



WEAR WOLF



MURPHY LAWLESS
ZOE CHANT

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VIRTUE SHIFTERS: BOOK FOUR



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CHAPTER 1



Victoria Hawthorne had never won anything in her life. Not a radio call-in, not a scratch card, not even a raffle. So when she entered a contest for a custom-made ballgown, she obviously didn't expect to win that either.

Especially because it was a country-wide competition. A formal gown, designed and delivered by one of Hollywood's hottest designers, Zane Bellamy. Even Vicki, who didn't follow fashion at all, knew his name. He'd done work for some of the biggest stars at the biggest shows the past few years. Her favorite was an utterly glorious gown inspired by the *Hunger Games* novels, a girl on fire kind of dress, for a dark-skinned African actress whose red-carpet walk had literally stopped the show. Vicki had replayed the video of the woman's joyful spin for the cameras dozens of times, watching in awe as soft fabric flared and changed with the light. Even when she stood still, the fabric glimmered like flame, its underlying tones and cut flattering the actress outrageously.

No ordinary person could look that amazing, but Vicki still coveted that gown in the depths of her soul.

Even so, she never would have entered the contest—or even known it was being held—if the designer wasn't a local boy made good. Except that made it sound like he'd worked his way up from nothing to become world-famous, when in fact the students at Virtue Elementary told Vicki that his family had been rich “for-EV-AR, Miss Hawthorne, for-EV-AR!”

If a bunch of first graders knew his family had been rich forever, Victoria figured it was probably true, although she hadn't heard anything about the Bellamy family, and kind of thought she would have. She had come to Virtue as a long-term substitute teacher in September, and if she'd learned anything about the small, upstate New York town, it was that the locals knew—and shared—all the gossip about one another. Even the kids were in on it all. Victoria had concluded that everybody born here got some kind of primer on How Things Work In Virtue at birth, or maybe just absorbed the knowledge in the womb.

For blow-ins like her, it was a friendly enough little town, but Victoria felt very definitely on the outside. That was all right: she had another contract for another long-term substitute job lined up for the next year, and eventually she would find a place to call home.

But the kids really wanted her to enter the ballgown contest, with one of them insisting, “You'd be so beautiful, Miss Hawthorne! Not that you aren't anyway,” which made Vicki laugh. Noah Brannigan, blue-eyed and unruly of hair, was an exceptionally charming kid, with a long-time family attachment to Virtue, although he and his mother had apparently only moved to the town a couple of years earlier. He had also promised to design her a dress on his own, if she somehow didn't win the contest.

Victoria thought she'd better win for her own safety, in that case, but she'd thanked Noah, and gotten the whole class to sit down and draw their own idea of a ballgown, or “ball suit,” as one forward-thinking little girl put it. The kids had taken to the task with enthusiasm, and a little to her own surprise, Vicki had gotten out her phone, found the contest page, and submitted an entry. Just her name and contact information, not even a mailing list to sign up for, which practically made it worth the effort in the first place.

And then she forgot about it. There were other things to think about, more practical and more likely things: the school play, which this year was *The Pied Piper* and for which all the kindergarten through second graders were by default rats, so

they didn't have to learn lines or much choreography beyond "follow the pied piper." They *did* need costumes, which were provided in large part by Noah's mother, Mabs Brannigan, who was a dab hand with a sewing machine, and by her friend and the town librarian, Sarah Ekstrom, who had the most fabulous retro wardrobe Vicki had ever seen, and could sew anything from rats to a giant Chinese dragon. Not that the play needed one, but the library had one on display, often with children in it.

There were also bake sales and fundraisers and birthday parties, and of course, in between all of that, some attempt at educating small people in the ways of the world, or at least the ways of addition and subtraction. Some days Vicki thought she'd lost all hope of doing even that, and others, the kids would happily yell out the numbers in the correct sequence when she asked them to count by twos, or fives, or even sevens. Within a few weeks, she felt as settled in Virtue as she was going to get, and that would do. It wasn't a forever home, but she hadn't found a place yet that really spoke to her heart.

"Coffee after school?" One of her coworkers, Carol, a Virtue native in her sixties, stuck her head into Vicki's classroom during lunch with a hopeful look beneath her grey hair. "If we're fast we'll get to Kate's before it closes."

"You're teaching sixth graders," Vicki said with mock dismay. "You can get them out of the room a lot faster than first graders go. But yeah, if they're out the door on time, that sounds great."

"See you then!" Carol disappeared from the door, and Vicki vowed to give the kids a few extra minutes to get ready to go that afternoon, so she'd have enough time to get to coffee at the cafe around the block.

It worked, too. The kids poured out to catch their buses, climb into cars with guardians, or walk home, and Vicki tugged her big boxy wool coat and a hat on as she hurried down the hall to meet Carol at the school's side gate. Carol gave a whoop of delight, and they skidded down the small road between the school and the back of a row of businesses, kicking snow and giggling at each other. It was cold but clear,

with ice melting and freezing solid across the huge town square and on the sidewalks.

Carol asked, “So how’s your first month been?” as they went around the corner, more or less pretending to act like grownups.

“Not too bad, I think. The kids are great, and the town is a little...standoffish, but it’s okay.”

Her friend grimaced a little. “You’re not wrong. I grew up here and sometimes it still has its moments, like it’s hiding secrets or something. I guess most old towns might be like that.”

“Welcome...to Small Town, New York,” Vicki said in her best movie trailer announcer voice. “Watch the adventures of a stranger in town as—”

An older man—heavy-set and handsome as well as jowly and white-haired—gave her a dirty look as she walked by spouting theatrical nonsense, and muttered something under his breath. Carol’s nostrils flared, but she didn’t say anything. A spark of anger flared in Vicki, though, and she slowed, then turned to say, “Excuse me?” to the man’s departing back.

He obviously hadn’t been expecting her to respond. Carol breathed, “Careful,” to Vicki, but her anger was building and she said, “Excuse me?” again to the man. “Did you want to say something to me?”

“I said people like you don’t belong in Virtue, and you should get out,” he said with nasty clarity.

Vicki’s eyebrows rose. “People like me? First grade teachers? Who’s going to teach your...” She paused, and rather deliberately, said, “Grandchildren, then?” instead of ‘children,’ suspecting it would annoy him.

Color flared in his face and she figured she’d made a hit. “We’ve got plenty of teachers from around here to teach our kids!”

“You apparently don’t,” Vicki said, now in her kindest teacher tone. “Since I was hired as a year-long substitute for my particular role.”

“People like you,” he said again, “don’t belong here. You’re bringing all kinds of dangerous new ideas and people into Virtue, and we’re never going to keep it safe with strangers settling all over the place here. Go find yourself another job,” he snapped. “Virtue doesn’t want you.”

He spun on his heel and stalked away, leaving Vicki to blink after him, and then at Carol. “What was *that*?”

“That was Arthur Lowell,” Carol said in a low voice. “Oooooold Virtue family. Lots of opinions and the money to back them up with. He’s disliked outsiders coming into Virtue as long as I can remember, and the town’s been having a really positive upturn lately that he hates.”

“I thought rich people liked it when the economy did well and they made more money,” Vicki muttered. “How can anybody be mad about the town doing *well*?”

“I don’t know. He’s got a real bee in his bonnet about—you probably don’t know there used to be a train line that ran through Virtue. It closed when I was a kid. They’re talking about reopening it, and Lowell’s furious about it. He doesn’t want anything ‘drawing attention’ to the town.”

Vicki looked at herself, and at Carol, wryly. “And I’m drawing attention?”

Carol’s distress faded into a smile. “Obviously. You’re a hot young blonde who’s come to town. That’ll get anybody’s attention.”

“Oh, God, ew. I don’t want that kind of attention from him. Grumpy old man. Seriously, though, he bothers you, huh? I’ll try to stay out of his way.”

“I don’t think he’s dangerous or anything. Just mean, and there’s no reason to engage with him if you can avoid it. Oh my God, no, we’re going to miss Kate’s!” Carol put on a burst of speed and ran to the cafe just before the owner flipped the door sign to ‘closed,’ and, laughing, Victoria followed her. It would be a nice enough year in Virtue, and that was all that mattered.

CHAPTER 2



FIVE MONTHS LATER

“M^{r.} Z?”

Zane Bellamy’s assistant tapped on the door, making him look up from a desk full of sketches. He was wearing orange, but Dion always wore orange. It looked terrific with his deep brown skin tones, but more importantly from Zane’s perspective, it made him easily identifiable. It was embarrassing to not automatically recognize the man who had been his assistant for over nine years now, but Zane had more or less come to terms with his face blindness. His wolf was better at recognizing people, but also didn’t care much about humans. Zane didn’t dare rely on it to navigate a world where most people seemed to be able to recognize and remember each other’s faces even after brief meetings.

Speaking of which, he frowned briefly at the calendar beneath his sketchpad. “I’m sure I don’t have a meeting today?”

Dion shook his head. “No, sir. I’m the only person who’s going to bother you today.”

“Thank God. What’s up?”

“The mail came, that’s all. They’ve drawn a winner for the Starlight Ball lottery.”

Zane squinted, trying to recall the lottery’s details to mind. “Is that the one where I agreed to make a couture gown for a woman off the street?”

“Technically, I think anyone could enter, but yes, sir.”

“Right, of course. In that case, am I making a couture gown for a woman or a man?”

Dion grinned. “A woman. Although I assure you I entered the contest, and am positively devastated that I didn’t win.”

“You didn’t need to win. I promised you years ago that I would design your wedding dress anyway. Tell me about our contestant winner.” Zane gestured to the chair across from him, then twisted his mouth as he realized it, like his desk, was covered in sketches and sketchbooks. The walls were, too, for that matter. He’d give up on normal walls a long time ago, and had cork board almost everywhere that wasn’t windowed. There were patterns pinned to the wall, and the sketches that went with them, and very often photographs of the finished product, usually on someone extremely rich, famous, or beautiful. Often all three at once.

Dion, long since accustomed to his boss, picked an entire stack of sketches up off the chair without dislodging a single paper and put it all neatly on the floor so he could take a seat. “I believe I’m accumulating wedding costume promises at the rate of roughly one a year. By the time I find a man who’ll have me, you’ll be making me an entire trousseau. Your winner is a first grade teacher from upstate New York.”

A nervous ball formed in Zane’s stomach. He’d grown up in upstate New York himself, and while his work took him to the city often enough, he avoided the rest of the state as much as possible.

Then he pushed the nerves away with the relative ease of long practice. Nothing had to drag him back to Virtue and the contentious relationship he’d had with his father.

Dion pursed his lips, considering Zane with a tilt of his head that made even Zane's wolf lift its head warily. *He has an idea.*

Zane almost chuckled. *Yeah, I think he does.* He started to speak aloud, but Dion's expression made that cold ball in his gut reform, and then drain icily through his belly. "Oh, no. No way. No?"

"Victoria Hawthorne lives in Virtue," Dion confirmed, "and I'm sorry, Zane, but the rules of the contest say you'll go meet the winner in their home town."

"No." Zane lifted his hands, fully rejecting the suggestion even as he felt a dreadful certainty that it wouldn't work. "I'll pay to fly her out here myself. Put her up in a hotel, whatever. I'm not going back to Virtue."

"You are," Dion said very gently. "Even if she were willing to fly out here, which she's probably not because it's the middle of a semester right now, the press is going to get hold of the fact that she's from your own home town, and if you don't go they'll excoriate you."

If Dion was pulling out ten-dollar words that Zane would personally need a dictionary to use correctly, he wasn't going to win this argument. He stared at his PA in despair a few seconds, then put his face in his hands. "For the record, what exactly does excoriate mean? So that I understand what I'm facing if I don't go to Virtue?"

"It means to remove skin. To flay," Dion said with a certain delicious enjoyment. "Or to tear you a new one, in more colloquial terms."

Zane echoed, "'Colloquial,'" and Dion laughed.

"That means 'everyday or ordinary language,' and I'm sure the press will use lots and *lots* of colloquial terms if you back out of returning triumphant to your own home town to meet the woman you're going to make a devastatingly gorgeous gown for. This has romance novel written all over it, Zane. And it'll help the whole eligible bachelor look I've been trying to get you to lean into."

“I am *married to my work*,” Zane told him for what felt like the eight hundredth time in the past couple of years. “I’m really not looking for a partner right now.”

We’ll find one when it’s time, his wolf offered.

Zane tried not to wince. He believed in fated mates a little bit more than his father—who had never found one—did, but not much more. Instant attraction, yeah, he could see that, but the soul-deep confidence that someone was the right person for him? That seemed...unlikely. And Zane designed fashion for film stars, whose entire lives were unlikely, so he felt like he had a pretty good grasp of what ‘unlikely’ looked like. The idea of fate was just a little too far for him to go.

“Partner,” Dion said with a disappointed sigh. “How about ‘girlfriend?’”

Zane wrinkled his nose. “I’m thirty-eight. That’s too old to have a ‘girlfriend,’ isn’t it? And I like the word partner better anyway. It suggests...” He waved his hand in an easy, fluid gesture. “You know. Partnership.”

Dion, watching that fluid motion, said, “It also suggests gay.”

“Does it still? In this modern world?”

“It does when single men in their thirties who design fashion use it.”

“Well, eventually, if slightly flamboyant straight white men like myself keep using it to define their relationships, it’ll just be a word,” Zane said firmly.

His assistant relented with a grin. “‘Slightly?’”

“Just book me a flight to Virtue, Dion.”

“Yes sir, Mr. Z.”



VIRTUE, New York hadn’t changed a bit, and Zane didn’t mean that in a good way.

It wasn’t a big enough town to have an airport of his own, so Dion had arranged flights to Syracuse, and proposed hiring

a chauffeur to drive them up to Virtue.

Zane could just imagine his father's reaction to *that*.

Instead he'd driven them up, hands tight on the steering wheel while Dion leaned out the window, oohing and ahing at the low mountains and the brilliant spring greenery. "I can't believe you ever left here. You know Los Angeles is a desert, right?"

"It wasn't for me." That sounded absurd and cryptic and Zane didn't say anything else until they were pulling up to the town center, at which point he said, "Jesus, it's exactly the same."

"It's *gorgeous!*" Dion looked like he might bounce out of the car if Zane didn't pull over, so he did, and Dion did, stepping up onto the sidewalk around the world's most ridiculously, unnecessarily huge town square. The gigantic gazebo he remembered still dominated the literal acres of greenery, although there were slender saplings in several places now, offering a promise of shade in the years to come.

Zane somewhat resentfully conceded *that* was different. There were also businesses he didn't recognize around the borders of the square now. A doughnut shop, a cafe, and a massage therapy clinic were new, although the store that had sold hand-made toys since before his own childhood was still there, as was the Jones's bed and breakfast. The church loomed over one end of the square, and opposite it lay the town hall and other political offices.

He couldn't see the schools he'd gone to off behind the row of businesses to the right of where he sat in the rental car, or the library he'd spent *thousands* of hours studying fashion at a few blocks away to the left, but he knew they were there. He knew where everything was in Virtue, like it was imprinted on the back of his hand, or on the backs of his eyelids. Zane remembered this town better than he'd ever remembered anybody's face, and mostly, he wished he could forget it.

Dion came back to the car, leaning in the driver's side window to frown at him. "You really don't want to be here."

“I really don’t.”

He waited, and he didn’t volunteer anything else. He never had. After a moment, Dion shrugged. “Well, let’s get checked into the B&B. I knew you didn’t want to stay, so I’ve got the press coming this evening—”

Zane groaned. “Did you have to?”

Dion said, “Yes,” unrepentantly. “The Starlight Ball is a fundraiser, Zane. You raise funds with promotional activity. You are Doing Your Part.” He spoke with capital letters, causing Zane to groan and lift his hands in defeated acceptance.

A minute later they were carrying their bags into the B&B, where a short, round white woman in a green dress that suited her body shape very well called, “Just a second,” from the breakfast area off to the right of the entrance. She swished in to the desk a minute later, tossing long nut-brown hair over her shoulder and smiling. “Let’s see, today it’s Dion Newman and...holy shit, Zane Bellamy?” The woman jerked her gaze up, met Zane’s eyes, and blushed hot pink. “Oh, good grief. Hi, sorry, that wasn’t very professional. You wouldn’t remember me, Emmy Jones, but you used to hang out with—”

Zane smiled. “Todd. I do remember you.” He *remembered* her, although he wouldn’t have *recognized* her if he’d been paid to. But then, that wasn’t unusual for him, and Emmy Jones didn’t need to know that. “You must have been about eleven the last time I saw you. How’s Todd?”

“He’s good! Um. Married. Four kids. He still lives in Virtue.” She laughed. “I guess most of us do. You got out, though.”

“And yet here I am, back again.” Zane tried not to let his smile look pained. “Glad you’ve got space for us at the inn.”

“Always! I’m surprised you’re not staying with your dad, though. We see him at the town council meetings sometimes, usually trying to make sure absolutely nothing ever changes in Virtue.”

Zane couldn't keep his smile from disintegrating that time. "Sounds like him, yeah. No, I'm just here overnight and didn't want to bother him to put us up."

"Right, yes!" Emmy smiled brightly at Dion. "Are you Zane's partner? Welcome to Virtue!"

Dion cast Zane an extremely *I-told-you-so look* about the word 'partner,' and shuddered delicately. "Dear God, no. He's my boss. Separate rooms. Very separate rooms. Please."

"Oh." Emmy blinked again before her smile returned full force. "Well, welcome to Virtue anyway, and yes, I see you've booked separate rooms. But I mean, who knows, Zane could have been a snorer."

Dion didn't even try to hide his laugh. "He's not, but I only know that because I've caught him sleeping on the couch in his office so often I don't know why he bothers to keep an apartment."

"Fabric storage," Zane said, only half kidding. All he wanted was to get upstairs to the room and not face people who had known him when he was seventeen. Dion looked like he'd be happy to gossip with Emmy forever, but he put on a professional face and got Zane checked in first, at least.

As if he couldn't do that himself, although honestly sometimes he wasn't sure if he could do anything without Dion. God knew his PA was always right there, murmuring names to him so he wouldn't embarrass himself in front of the clients who wanted to be remembered, and he'd arranged the entire Starlight Ball contest, and—

Come to think of it, maybe he'd be better off without him, after all. Zane wouldn't have ended up back in Virtue, if Dion hadn't gotten him involved with the international arts foundation and a contest to design a gown for a woman—a person—off the street.

Zane snickered, genuinely amused at himself. The truth was he lived in dread of the day Dion found something better to do with his time than keep Zane's life in order. Personal assistants of his caliber were rare, expensive, and worth it. He

left Dion to gossip with Emmy after putting in a plea that she not reveal anything too embarrassing about his youth, and went up to his room to eye the bed.

Sleeping through as much of his visit to Virtue as he could was the best possible way to spend his time there, as far as he was concerned. He lay down, closed his eyes, and what felt like thirty seconds later, woke to Dion knocking on his door and telling him to get ready to go. Zane yelled, “Where are we going?” through the door, and swore he heard Dion cackle.

“The high school gym. Apparently it’s the only place in town big enough to announce a local boy’s triumphant return.”

Zane said, “Oh my God,” to his reflection in the room’s mirror, and made an effort to dress well. He always did, but at the moment it seemed more important than usual. It took long enough that Dion was outside the door again, tapping his toe impatiently, when Zane finally emerged.

His assistant—whose own suit was deep burnt umber with a flashily brilliant orange silk shirt beneath it—gave him a critical once-over, proclaimed, “Not bad,” and hurried him out of the B&B.

To Dion’s horror, they walked to the high school. Zane muttered, “Driving three of Los Angeles’s long blocks is one thing, Dion. Believe me, driving three blocks in Virtue is not a winning strategy.”

“But I’ll *sweat*.”

“You’ll perspire delicately,” Zane corrected, still in a mutter. “My PA would never do anything as crass as sweating.”

That at least got a snort of amusement out of said PA, and a couple of minutes later they were at the high school. It was bigger than Zane remembered on the outside, and smaller inside, and it looked like Virtue’s entire population had decided to come jam itself into the gym. Worse, there seemed to be as many reporters as there were people there.

Which implied reporters weren’t people, but with cameras already going off, microphones being pushed at him as he

walked into his old stomping grounds, and his name being shouted by faces he would never be able to put a name to, Zane wasn't feeling very charitable. He gave a few brief smiles, waved when he was supposed to, and then was suddenly up on a stage, shaking hands, pretending he knew who he was talking to, and then, very, very briefly, being introduced to Victoria Hawthorne, the winner of the Starlight Ball couture costume contest.

He only had a glimpse of her in all the chaos. Long enough to shake her hand, and then she was at his side, smiling shyly at the crowds as their pictures were taken. At his *side*, where he couldn't gaze down at her in desperate, stunned adoration, because a glimpse was all it took.

She had blue eyes. He'd seen that, in the heartbeat their gazes met. She was tall and blonde. Willowy, even. She wore a fashionably blocky spring coat, taupe in color, nipped at the waist, falling just past her knees in length. He scrambled frantically for details, things to remember her by, in the few seconds they had to smile and shake hands. Her fingernails were strange colors, and her grip was confident.

She had a lovely rich warm laugh that spilled out easily when somebody asked her a question about what kind of dress she wanted. "It doesn't matter," she told them, and glanced up at Zane briefly. She didn't wear much makeup, no distinct style that would help him remember her, but her smile was flawless, pink lips curved upward in apparent real joy. "If Zane Bellamy designs it, it'll be perfect."

He said, "I expect anything would be, on you," which he thought was rather good, and which got a charmed *awww* of amusement and laughter from the audience. Victoria Hawthorne's blue eyes sparkled, and then somehow, dreadfully, the gathering on the stage was pulled apart. Victoria went one way, down into the crowd, and Zane went the other, guided away under Dion's direction.

For the first time he could remember, Zane shook his assistant off and turned a despairing gaze across a gym filled with unrecognizable faces, milling with bodies pressed too close together to pick out a silhouette, scattered with blondes

who suddenly all seemed to be of a height. His shoulders slumped, hopelessness filling his chest.

One of the women in this room was Victoria Hawthorne, his fated mate.

And Zane had no idea which one.

CHAPTER 3



Vicki had not been prepared for Zane Bellamy.

Truth be told, Vicki hadn't been prepared for any of it. She had actually just stared in confusion at the email saying she'd won a couture dress, then laughed and sent it to the spam folder. She hadn't thought about it again for two days, until her phone rang with an unknown California number. She'd picked up because sometimes her brother called from places unknown, but a man who definitely wasn't her brother said, "Victoria Hawthorne? This is Zane Bellamy's assistant, Dion Newman. Would you be available on Thursday evening for a press conference about your win?"

Somehow she'd agreed, and Thursday evening found herself being ushered up onto the stage in the high school gym to shake the hand of the most incredibly attractive man she had ever laid eyes on.

Vicki had seen pictures of Zane Bellamy before, of course. He was in the entertainment magazines from time to time, and sometimes on the red carpet with one of the actors or actresses he'd dressed. She'd always wondered if he was dating one of them, because they usually all looked so casually comfortable together, regardless of whether it was a man or a woman. Anyway, he was *obviously* handsome, from what she'd seen on film and in photos, including one in the high school lobby from when the drama club had won a state competition the year he'd been costumer for them.

She had not been prepared for his *magnetism*, though. Or his cheekbones. Or the glitter of early silver in his dark hair

where it swept back from a widow's peak. Or the cool shining grey of his eyes, or the warmth of his big, strong, lightly calloused hand as it gripped hers.

Or the fit of his *suit*. Vicki had almost giggled hysterically at his *suit*, for heaven's sake. It wasn't showy. His assistant's dark orange-brown suit and flashy orange shirt, *that* was showy. Zane Bellamy wore a deep heather grey with silver threads woven in at just the right places to catch light and give his suit an extra little *something* that wouldn't be recognizable from more than three feet away.

Which Vicki was. Three feet away. From Zane Bellamy, fashion designer to the stars.

He was so *tall*.

She was fairly certain she said, "Hreebee hee hee tee hee shloipp goible," or something equally incoherent and stupid when he greeted her with a politely warm smile, but it wasn't her fault. He had shoulders roughly the width of the gymnasium itself, framed perfectly by the mesmerizing fabric of his suit, and it nipped down to his waist in a way that didn't scream 'skinny suit,' but which somehow made his waist look exceptionally slim and narrow. And even under the suit jacket, the fit of his slacks made it look somehow like his legs went on *forever*.

Vicki, right there on the stage, had an unfortunately vivid image of those long long legs wrapping around her and pulling her close, a warm delicious tangle of bodies, and lost any hope of remembering how to talk.

The worse part was she only got to look at him for a few seconds before they were supposed to smile for the cameras, and then, cruelly, some of her coworkers dragged her away for pictures with them and to ask what it was like to meet Zane Bellamy. Victoria hiss-howled, "I don't *know*, you *took me away from him* before I got to *talk* to him!" at Sondra, the other first grade teacher, who at least had the grace to look abashed.

Vicki shot one panicked glance over her shoulder, wondering if Mr. Bellamy thought she was unforgivably rude

for being hauled away. They were supposed to talk about a dress, which she couldn't from way over here. Although she wasn't sure how she was supposed to talk at *all* instead of just drooling over the fabulously gorgeous man on the stage.

She caught just the briefest glimpse of him looking out over the gathering—everybody in Virtue seemed to be there—with a slightly confused, bereft expression on his wolf-sharp features.

Then his assistant tucked a hand into Bellamy's elbow. The fashion designer sighed, smiled briefly, and covered the orange-suited man's hand with his own as he allowed himself to be led off stage.

All of Vicki's fantasies immediately collapsed. Of course the world-famous fashion designer who had fled his small, conservative home town the moment he'd graduated high school had an intimate relationship with another man. She *had* wondered, seeing pictures of him on the red carpet, and she hadn't just wondered about his relationships with the women.

A thread of hope immediately wove itself back through her fantasies. There was nothing wrong with fantasizing, anyway, "And it's not *that* conservative," she said under her breath, before adding, argumentatively, "sort of."

"What?" One of her friends, a fellow teacher and a Virtue native, elbowed her. "What?"

"Virtue. Is not that conservative. Except when it is."

Her friend, Carol, made a noise of agreement almost lost in the general uproar of the crowd. "You're not wrong. There are a lot of old families here who want it to stay the same, and quite a few newcomers the past few years who are hauling it into the present day despite the old farts. Of which I am not one, even if I technically am."

Vicki laughed. "You're not that old."

"I'm sixty-seven."

"And young at heart." Vicki turned to see if she could catch another glimpse of Zane Bellamy, but he was long gone. "Did you know him when he was younger?"

“I taught him in high school, in fact. Really artistic kid. Quiet. Not necessarily shy, but quiet. He always knew what he wanted, and it was, among other things, to get the hell out of Virtue.”

“Too artsy for a small town?”

Carol, who had learned not to miss a single trick in her sixty-seven years, cocked a white eyebrow at Victoria, like she knew exactly what Vicki was trying not to ask directly. “Too artsy for his father, anyway. His dad had—probably still has—ideas about what kind of person his son should be, and Zane...” She shrugged. “Wasn’t any of them.”

“Is he here tonight?” Vicki glanced around as if she’d somehow recognize Mr. Bellamy Senior out of the crowd of hundreds who *were* there.

“For Zane’s sake, I hope not. I don’t think he’d be celebrating.”

Vicki sighed. “Well, that’s awful. I’d think you’d be proud of a child who’s reached the levels of professional success Mr. Bellamy has. No wonder he left so quickly. This must not be much fun for him.” A well of regret filled her chest. The whole contest was such a wonderful thing for *her*. Vicki hadn’t considered the possibility it might be miserable for the designer whose dress she’d won. “I’ll try to be nice to him.”

Carol laughed, a quick surprised sound. “Do. I don’t imagine he’s expecting Virtue in general to be nice to him. Sycophantic, maybe, but not nice.”

“You know normal people don’t use words like ‘sycophantic’ in conversation,” Vicki said dryly. “They say ‘brown-nosing,’ or ‘kissing ass.’”

The other teacher sniffed. “Children cannot expand their vocabulary if they’re not exposed to new words. Neither can anyone else,” she added more thoughtfully. “Maybe I should try to start a town-wide spelling bee or something. The New Words Spelling Bee Challenge.”

“You’re a lunatic. Oh, god, is that a reporter? They can’t want to talk to me, can they? I’m not the famous one!”

Vicki had actually seen the woman descending on them on a lot of red carpet press junkets. She was small, curvy, black-haired, and usually looked like she was having a great time. She looked that way now, in fact, a huge smile plastered across her face, even though Vicki was fairly certain terror was plastered across her *own* face. “Hi, Ms. Hawthorne! I’m Grace Chen with the All-Arena Entertainment channel and I hoped to ask you a few questions tonight!”

“I know you,” Vicki said weakly. “You’re kind of great.”

Grace Chen laughed out loud, a big sound that echoed up to the gym’s high ceiling. “Only kind of? No, I’m flattered, and I think *this* is kind of great! What do you think of being the Starlight Ball’s couture gown winner?”

“It’s amazing? And alarming? I didn’t know there would be...” Vicki looked around, hoping for Carol’s support, but the other teacher had faded into a grinning background. Everybody nearby was, in fact, beaming at her with either encouragement or grimacing at her in obvious envy. Vicki took a deep breath, straightened her shoulders, and managed a smile for Grace. “I didn’t know there would be a horde of people to go along with the dress. I guess I wasn’t expecting such a fuss.”

“Well, we’ve all got Google,” Grace replied with disarming frankness. “The winner being from Zane Bellamy’s home town is a great story all by itself, and then it turns out you look like Cinderella. All you need is a pumpkin and a fairy godmother!”

Vicki blinked down at herself in astonishment, then blinked at Grace, too, before pulling together a crooked smile. “Are you saying I’ve got ashes in my hair and need to take a bath, Ms. Chen?”

The reporter’s hearty laugh bounced upward again. “You know I’m not. Tell me, what kind of dress do you have in mind?”

If Vicki’s eyebrows went any higher, she thought they’d crawl off her forehead. “The kind that Mr. Bellamy suggests, probably. I’m a school teacher. I buy most of my clothes at the

Five and Dime. I have no idea what a fashion designer would think looked good on me.”

“Your coat is very good,” Grace said with a thoughtfully critical eye. “Am I supposed to believe you don’t know that?”

“There’s a whole *heck* of a lot of difference between a decent wool coat and couture, Ms. Chen,” Vicki said wryly. “Tell you what—oh, no.” The last words were to the world in general as a whole bunch of other reporters swooped down on her, now that Grace Chen and her cameraman had noticed her. She spent the next forty minutes answering exactly the same questions from people who were mostly not as nice as Grace, as Vicki’s exhaustion and blood pressure both rose.

Vicki’s *brother* liked being the center of attention. Vicki did not. It had been a running joke in their family ever since their parents had gotten married. Vicki, aged eight, had done all she could to avoid being the flower girl because people would *look* at her. Her soon-to-be stepbrother, age twelve, had put in a remarkably good argument for *him* being the flower girl, although in the end, she’d been the flower girl and he’d escorted his mother down the aisle. Vicki was still fairly certain he’d have looked better in her dress than she did.

Her brother also would have handled a billion interview questions better than she did. Vicki finally escaped to the bathroom, where she contemplated the high, narrow windows. She could probably go out one, if she wanted to. It had to be better than going back out through the crowd in the gym.

Next thing she knew, Vicki was balanced precariously on a garbage can and pushing the window as far open as it would go. She could get her arms through it up to the armpit, enough to squirm up and look down at the forty-foot fall.

“It is *not* forty feet,” she breathed to herself. It was maybe eight, really. Ten at the most. If she could get herself out and turned around so she could dangle from the window, her feet would only be a little ways above the ground.

A deep warning part of her mind informed her that this was going to go incredibly badly. The window was not wide enough for her to get up there and lie on her belly and squish a

leg through so she could go out feet first. Not unless she had secret contortionist skills unknown even to herself. She pushed herself up a little farther, trying to see how exactly she could make this work, and two terrible things happened.

The first one was she had hitched herself up just far enough to get her boobs over the edge of the windowsill. Vicki was not *tremendously* well-endowed, but having gotten her boobs over, she suddenly realized there would be No Going Back. For one thing, it would hurt like a motherjammer, because it would be all squish and scrape all the time.

For another—the second terrible thing—she had just knocked the garbage can over with her squirming and kicking. It crashed to the tile floor with a tremendous bang, echoing wildly through the bathroom.

There was no way half the gymnasium hadn't heard that, which meant Vicki had to get the hell out the window *now*, or the entire east coast press corps would be in here to see her ass-up hanging out the window in an all-too-obvious escape attempt. She said several words she wouldn't want her first graders to hear her use, thought, *this is going to end badly*, and gave herself a good solid shove forward.

For a couple of seconds she was high-centered on the window sill, bent double over it, her front half free to the world and her back half kicking and flailing against the bathroom air. She could already tell she was going to be one big bruise from collar to hip bone, and she could see no way to get out of this situation without scraping the ever-loving hell out of the fronts of her thighs.

And probably breaking her neck. But it was too late now. No way through but forward. She heaved again, had a horrible moment of scraping pain, terror, and free-fall, before landing hard on a man who came rushing up to the wall as she fell down it.

They both collapsed to the earth with a series of grunts and howls, apologies already pouring from Vicki's lips as she struggled to roll away from her poor, no-doubt damaged rescuer.

“No, no, it’s okay,” he said in the hoarse voice of a man who’d had the wind knocked out of him. He still had his hands on her waist, like he was afraid she’d keep falling if he let go. “Better we both go down than you break your neck. Are you okay?”

“Mortified,” Vicki reported, trying to get her hair out of her face so she could see, “but mostly unharmed. You? Thank you so much. Oh my *god*,” she said as she clawed her hair back and got a decent look at the man’s sharp, handsome features and the soft glint of the expensive fabric he wore. “You’re Zane Bellamy. And I’ve just ruined your *suit*. I am *so sorry!*”

CHAPTER 4



No man had ever been blessed with such good fortune as to have the woman of his dreams literally fall into his arms. That was cinematic in scope, Zane thought. Storybook love was made of such things.

Storybook love did not, however, dwell on how much it actually hurt to have somebody land on you. Or how awkward it was to try to catch somebody sliding headfirst down the side of a building, for that matter. In movies, the heroine leaped gracefully into the hero's embrace, giving them both plenty of clearance. They didn't slither through a high window and slowly gain momentum as they slid out the other side, and the hero's strong arms were capable of catching a hundred and thirty pounds of falling human without everybody slamming to the ground.

Zane had never thought of himself as much of a romantic hero, and now he was sure of it. Some of his film star friends probably could have managed it—Fletcher Cole, who was tall and wiry and incredibly strong, and also fun to dress because of his narrow frame, or Benton Sinclair, who was built like one of the superheroes he'd recently starred as and looked good in literally anything—would have caught Victoria Hawthorne effortlessly.

Which was why Zane was designer to the stars, and not one of the stars himself. He croaked, "The suit will wash," although given how much muddy snow he'd rolled in, he wasn't actually sure of that. "Are you all right? What were you *doing*?"

“Escaping the media.” Victoria rolled away from him, apparently undisturbed by the fact that she was spreading more mucky snow across her boxy wool jacket. She lay there in the mud for a minute, looking at the sky as if the distant stars were the most interesting thing she’d ever seen. “What were *you* doing out here? You left the gym almost an hour ago.”

Zane groaned. “The B&B is surrounded by media. I sent Dion in as a distraction and ran.”

“Back to the school where there’s a ton of media presence?” Victoria pushed up on her elbow, amusement curving her mouth. She didn’t seem nearly as cold as he felt, though she was, of course, wearing a large coat, and he was in a suit meant for a Los Angeles winter, which was an easy twenty degrees warmer than Virtue. “Aren’t you freezing?”

“I am, in fact.” Zane smiled lopsidedly at her, then felt a pang of dismay as she scrambled to her feet and offered him a hand up. “I should be doing this for you...”

“You stopped me from smashing my head on the ground and breaking my neck. I think I’m still in your debt.” Victoria pulled him up with unexpected strength, then steadied him as he lurched a little from the power of her lift. “Sorry. I’m stronger than I look. Hauling all those six year olds around will do that.”

“That’s right, you’re a teacher. At the same school I went to as a kid.” Zane smiled again to hide a wince. That had been a dumb thing to say.

It’s fine, his wolf said with lazy patience. She’s your mate. She thinks you’re wonderful.

Zane actually grimaced. Those words, *fated mate*, were the first ones that had leapt to his mind when he’d seen Ms. Hawthorne, it was true. That was shifter legend, after all, the kind of thing shifter kids heard about the way true humans heard stories of true love. But like true love, Zane didn’t much believe in, or even like, the whole idea of fated mates. He wasn’t at all sure he thought anybody *could* know instantly that another person was the right one for them.

Which didn't mean he wasn't incredibly, deeply attracted to Victoria Hawthorne, because he'd never seen a woman who made his heart leap like she did.

Or one who'd taken his knees out like she had, either, although he imagined almost anybody falling out of a window on top of him would have done *that*, at least.

He had the sense of the wolf opening one eye to give him a half-hearted but exasperated glare before drifting back to sleep. Zane knew at least some other shifters had extremely opinionated animal selves, and could never decide if he was envious of them or not. It would be *helpful* if his wolf would take notice of people, remember their scent or sound or anything that would allow Zane to identify individuals more easily. Instead, the rangy beast inside him mostly wanted to nap unless they'd shifted to wolf form and it could *run*.

Victoria was saying, "I assume it's both changed a lot and not at all since you were there. Look, you've got to be freezing and your suit is going to be soaked through at any minute. Do you want to come back to my apartment and—well, at least hang it up to dry? I assume it can't go in a dryer."

Zane winced again, visibly this time. "You assume correctly. My entire wardrobe is line-dry only." He cast a glance toward the front of the school, then back toward the B&B that might well have media hanging out around it all night. "Honestly, I would be grateful. I'll ask Dion to text me if the vultures fly away."

"I cannot imag—well, no, that's not true, I can because I know people who do, but—I can't *imagine* living a life that involved having to hide from the media. I'd lose my mind."

"And I'm not even a celebrity." Zane smiled briefly at Victoria as they picked their way out of the half-frozen mud and hurried away from the school building.

She made a disbelieving sound. "There's an awful lot of media presence here that says otherwise."

"They're here for you," Zane said with confidence. "The girl from my home town—"

“I’m not *from* Virtue.”

“No, I would have remembered you if you were.” Zane was confident of that, too. He might not have *recognized* her, but he would have *remembered* her. He wondered if he would have felt this kind of attraction back in high school, if she’d been from Virtue.

No, his wolf said with a vague note of impatience. *You only recognize your mate when it’s time.*

If you say so, Zane replied uncertainly. There had been no fated mates or even much love in the house he’d grown up in; his parents had met and married like any true humans did, and divorced again like many other people did, too.

“Nah, I was tall and skinny and awkward in high school. You wouldn’t have remembered me.”

“I’ve wanted to be a fashion designer since I was nine,” Zane said with a smile. “I definitely would have remembered a tall skinny girl, especially if she let me make clothes for her. Tall and slim are great for catwalk style modeling and clothes. I had a friend here, Sarah Ekstrom, who even in high school had a really retro vibe and I used to make her clothes. She wasn’t catwalk-shaped, but I learned so much about the structure of clothing making all these forties and fifties styles for her.”

“The librarian?” Victoria’s voice rose in surprise, and so did Zane’s eyebrows.

“Really? She’s back in—really? That’s great!” A grin split his face. “She always wanted to be a librarian and used to say she was going to come back to Virtue and whip the library into shape. She did it?”

“There can’t be two retro-vintage-loving Sarah Ekstroms from Virtue, can there? Yeah, she’s great. She runs a daycare out of the library. Unofficially, but I think probably eighty percent of the kids in my class spent at least one day a week in the library daycare from age two onward. It’s amazing. All these little readers, and most of them are insanely creative, too. Sarah goes all out for every holiday and the kids come into

kindergarten and first grade knowing how to use scissors and glue and—” Victoria burst out laughing. “And reading. You know how there are usually pictures of shapes and animals and things around classroom walls for little kids?”

Zane, so delighted with the news that Sarah still lived in Virtue that he’d almost forgotten he was cold, nodded his enthusiasm. “Yeah, of course? I mean, I’d forgotten until you just said so, but yes?”

“Right, so I got here—I’m a long-term temp, I arrived about ten hours before school started and won’t be in Virtue next year—”

Zane’s stomach fell through the bottom of his shoes. Not that he had any intention of staying in Virtue a single minute longer than he had to, but the idea that he might lose track of Victoria was actually blood-curdling.

You won’t lose her, his wolf said with the same lazy impatience. *You **can’t** lose your fated mate.*

What if ‘fate’ isn’t as sure about things as you are? Zane didn’t expect, and didn’t get, an answer, but that was okay, because he was listening to Victoria’s voice brighten as she told her story, and it was wonderful.

“—so I got here and I introduced myself to the kids, and I was seeing whether they knew shapes and stuff, and I said, ‘Does anyone know what that shape is?’ about one of the rectangles on the wall. There’s a pause, and then one of the kids says, ‘...a rectangle?’ And that’s really good, right? Lots of kids *don’t* know their shapes, which is fine, that’s what the early grades are for. So I said, ‘Great job! How did you know that?’” Victoria’s grin stretched across her whole face. “And the kid says, in a tone that suggested I might not be too bright, ‘...because I read the word underneath it?’”

A startled laugh burst from Zane’s chest, and Victoria’s bright peeling laughter joined it. “So that put me in my place, and kind of got me off on the right foot of what to expect from the kids here. And then I met Sarah and realized at least part of why the kids all had a leg up on reading. This is me.” She gestured toward a sidewalk off the main path, and Zane

realized suddenly that they'd walked at least half a mile away from the school to an apartment complex he didn't remember.

"This is new." He followed her up the slick concrete, both of them skidding their feet along the black ice instead of stepping normally. "Or at least, new since I've been h...ere." *Home* didn't seem appropriate. It never really had.

"Well, it's definitely not *new-new*. Probably fifteen years?" Victoria glanced over her shoulder at him, risking her balance. "The appliances in my apartment all have that 'not really antiques but seem like it' vibe. Thank God the mattress is newer than that."

Heat rushed straight through Zane's body, starting by setting his ears on fire and permanently lodging much, *much* lower than that. Logically he was quite sure Victoria wasn't making any kind of invitation by mentioning the mattress. Emotionally and physically, though, it was as if his world flipped over and dragged him off into illicitly hopeful thoughts without his permission. He was still overheated by the time they'd walked up to her third floor apartment and she unlocked the door, totally unaware that she'd thrown him for a loop.

The apartment was nice in a generic, semi-lived-in kind of way: a living/dining room that the door opened into, with a kitchen to the left; a hallway beyond that, presumably leading to a bathroom and some number of bedrooms. The walls, carpets, countertops and cabinets were all what Zane thought of as 'Modern Living Grey,' which meant Victoria was probably right about the age of the place. He thought it could use a more colorful updating, although really, a great deal of the grey was covered by brightly colored, childish paintings, drawings, toys, and a truly astonishing number of coffee cups.

"Here we are," Victoria said cheerfully. "Welcome to my humble abode, interior decoration compliments of the apartment industrial complex and first graders all over the northeast." She shrugged her boxy coat off and threw it over the back of a kitchen chair to drip, and he took a heartbeat to smile at the dress she wore beneath it. It was polyester, which made it mostly wrinkle-free, easy to clean, and very practical

for a first grade teacher. It was a little bit librarian-ish, with a faux vest in a plaid over a white blouse and an ankle-length grey skirt. She was even wearing Victorian-style ‘granny’ boots, and he bet if she swept her hair up, she would have a full-on 1890s schoolmarm vibe going on.

The skirt was also dripping wet on three out of four sides, and clung to her legs in a way that would be distractingly pleasant if it didn’t look so *cold*.

Vicki, as if reading his mind, only backward, said, “You must be *freezing*.” She glanced up at him with concern in her sky-blue eyes.

The last thing in the world Zane felt right then was cold. He could fall into that gaze forever, swimming in its warmth. It took him a moment to remember his *own* clothes were soaked through. Then a sudden shiver rushed over him. “Now that you mention it...”

“Tell you what. Why don’t you go take a shower and I’ll try to find something that’ll fit you while your clothes—wash? Can they be washed in a washing machine, or is this a hand-wash-only situation?” Her hands twitched like she wanted to push his jacket off his shoulders but recognized that he wasn’t six and could probably undress himself.

He would *welcome* her undressing him, of course, but there didn’t seem to be any way to suggest that without sounding incredibly crass. “Uh. Wash. Yes. Machine good. Fine! Yes!” He dragged a breath in, trying to sound like someone who knew how to talk to another adult, and mumbled, “They can be put in the washing machine, yes. Gentle cycle, though? And not dried.”

“Right. You, go to the bathroom. Hand the clothes out and I’ll put them in the machine and find you clothes while you shower. I make no promises about what kind of clothes.” She eyed him, her expression somewhere between critical and apologetic. “I *can* promise they won’t fit as well as your suit does.”

“I’d be surprised if they did,” Zane said, sounding apologetic himself. “This was hand-made for me.”

“By you, I assume.” A wistful expression crossed Victoria’s face before she tilted her head toward the hall. “First door on the left. Go undress.”

The order jolted *straight* through the most arousable parts of Zane’s body, and he fled to the bathroom before his interest became visibly and mortifyingly obvious.

CHAPTER 5



Two minutes later, putting a silver-streaked suit and the softest silk shirt she'd ever touched into the washing machine, Vicki wondered what the hell she'd been thinking. She muttered, "Come back to my house and get undressed, *super* subtle, Vic, *suuuuper* subtle. Lemon-wrapped gold bricks have nothing on you."

The clothes went in the washer *without* her burying her nose in them to catch Zane's rich, masculine scent. She put it on gentle wash, then sank to the floor, leaned against the washer, and thumped her head against it as it began to swish.

She'd gotten a glimpse of Zane's strongly muscled forearm as he handed his clothes out the cracked-open bathroom door and thought her life might never be the same. She'd never considered herself to be much of a forearm girl, but evidently she just hadn't seen the right forearms. He had such long elegant fingers, and she bet he was incredibly deft with them.

She could think of *so* many excellent ways to find out.

Someone actually whimpered, and after a startled moment Vicki realized it had been her. Still more or less under her breath, she said, "Pull yourself together, Vic, and..."

There was no 'and.' Everything after 'and' involved finding clothes for Zane Bellamy, and *not* thinking about him being wet and naked in her shower. Vicki got to her feet, determined to keep her mind on the prize, which was definitely not Zane or even the dress he was supposed to design. No, it was...

...maybe it was wondering, again, what she'd been *thinking* by inviting a strange man back to her home roughly ten seconds after meeting him. Her libido had plenty of answers, some of them supplied in deliciously vivid detail, but her good sense had no answers at all, except he seemed nice.

More than nice. He seemed safe, charming, gorgeous, delightful, *safe*—she'd listed that once before, but it deserved repeating—and also rather desperately in need of a refuge.

Vicki would be *so* happy to provide refuge. In all kinds of ways. If Zane felt the need to curl up in someone's arms and be protected from the world, Vicki was the woman to do the job.

Not that a guy who navigated the world of the rich, famous, and beautiful—and threw himself under women to keep them from breaking their necks when they fell—needed a random elementary school teacher to stand between him and the world, but man, Vicki would be happy to. Even if it was just for the evening, it sounded wonderful.

She had a soft fluffy robe that was ankle-length on her, and a set of what her brother referred to as 'floppy clothes' from the last time he'd visited her. He was bigger than Zane, but probably offering him extra-floppy clothes was better than handing over a pair of her own yoga pants and a belly shirt, which was mostly what Vicki flopped around the house in, given her druthers.

She hesitated with her hand over Chris's sweatpants and t-shirt, entirely distracted by the idea of Zane in snug yoga pants and a belly shirt. She bet he had *great* abs. She bet his ass would look way finer in her yoga pants than her own did. Maybe lending him her clothes was a better idea after all.

"Vicki, *no*." She recognized that tone of voice: it was the one she used when she was especially exasperated with one of her first-graders, and trying not to be. Having essentially scolded herself, she got Chris's clothes and the robe and went to tap nervously on the bathroom door before opening it a crack. "Vicki's Emergency Clothes Delivery Service. I'll just leave them on the bathroom counter?"

Zane's voice rolled out on a billow of steam. "Thank you, although I'm never getting out of the shower. The water pressure is incredible."

"Oh, I know, right?" Vicki brightened as she stepped in to drop the clothes off. "It's the best thing about this apartment! I get up fifteen minutes early because I finally realized I'm always going to stand there in the hot water *just a little bit longer* and otherwise I run late." Oh, God, she was standing in the steamy bathroom yammering at an incredibly attractive naked man who was only a semi-transparent shower curtain away. That was not cool. "Sorry, I'm letting all the heat out. Enjoy the shower. Oh, towels are in the cabinet right above the toilet there."

"Thank you." Zane sounded hazily happy as Vicki retreated, carefully *not* looking toward the shower curtain, an item she had never wanted so badly to look at in her entire life.

As soon as the door was closed, she almost opened it again to ask if he'd like a cup of coffee when he got out, never mind that it was too late for coffee by any sensible person's standards. Maybe tea. Maybe orange juice. Maybe water. Maybe *anything* that would let her stand in the hot humid bathroom three feet away from the gorgeous naked man.

Vicki, somewhere between appalled and amused at herself, went to make some cookies, because there was always refuge in baking.



ZANE REALLY DID TAKE his time in the shower, which meant the cookies were ready by the time he emerged in Chris's floppy clothes and, to Vicki's surprise, her robe. His wet hair, ruffled from a towel dry, was surprisingly long when loosened from its gelled hold, and the sweatpants actually just scraped the tops of his ankle bones. He was smiling as he came out, stroking the soft fluffy nape of her robe, and the smile turned to a grin as he met her eyes. "I *was* going to stay in the shower forever, but I have a terrible weakness for Sherpa fleece, and I *thought* I smelled cookies. Thanks for the clothes."

Victoria told herself she was imagining the question in the last four words, but since she was already staring at his ankles in surprise, she said, “They’re my brother’s. He’s huge and I thought those would be really big on you. You must have really long legs.”

“I do.” Zane put a foot out like he was seeing it for the first time. “Disproportionately long legs and arms for my height. It’s actually why I started being interested in clothing design. Even when I was a little kid, I’d get a long-sleeved shirt and...” He put his arms straight out in front of him and the sleeves of Vicki’s robe slid up to well above his wrists. “Not quite that bad, because this is a woman’s robe, but you get the idea. So I wanted clothes that fit.” He laughed and put his arms down again. “Fast-forward thirty-some years, and here I am.”

“In my apartment, wearing my robe and eating cookies,” Vicki said a little weakly, having gotten a glimpse of forearm again. “If you eat cookies?”

Zane gave her a positively blazing smile, movie-star megawatt in power. “I do. Especially homemade ones straight out of the oven. I don’t suppose you have any milk?”

Vicki beamed. “Milk and cookies coming up.” She got a plate and put all the cookies on it, poured two glasses of milk, and nodded in the general direction of seating. “Table or couch? I’m good either way.”

“Couch?” Zane asked hopefully. “My socks are in the wash and my feet get cold easily.”

“Oh no! I’ll see if I’ve got any of Chris’s slippers. You won’t fit in mine. Couch is good, go tuck your feet up.” Vicki put the milk and cookies down, then scurried to the spare bedroom as Zane offered a weak protest. She came back with socks, handing them over. “No slippers, but Chris’s girlfriend says he’s a furnace, so he doesn’t really need them. Socks should help, though.”

Zane had already taken a cookie to nibble, and after a moment’s hesitation, shoved the whole thing in his mouth rather than figure out where to put it down so he could take the

socks and put them on. To Vicki's surprise, he said *thank you* in American Sign Language, then swallowed the cookie and mumbled, "Sorry, that means—"

Thank you, Vicky signed back, bringing her open-palmed hand to her mouth, then lowering her hand in front of her so her palm faced up. Then she turned her hand to the side and closed her fingers as she pulled her hand across her chest, signing 'and' before repeating the 'thank you' gesture and saying, "And, you're welcome," out loud along with the signs.

Zane's jaw fell open, but then, Vicki was having a hard time keeping hers closed as they both said, "You speak sign?"

"Not very much," Zane admitted as Vicki drew a breath to answer, too. She took a cookie to encourage him to do the talking for a moment, and he said, "I've had a few Deaf clients and I hated not being able to speak with them directly, at least some of the time, so I picked a little up."

"I took it in college and actually teach it in my classroom, not formally but I use sign while I'm talking to the kids, and encourage them to use it, too. It's partly because I've had, and expect to have, Deaf students, but it's also because—" Vicki leaned forward, suddenly impassioned. "People talk with their hands all the time, right? It's human nature! So why don't we use them *say* something? And it's not just useful for Deaf people, that's the thing that gets me! It's great if you want to talk to somebody at a concert, or across a distance! We should all be learning sign from birth, or at least from school-age onward!"

Zane put another whole cookie in his mouth so he could applaud. "Right? I'd feel so much more competent if I'd learned ASL growing up and could just *talk* to my Deaf clients! I hadn't thought about the distance thing, though. That's a great point. Why *don't* we teach sign from early schooling?"

"Oh, don't get me started." Vicki waved a hand expressively. "It has to do with normalization of different abilities and funding and a million things, but I can't solve all of that tonight so let's just sit here and eat cookies."

“A compelling suggestion.” Zane smiled at her again, that high-wattage grin that made her toes curl and heated up her whole self from the core outward. “They’re great cookies, by the way.”

“Oh, thank you. I didn’t know if you had any allergies or food intolerances so they’re gluten-free and vegan.”

Zane’s dark eyebrows rose toward his damp hairline, where the silver-shot black threads were beginning to dry in soft appealing waves. “They’re—are they *really*? My God. I didn’t know gluten-free and vegan could be this good. No allergies or intolerances, but you probably could have looked it up online,” he added wryly. “Some of the strangest stuff I’ve mentioned in passing has ended up on the internet.”

“Oh. I didn’t think of that.” Vicki wrinkled her nose. “And now that I have, it seems weird and invasive.”

“It is, but I suppose I’ve gotten used to it to some degree. I try not to draw attention—”

Vicki snorted with disbelief, choked on a cookie crumb, and coughed until her eyes watered. Zane sat frozen with uncertainty, clearly not sure whether he should leap up and do a Heimlich maneuver or wait it out. She signed a feeble *I’m okay* and he relaxed a little, although his eyebrows beetled worriedly until she managed to stop coughing and got a drink of milk that cleared her throat. “Sorry,” she wheezed. “Just somebody as good-looking and well-dressed as you are trying not to draw attention struck me as unlikely.”

Zane gestured at his current outfit like it somehow detracted from either his gorgeous face, body, or general clothing choices, but also said, “Thank you,” as if slightly confused. “I hang out with much more attractive people than I am, so...well, thank you.”

“Please, I know some legit hotties by anybody’s standards and you can hold a candle,” Vicki said with another, more careful snort. “But anyway, I didn’t look it up, so the cookies are as allergy-proof as I could make them.”

“Because you have food intolerances?”

“Because I have classrooms full of kids who often do, so I have dozens of recipes of things I can bring in for them without killing anybody.”

“Oh, yeah, that seems smart. I don’t cook anything. Dion makes sure I stay fed. He never brings me cookies, though.” Zane examined the plate of cookies again as if considering the idea he was being neglected. “I might have to talk to him about that.”

Right. Dion. The man who’d put his arm around Zane’s waist and escorted him out of the gymnasium. Vicki had managed to forget about Dion, and took a brief moment to despise him in a sort of general and impersonal way before deciding she should be the bigger person. “I can give him the recipe.”

Zane laughed. He had a wonderful laugh, warm and inviting. “I genuinely don’t think he’d know what to do with a recipe. He’s the take-out king of Los Angeles. But if you give me the recipe, I’ll give it my best shot. You have my email address, right?”

A blush ran through Vicki at top speed, which was ridiculous. Who blushed at the idea of getting—or not having—an email address? “Um, no. I have Dion’s number, but he didn’t give me any way to contact you directly. I had the impression you were like Tony Stark and didn’t like to be handed things.”

“I...want to object to that, but...” Amused distress wrinkled Zane’s eyebrows and he put another entire cookie in his mouth as he looked around for something to write with.

Vicki pulled a drawer open from the coffee table and came out with some yellow construction paper and a dark purple marker. Zane examined them speechlessly—maybe because his mouth was full of cookie, but maybe because she was an adult human being offering another adult human being the writing implements a six year old would use—and then wrote his email address in nice clear blocky letters across the yellow paper. Vicki, without meaning to, chimed, “Oh, very nice! Good job, Zane!”

Horror crept over her entire body as the last words came out, but it was far too late. She had absolutely, without a doubt, praised the top designer for red carpet galas like he was a six year old. The top designer who was supposed to make her a dress. The *incredibly attractive*, funny, charming, pleasant, nice-smelling top designer who was supposed to make her a dress.

It would be better if she just spontaneously combusted now, and saved them all the humiliation.

Zane was staring at her with wide, wide grey eyes, his mouth pursed like he was trying to hold back—she didn't know what. Probably a string of offended outrage that would end in him swearing he would never make a dress for an idiot like *her*.

Then he clapped both hands over his mouth and spluttered laughter into them, ending up in a cough almost as hard as hers a few minutes ago. “Sorry, sorry, I’m sorry, I was afraid I was going to spit cookie all over you. Thank you. No one’s complimented my handwriting in a long time.”

“Probably since about first grade,” Vicki said miserably. “I’m so sorry. I’m a moron.”

“You’re really not.” Zane, having tidied up the cookie mess, gave her an incredibly sincere smile that washed some of her mortification away. “You’re really rather wonderful. I’m looking forward to making your dress.”

“Really? I thought you’d decide you never wanted to see me again. I’m *so* sorry.”

“Please. You’ve washed my clothes, fed me cookies, given me a warm cozy robe, and made me laugh. I don’t want to hear another apology.”

“None of that would have been necessary if I hadn’t fallen out a window on top of you.”

“I promise that if I’d ever thought of diving through a window to escape the media, I would have, so I can’t hold that against you either. Really, Victoria, it’s all right.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Vicki. I don’t usually use Victoria unless I’m being formal.”

“Well, then, it’ll be Vicki between you and me, but I’ll call you Victoria in the public eye. It’ll be our secret.”

Vicki’s insides melted again, gooey as the chocolate chips in the cookies. “Okay. I like that.”

“Me too.” Zane’s smile could keep her fantasies going for a month, although it disappeared into a jolt of surprise as a terrible buzzing shriek rang through the apartment.

“The washer! Ack!” Vicki vaulted the arm of the couch and ran for the utility room, slapping the buzzer off and calling, “Sorry, it sounds like a peacock being murdered so I usually try to be here when the cycle finishes but I also never use the gentle wash so I didn’t know how long it would take!”

Somebody thumped on a neighboring wall. Vicki banged back harder, yelled, “I’m *sorry!*” and said something rude under her breath when the obviously-displeased neighbor’s answering shout was clearly unmollified. She was taking Zane’s clothes out of the washer when he got to the utility room door to say, “I should be doing that,” in apology.

“No, it’s fine, or, I mean, sure, but I think all we’re doing is hanging them up to dry, right? I know it’s winter, but believe it or not, there’s a clothes line at the back of the apartment complex, and it’s kind of windy. Would that do?”

“I could iron it all dry, actually.” Zane offered his stunning smile again while dismay cascaded through Vicki’s chest.

“Is there something about me that makes you think I own an iron?” She gestured at the yoga pants and belly shirt she’d put on after her own roll through the mud, and lifted her fingerprint-stained nails with a rueful look. “I started my career with the idea that I would be one of those put-together and formal-looking teachers to I could establish solid boundaries between me and the kids. Instead, most days I’m lucky to find matching socks. All right, I’m not that bad, but I don’t iron anything by nature.”

Zane looked far more dismayed at the idea she didn't own an iron than he had at having had his handwriting praised. "Oh. Um. Well, if you have some extra towels I can press a lot of the remaining water out of everything so it'll dry faster on the line...?"

"Towels I can do." Vicki squeezed by him toward the door. The laundry room wasn't big and he filled it quite nicely. She would have been just as happy to stay there, squished up against him and inhaling his warm masculine scent, but she'd already embarrassed herself with the cookie and handwriting incident, so she thought she'd better move along.

"Thank you." Zane's warm voice, full of real appreciation, followed her as she opened the hallway closet and got towels. "You've been very kind this evening."

"Well, you did stop me from breaking my neck. I had to repay you somehow. Oh! Hey!" Vicki emerged from the closet triumphantly, a stack of towels folded into one arm and an iron brandished in her other hand. "There was one in here! It must have come with the apartment!"

"Oh great. I'll still press the extra water out, but I can dry everything much faster with the iron than on the line. And if you have anything you want ironed, I'd be glad to do that for you."

Vicki paused, blinking at him. "Are you serious?"

"Completely. I love ironing, and I'm good at it."

A thrill of suspicious delight went through Vicki. "Oh my God. Are you a unicorn?"

CHAPTER 6



Zane took a shocked step backward, smacking right into the washing machine as surprised color heated his face. How could she possibly have known that he was a shifter? Not that he was personally aware of any unicorn shifters, but— “Uh, n—no?”

Victoria’s face crumpled in embarrassment, or rue. “No, of course you’re not. It’s just, you know, you’re kind of perfect on the surface, like a unicorn. Gorgeous, personable, *irons clothes for fun*, I mean...right, no, not a unicorn, of course not. You, uh, you don’t cook.”

Oh, *that* kind of unicorn. Somebody who seemed perfect, not a shifter kind of unicorn. Zane should have known, but the idea that she already knew about shifters had thrown him for a loop. He said, “I could learn to cook?” and Vicki laughed.

“I’m sure you could, and then where would the Take-Out King of LA be?” She sounded like she was trying to convince herself of something, but whatever it was, she gave herself a shake and tilted her head toward the living room. “Let’s get your ironing board set up. Or set up my dining table to pretend to be an ironing board, anyway.” She hurried down the hall.

Zane followed more slowly, only belatedly realizing he should have kept his mouth shut about ironing the clothes dry. If they’d gone on the line, he would have had a great excuse to stay overnight in Vicki’s apartment.

Not that he intended or expected anything to happen. He’d just met her, and now he knew for sure that the whole

conversation about being a shifter needed to happen. He hoped she wouldn't be disappointed that he was only a wolf, not a unicorn.

Only? His wolf sounded indignant, although that was its only opinion on the matter. Zane muttered, "You know what I mean," aloud, and followed Vicki down the hall.

She was so bright and beautiful, so full of enthusiasm for everything. The paintings and drawings done by her students were the most heartfelt and wonderful art he could imagine for a home, and her slightly chaotic life clearly worked well for her. His was much more regimented, mostly thanks to Dion's constant interference, but he couldn't work without a certain amount of structure.

It struck him suddenly that even the ways they dressed reflected that chaotic/orderly approach to life: Vicki was wearing pink yoga pants, a mint green shirt that showed off her midriff, and fluffy orange slippers. He imagined she didn't dress like that for work, but those were her casual, off-the-clock clothes. *His* off-the-clock clothes were slacks and a button-down shirt and got more formal from there. Even his workout clothes were tailored.

Zane sighed. Even if he'd believed whole-heartedly in fate, he was fairly sure his wolf was wrong about the power and inevitability and perfection of that recognition when it came to Vicki. There was no *way* somebody like him would fit into her vibrant, energetic life. They'd just clash, the way his parents had, and there would be no joy in that for anyone.

"All right," Vicki said dubiously. "Your ironing board awaits, Monsieur Designer."

"Thank you, Madame Teacher." Zane bowed and came to look at the ad-hoc ironing board she'd set up with a towel on the table. "Ah, this will work just fine, thanks." He spent a few minutes rolling his clothes in other towels, squeezing extra water out, until the iron would do most of the drying for him. Vicki sat on the far side of the table, chin in her hands, watching him iron like it was the most interesting thing she'd ever seen.

“You weren’t kidding,” she said after a few minutes of apparently genuinely rapt silence. “You’re really good at this. You could make a killing with a YouTube channel.”

Zane lifted the iron so he wouldn’t burn anything while he stared across the table at her incredulously. “With *ironing*?”

“Oh, God, yes. People love watching people be competent. They’d ask you to iron increasingly impossible things, of course, but honestly, it’s really soothing to watch something being done really well. Especially when it ends with nice crisp lines and smooth fabric like this does. And you’ve got a built-in audience, since you’re already famous. You could get somebody to film you doing whatever ironing you have to do for work and have the clips edited, and oh, yeah, it’d be a great success.”

“I’m both intrigued and disturbed. There’s a lot of work I couldn’t show, though. The whole point of a lot of the couture gowns is that no one has any idea what the stars will be wearing until they arrive on the red carpet.” Zane went back to ironing, silk-scented steam puffing up as the hot metal ran across the smooth fabric.

“Even if you just ironed your own suits, it’d be popular. Not that you have to, but I’m just saying. There are guys—and people love it when it’s guys—who make whole careers out of sewing for social media. Not for people *on* social media, just to show what they’re doing via it.”

Zane smiled crookedly at her. “I think I feel like I exist in an entirely different world than you do, right now.” That was true, of course. His world included shifters, for one thing, and hers didn’t.

“Hey, I’ve got a movie star or two in my life too, you know.” Vicki tossed her hair and laughed. “No, I know what you mean, though. The kids in my classes are really in touch with a lot of this stuff, so I have to keep up on it, to the point that I’m fairly sure I sound like an alien to people my own age. They’re the ones who even got me to enter the contest for your dress. The kids, I mean.”

“Really?” Zane’s heart thumped unexpectedly. “Then I guess they did me a real favor. I never would have come back to Virtue otherwise, and I never would have met you.”

Vicki pursed her lips, studying him a moment, and he braced himself for the obvious questions: *why did you leave, why weren’t you going to come back, do you miss it*, and for all the questions that would follow. *Do you think you’ll ever reconcile with your father, have you ever sewn for him, would you have ever left to follow your dreams if you’d had a different relationship with him.* He’d heard them all before, and mostly hadn’t answered; Dion was very good at cutting off or redirecting interviews that went places Zane didn’t like. And Zane wasn’t the kind of celebrity that most people wanted to know everything about, either, which helped. Still, he braced himself.

And after a moment’s thoughtful pause, Vicki didn’t ask a single one of those questions. She only said, “They did me a favor too. I’ve never won anything in my life, but if I get to win *one* thing, this is an amazing one *to* win. I’ve always loved your work, even before I came to Virtue and found out you were a local boy.”

“Thank you.” He hung his silk shirt and socks up so he could turn his damp slacks inside out to iron them. “I haven’t been local for a long time, though.”

She laughed. “You wouldn’t think that from how the kids talk about you. You’d think you actually only left last summer, and they were all your close personal friends. Which is pretty funny, coming from six year olds. It’s a weird little town, isn’t it? It feels really closed off a lot of the time, but it’s also vibrant and proud of people like you who are from here.”

“Probably because I don’t talk about where I’m from much, so they can keep on being isolated and closed off.”

Even he heard the touchiness in his voice, and Vicki’s eyebrows rose a little. “You and me, both eager to get out of here, huh? It’s fine,” she added hastily. “The kids are great, obviously. But I feel like there’s...do you know *The Music Man*?”

“You mean Professor Harold Hill, Harold Hill?”

“Hah! ‘Tell me what’s his line!’ Or something like that, I don’t think that’s quite right. But the point is, I’ve found coming to Virtue is like going to River City in that musical. It’s a place where everybody already knows each other and nobody wants to know an outsider. I’ve worked in a lot of small towns, but I’ve never encountered something like it. I keep wondering if I’ve forgotten to put on deodorant or something.”

“You smell good,” Zane assured her hastily, then winced. That probably wasn’t the right kind of thing to say to a woman you hoped to romance. Or maybe it was exactly the right thing, but still probably not right when you’d only known her a few hours.

Vicki laughed, though. “*You* smell good. Please tell me it’s a cologne and not just your naturally fantastic masculine scent, because that would be unrealistic.”

Zane hesitated. “I’m afraid it might be worse to say it’s a limited edition cologne more or less designed for me, though.” He put the iron aside and lifted his slacks, shaking them a little so they would cool enough that he could test their dampness. They weren’t entirely dry, but he wasn’t sure he could get them that way with the iron.

He must have made a face, because Vicki said, “Not dry yet? Well, we can hang them over the heat vent or something. And no, I don’t think it’s worse for you to have a cologne designed for you, but how did that happen?”

“Oh, Éliott Renault’s daughter wanted a wedding dress, and I wanted a cologne, so we took it out in trade.” Zane grimaced again as he set the slacks aside so he could work on his suit jacket. “That definitely sounds worse. Now it sounds like I’m name-dropping.”

“Which would work better if I had any idea who Éliott Renault is.” Vicki had her phone out, looking the perfumier up, but she shook her head as she found him online. “Still don’t know. Wow, that dress, though.” She turned the phone around, showing him a picture of Renault and his daughter

Dani le on her wedding day, as if he wasn't familiar with the gown. Dani le was a tiny, delicately-boned young woman, extremely blonde and pale-skinned.

Zane crooked a smile. "Thank you. The poor thing was in tears when they came to ask me about designing a dress. She's so pale she looks like a ghost in white, but didn't want a dress that would overwhelm her with color, either. They hadn't been able to find anything that didn't make her feel like she'd disappear into the background of her own wedding."

Vicki turned the phone back around, examining the picture, then clearly scrolling to more. He knew what she saw: the young bride in a bodice of the palest lilac that faded to a cloud-like skirt of silver illusion tulle, light and flowing and beautiful. He had been pleased with the gown, and Dani le had been overjoyed. "So I made the dress, and  liott spent the entire time I was working on it with me in my workshop, smelling me, then presented me with the cologne at the wedding."

Vicki's gaze jerked up, laughter in her eyes. "Are you serious?"

"Completely. He said to design a unique cologne he had to know *my* scent first, so he would understand what he was working with. He had me use three different kinds of deodorant on three different days, and insisted I not wear any on one day. *I* regretted it, but the fact that I stank didn't seem to bother him at all. In fact, he told me there are no bad smells, only scents that can be worked with. I've had people watch me closely while I was working before, but I'd never had anybody basically put his nose in my armpit while I sewed. All right," Zane added. "These are as dry as they're getting tonight. I can probably make it back to the B&B without freezing to death."

"Oh." Vicki's face fell, which was flattering and, if Zane was truthful with himself, a relief. It suggested she wanted to spend more time with him, which made a warm, relieved core in the center of him. He didn't have to think or worry about things like fate if she just *liked* him. She looked at her phone to see the time and sighed. "I guess. They're probably not still

all out there around the building, right? It's almost two in the morning."

"Oh my God. And you have to work tomorrow! I'm so sorry!" Zane whisked his suit jacket off the makeshift ironing board and gave it a shake, too. It was mostly dry, and the lines looked good. That would do. And next time he would wear an overcoat.

As if there was likely to be a next time for diving under a beautiful woman who was falling out a window.

"No, it's okay, coffee to the rescue," Vicki said airily. "This has been a really nice evening, and I wouldn't have missed it for a couple of hours in bed." She went scarlet from her collarbones up as she heard what she'd said. "I mean—I mean—"

Zane couldn't stop a huge grin from plastering itself over his face. "You mean a couple of hours of sleep. I get it."

Vicki moaned and put her face in her hands. Zane thought he'd much rather hear that kind of sound under other circumstances, but at least she was also laughing, even if it was in obvious embarrassment. "It didn't sound wrong in my head!"

"Don't worry about it." Zane was still grinning. "I'll get out of your hair so you can go sleep for a while."

"That's probably a good idea." Vicki looked up, expression reluctant. "Do you want me to call you a taxi?"

Zane's eyebrows rose. "A...*taxi*?"

She blinked at him. "I know it's not *that* far, but your clothes are still a little damp—I mean, you can borrow those ones if you want to go home in them, which, now that I'm saying it, I could have thought of three hours ago so you could have escaped my weird apartment—so I thought it might be nicer than hoofing it, especially in dress shoes in this weather?"

"No, no, it's just, who uses taxies anymore? Aren't there any other ride services in Virtue?"

“Oh! No. They’re actually illegal in the township. All of that ‘sharing economy’ stuff is, as far as I can tell. If you want a room for the night, you rent a hotel or a B&B. If you want someone to drive you somewhere, you hire a taxi. It’s helped keep the local housing economy stable and when people said they couldn’t afford to live without supplementing their income with the gig economy, the town council voted to raise the local minimum wage to a living wage.”

Zane stared at her, taken aback. “That’s wildly forward-thinking. Are you sure I’m in Virtue?”

“It’s a *weird* little town,” Vicki said again. “Totally isolationist—I mean, holy cow, I tell you what, some of the people who have come at me just for being a temporary teacher in town, like wow—and then on the other hand, they do really progressive stuff like this. You should see the recycling program in the township! But probably not tonight.”

“I’m going to have to look it up,” Zane said in astonishment.

Vicki laughed. “Good luck with that. The town’s website dates from last century, I think. Sarah Ekstrom, the librar—oh, you know Sarah—even she finally gave up trying to get them to let her update it.”

“Sarah built that website,” Zane said absently. He remembered when she had, and how frustrated she’d been that the town council hadn’t embraced it. At the time, he’d wanted to explain about Virtue’s secrets and shifters, but he hadn’t known how to bring it up.

He still didn’t, even though he was going to have to explain it to Vicki at some point. But for the moment, he added, “I think...I might borrow these clothes to walk home in? The shoes don’t go, but needs must.”

“I won’t tell anyone you’re a late-night fashion disaster,” Vicki promised. “But are you sure you want to walk?”

Zane’s wolf said, *Definitely*, but he couldn’t exactly say that to her. Or maybe he could. For a heartbeat, Zane considered it. What was the worst that could happen?

Nothing bad, the wolf said. *She'll like it.*

And yet he couldn't quite bring himself to blurt the truth that he was a shifter out on a mere evening's acquaintance, so Zane only nodded as he folded up his now-clean clothes. "I'm sure. I don't get much walking done in LA, and it'll be nice to stretch my legs. I'll bring the clothes back washed tomorrow."

"Oh, no rush. You know where I live."

"Well, I leave for Los Angeles again on Saturday morning, so it'd better be tomorrow."

"Oh. Sure, right, tomorrow it is, then."

Vicki rose to walk him to the door, and Zane didn't think he imagined the note of disappointment in her voice. But fated mate or not—if it was even real—he had no intention of staying in Virtue a minute longer than he had to, and he *did* have obligations back in Los Angeles. "Great. You've got my email. I'll see you tomorrow?"

She tucked a strand of long golden hair behind her ear as she smiled up at him. "Tomorrow."

Zane, captivated, gazed down at her a few heartbeats longer than he should, trying to decide if she would punch him if he was audacious enough to kiss her.

His wolf said, *No*. Zane said, *But maybe yes*, and hurried out the door before he got up the nerve to find out which one of them was right.

CHAPTER 7



Vicki told herself she was an adult woman, not a teenager with a crush, and that she was absolutely not going to rush to the front windows of her apartment and peek through the curtains to watch Zane Bellamy walk down the sidewalk.

She *meandered* to the front windows. She *sauntered*. She *walked at a casual pace*. She did not, by anybody's definition of the word, *rush*.

He was gone by the time she got there.

An absolutely ridiculous flash of disappointment crashed over her, although she recognized it as silly and managed a laugh at herself. Also, she had to be kind of impressed by the speed at which he'd slid down the sidewalk in those dress shoes. If she'd been wearing them, it would have taken her ten minutes to get from the door to the main sidewalk. Or maybe men's dress shoes had better traction than women's did, in which case she might start wearing them.

For a moment she envisioned wearing shiny black patent leather men's shoes with whatever dress Zane was going to make her, and laughed. Maybe she'd stick with heels after all.

Her phone buzzed with a text as she headed for bed, and she picked it up to read a note from her brother: *didja meet him, huh, huh, what'd you think???*

I think it's 2:30am, you big nerd, what are you doing texting me! It was only 11:30pm in California, where he was, but he knew what time zone she was in! Vicki put the phone

on silent, like that would stop her from checking to see if Chris had texted again, and went to bed. To her complete surprise, exhaustion trumped excitement, and she slept like a log for the four hours until her alarm went off.

There were three more texts from her brother, two defending his time zone versus hers, and a third asking what kind of dress she was going to have made. It was now 3:30 in the morning *his* time, so she didn't answer for fear of waking him up, "Because," she told herself tiredly, "you're a better person than he is."

The idea of being morally superior to her brother made her giggle enough to get through the morning routine, although to her dismay, she'd forgotten to clean her big boxy wool coat and had to wear a pink puffy jacket out of the house. At least she made it out early enough to get a cup of coffee at the Winter Doughnut Shop, which was the silliest name she'd ever heard for a doughnut shop, but apparently the woman who owned it only ran it in the winter, and so: Winter Doughnut Shop. The caffeine had more or less kicked in by the time she entered the classroom, where roughly thirty bright-eyed six year olds had exactly the same questions her big brother had.

Noah, her secret favorite, had the air of a child both profoundly delighted for her while simultaneously being deeply depressed about the whole situation. "I really would have made you a dress, Ms. Hawthorne. It would have been *beautiful*."

Vicki laughed and ruffled his hair before she remembered that annoyed him. "I know you would have, Noah, and it would have been." For a heartbeat she wondered if she could get Zane to come in and do some kind of sewing crafts project with the kids, but remembered with a disappointed shock that he was leaving the following morning.

Besides, world famous fashion designers probably didn't volunteer their time to come put pieces of pre-cut felt together with embroidery thread and bulbous-nosed plastic sewing needles with a bunch of small children, even though the little stuffed bear and mouse and alien patterns were really cute.

“We’ll do a sewing project of our own next week,” she promised Noah, and the class at large.

Enthusiastic chaos immediately erupted, and the rest of the day went as usual, getting a little learning done amidst the work of socializing small wild animals in the general direction of civilized adulthood. A surprising amount of the afternoon involved standing on the playground yelling as an investigation into how sound carried. Vicki’s throat hurt and her voice sounded like she’d been on a three-day bender by the time they were done, but it was great fun.

There was paperwork to do after the kids left, and she didn’t get out of the school until well after five. To her horror, there was still a media presence hanging out, apparently hoping to interview her. “We haven’t talked about the dress yet,” she said to the eager faces and cameras, but the questions that followed her as she hurried away from the school were more about her personal life, whether her personal life had room for Zane Bellamy in it, and whether his presence was a disruption to her personal life.

It would do no good to tell them *they* were the disruption. Vicki flipped the poofy collar of her jacket up like she could hide behind it, and fled to the gastropub around the block from the school. The owner, a genuinely enormous guy named Steven, looked at the swarm of media on her heels, and shuffled her to the back of the restaurant while somehow keeping his huge, broad-shouldered bulk between her and the reporters. He said, “No cameras,” pleasantly enough, but there was a dangerous growl in his big voice, and most of the media crew people suddenly decided they had somewhere else to be. Vicki collapsed into a two-person booth and put her head on the table. “I don’t know how he does it.”

God, her voice sounded like she’d swallowed a frog. A sympathetic voice said, “How who does it?” as someone slid a menu onto the table in front of her. Vicki lifted her head to see a young woman, name tag *Robin*, smiling at her. “Not excited about the dress? I would be. Want some water while you think about what you want to eat.”

“Water would be great.” Her voice was so hoarse Vicki winced. “I *am* excited about the dress. Does everybody know about it?”

“It’s the most exciting thing that’s happened to Virtue since...” Robin, who looked about nineteen, made a thoughtful face. “Ever.”

Vicki laughed, although it wasn’t very loud, and sort of hurt. She really needed to take some voice lessons so she wouldn’t do this to herself next time there was a shouting contest at school. “You might be right. It’s a pretty ordinary little town.”

“It has its charms.” Robin waved and went to get water while Vicki studied the menu. Literally everything on it looked unspeakably delicious. The pub had only opened a couple of months before, and from the time or two Vicki had been in, ‘unspeakably delicious’ pretty much covered it in terms of food quality. The chef specialized in what Vicki could only call ‘upscale comfort food,’ and after being chased around the block by reporters, she thought she could use some comfort.

She ordered, and gradually started to relax as it appeared the owner really wasn’t going to let any media harass her. The pub’s layout helped with that: a big front room with a bar counter and a number of booths around the walls, plus a few tables on the floor, and then a double-door-width opening leading into the back half of the restaurant. She was tucked into the back half, against its front wall, so somebody looking for her would actually have to peer directly around the corner to find her at all. It felt surprisingly secure, as well as warm and cozy.

Possibly too warm and cozy for someone who had only had about four hours of sleep. Her eyes drifted shut. She took her phone out to look at it in hopes of keeping herself awake, and found herself ‘studying’ the screen through closed eyes again. Fortunately, Robin came by with water and to take her order before she fell completely asleep. Vicki alternated between drinking water and scrolling through Zane Bellamy designs on the phone, wondering what on earth she should ask for as a gown. Her imagination didn’t seem to be nearly as

good as his, when she compared her ideas to his actual creations.

Maybe she should just leave it to him. She put her phone down, rubbed her eyes, and peeked out of her booth to see if her dinner was on its way.

Instead, Zane Bellamy, today in a dark grey suit that made the other one look flashy and outrageous, stood up from a few booths down, said something to his waiter, then turned and headed down the aisle in her direction.

God, he was handsome. All long lean lines that his suit emphasized, although he pulled on a well-cut overcoat as he came down the aisle. Vicki grinned up at him in greeting and croaked, “Fancy meeting you here.”

Zane gave her a brief, polite smile, and walked on by without a hint of recognition.

A gut-twisting wrench of shocked disappointment went through Vicki. They’d spent *hours* chatting the night before, and he hadn’t recognized her? Apparently if there was any attraction going on, it was entirely on her side. She sank into her booth, hot with embarrassment.

A few seconds later, the waitress appeared, eyes wide and a little star-struck. “I just saw Zane Bellamy. Did you talk to him?”

Mute with mortification, Vicki shook her head.

Robin’s eyes lit up even more. “I’ll grab him and make him say hi!”

“No, Robin, wait—!” It was too late. The young woman was gone, darting back to the main room of the restaurant. Vicki put her face in her hands, hoping against hope that Zane had already left and she wouldn’t have to face a man who’d dissed her like that. It was bad enough she’d have to face him eventually to get the dress made.

Maybe she could say she’d decided not to accept the prize, and let somebody he wouldn’t forget instantly have it instead. Vicki pulled her phone out to text her humiliation to her brother. He would have her back. He always did.

Before she got the text written, though, Zane appeared at her table again, and said, in the most genuine tones imaginable, “I am *so sorry*.”

Despite the fact that she was positively burning with embarrassment, Vicki automatically whispered, “No, it’s fine, of course it’s fine,” because that was what people did in awkward situations. That, and she didn’t think her voice would hold out if she started yelling.

“May I sit down?” Zane actually waited until Vicki nodded, and sat across from her with a beseeching look on his gorgeous face. “I’m sorry. I can explain, but first, Vicki—Victoria,” he said, as if suddenly remembering their agreement to be formal in public, “are you all right? Your voice—it didn’t sound right?”

Vicki put her hand on her throat, wishing she’d thought to ask Robin for tea or whiskey or anything to soothe the ache. “We got into a yelling contest at school,” she whispered. “I kind of wrecked it.”

“Oh my God.” Real dismay spilled across Zane’s face. “Can I get you anything?”

Well, she’d literally *just* thought she could use something soothing. Vicki croaked, “A hot toddy with a lot of honey?”

Zane jumped up and dashed out of the back room like a man on a mission, leaving Vicki to blink at his empty seat in total confusion. *That*—the helpful, kind, thoughtful guy who’d just bounced off to help her—seemed like the man she’d spent hours laughing with the night before. It didn’t square at all with the guy who’d just entirely blown her off.

Humans, she decided, didn’t make any sense at all.

It took a couple of minutes for Zane to come back, but he had the hot toddy in hand when he did, and presented it to her with an air of enthusiastic apology. “Extra honey, and the bartender made it with honey whiskey, which he said is great. Vicki, I’m *so sorry*. Your voice being wrong really threw me off, and I know that’s no excuse, but—”

Vicki took a sip of the hot toddy, which was delicious, painful, and soothing all at once. She made a sound like a kitten, small and pathetic and also relieved, and Zane broke off with an expression of great concern. “Is that good? Or bad? Should I get you some lozenges? I should, oh, God, I should have thought of that already, hold on—”

He jumped up and ran off again. Vicki, despite herself, giggled. Just once. A small giggle. She still didn’t know how he could have blanked her like that, but he was clearly eager to make up for his mistake, which made forgiving him a lot easier. The sting of embarrassment faded (probably helped somewhat by the hot toddy), and Vicki felt herself relaxing.

Zane reappeared with a positively agonized expression. “They don’t have any throat lozenges. Should I go to the drugstore and see if I can get you some?”

Vicki lifted her hot toddy. “I’m good. Thanks, though.” Her voice didn’t sound like she was good at all, but the honey and whiskey was helping. “What have you been doing today? Ugh. You have to talk, I can’t.”

“Ah, yes, just what every man wants: the opportunity to talk endlessly about himself.” Zane gave her a rueful smile as he sat back down. “I spent the day hiding in the B&B and doing sketches. Only desperate hunger and the fact that Dion doesn’t know who to order out from here drove me into the wilds of Virtue’s streets.”

Childish excitement burst through Vicki. “Sketches for me?”

Another expression of sheer guilt slid across Zane’s face. “No, I’m sorry. We didn’t talk about the dress at *all* last night. I don’t want to start until I have some sense of your personal style, of what you like, of—”

“Please,” Vicki croaked. “You saw my personal style. Yoga pants and t-shirts.”

Zane flicked a fingertip upward, wagging it slightly. Not at her, but in rejection of what she’d said. “And boxy wool coats, and schoolmarmish dresses.”

Vicki looked down at herself: jeans and a fluffy sweater, and her puffy pink coat shoved around her hips because she was sitting in a booth. “I guess? I wore the dress yesterday because we were supposed to meet and I know it only cost thirty dollars but I think it’s cute—”

“Hey,” Zane said softly. Vicki blinked up to find him smiling gently, as if she was a wild animal that needed careful handling. “That thirty dollar dress *is* cute, and it suited you. Don’t apologize for developing your style around your budget.”

“Oh.” A much happier heat washed through Vicki, almost bringing tears to her eyes. “Thank you. I...I don’t know, I guess I figured a couture fashion designer wouldn’t have much use for thrift shopping and sports wear.”

Zane sat back with a wry smile. “My life *allows* me to wear bespoke suits and patent leather shoes. My sartorial choices would be terrible for a first grade teacher. You know what works for you in a way I can’t.”

“Well, yeah, but it’s not like I’m going to be wearing your dress to work,” Vicki pointed out before making a face and drinking more of her hot toddy as Robin stopped by the table again. “Ow. Oh, Robin, good. Can I just have the soup, I think? My dumb throat hurts too much to swallow anything else.” She smiled at the young waitress, who nodded and lifted her eyebrows at Zane.

He shook his head. “No, I just ate, but thank you. I wish this place had been here when I was growing up,” he added to Vicki. “It was a bar back then, and only the—” He broke off abruptly, looking distressed.

Vicki’s eyebrows rose. “Only the unsavory types hung out here? I didn’t think Virtue was big enough to have unsavory types.”

“Only a certain kind of people, yeah,” Zane said so slowly and carefully that Vicki’s eyebrows popped even higher.

“Good grief, was it a gay bar? I definitely didn’t think Virtue was big enough to have a gay bar, although I guess, I

mean, if one in ten people are gay, that's at least four or five hundred here in Virtue, but on the other hand, you left, what, twenty years ago, give or take? I don't know if there would have been that many people out, that long ago..." She was talking too much and it made her throat hurt, but its ache suddenly closed around the words. No wonder Zane had left Virtue as soon as possible, if he was, in fact, gay. A small town like this, without much in the way of an openly queer population, would drive a lot of people away.

Zane held his mouth like he was trying to stop a laugh. "No, not a gay bar, not as far as I know. The *dress*, Vicki. What do you have in mind for the dress?"

"Blue?" Vicki smiled weakly. "I don't know. I like blue. Cinderella? Elsa? Claire Danes's starlight dress?"

"Oh," Zane said with a bright flash of admiration, "oh, that was a lovely idea. They implemented it so well. Zac Posen. Beautiful work. All right, I'm hearing fitted bodices, full skirts here. In blue. What else speaks to you?"

"Flowy?" Vicki said uncertainly. "I do like the full skirts, but...can you have a full skirt that moves a lot? One that isn't poofy? Like Lupita Nyong'o's Storm dress?"

"Her what?" Zane blinked, and Vicki laughed.

"From the Oscars. I guess it was a long time ago now, but it was blue with an incredibly flowing skirt and there was an amazing picture of her swooshing it around, and somebody did a photo manipulation and changed her hair to Storm's, from the X-Men, when she had a mohawk..."

Zane's eyes sparkled. "I remember the dress. Prada. Beautiful. I don't know anything about Storm, though. Except didn't Halle Berry play her? But yes, that's an example of a full, but not poofy skirt."

"Oh good. I know something about what I'm talking about, then, maybe. Or your *girl on fire* dress? I loved that so much..."

Zane said, "Oh!" again, pressing his hand over his heart. "Thank you. I'm sure I'm not supposed to have favorites, but

that's one of my favorites. She's a dream to design for. All right, this is starting to shape up in my mind a little. I have to go back to LA in the morning, but—we could vone to talk about it?"

"...vone?"

"Video phone." Zane waved a hand. "There are so many apps. I decided it was just easier to call it all voning."

"That is an amazing idea. Down with branding. Except Zane Bellamy fashion branding," Vicki said hastily.

"Right. Except that." Zane smiled at her, and Vicki swore her toes curled. Why did he have to be so *very* handsome? His smile fell away a little, though. "I didn't explain myself, about earlier. I really am sorry. It's just..."

He hesitated, clearly trying to figure out how to say something, and after a moment Vicki shook her head. "We all have bad moments, right? It's okay."

"No, well, I mean, thank you, but—" Zane grimaced himself into silence as Robin returned with Vicki's soup, and when she left again, said, "I'm not great with faces, is all. It's not you. I just...am not great with faces."

"Oh! Oh, you've got face blindness? Yeah, I know some other people who have that problem, and my hair's different and I'm wearing a different coat and my voice is messed up. I must have seemed like a total stranger. Oh my god. No, that's *fine*, that's totally okay. Oh my God." She reached across the table and seized his hand, nearly upsetting her soup in the process. "Is that just *awful* for your work? Like you're supposed to be dressing, uh—" Her mind went totally blank for a second. Normally she could think of plenty of celebrities, but when she needed to? Of course not.

Zane grinned. "Benton Sinclair?"

Vicki laughed out loud. "Yeah, okay, good old Benton 'my friends probably call me Ben' Sinclair. No, I was thinking, I don't know, more like, oh, you know, Nora Bruschi. She's fabulous, and dresses incredibly, but I bet she hates not being

recognized. Because men usually wear such similar stuff, but yeah.”

“Well, Ben is pretty creative for a male client—”

“Oh my god, do people really call him Ben?”

“...yes?”

“That’s ridiculous. Sorry, sorry, go on.”

It obviously took a moment for Zane to get himself back on track. “Um. Right. Right! Ben’s fashion tastes aside, sometimes it’s awful, yes. Nora—I’ve known Nora for years—she’s got a clothing profile she almost always wears, which makes it easier to know who she is, but I learn to look at other things, too. It’s just usually it’s hair or eye glasses style or something, and if those change, I’m doomed. Nora’s easy, but yes, she’s a good example of someone who feels it’s really important to be recognized. Others, though, sometimes they’re just really glad to be treated like just anybody off the street, which I’m very good at.”

“Because they could be literally anybody, unless you recognize their style or something.”

“Exactly. Look, thank you for being so understanding. A lot of people aren’t.”

“Well, here’s a secret for identifying me.” Vicki extended her hands, showing off her paint-stained nails. “I almost always have weird colors on my hands because of finger-paints.”

Zane, audibly relieved, said, “I’ll remember that. Thank you, Vicki. Look, Dion and I are leaving Virtue around ten tomorrow morning, so if I go back to the B&B and do some work tonight, we could meet for breakfast and I could show you some preliminary sketches then? And then we’ll really know what we’re aiming for when we vone.”

“That sounds great. Like...eight o’clock? At the Silver Diner? Do you know about the Silver Diner?”

“Wow. That place is still open? Yeah, that’ll be fine. See you then.” Zane scooped up his things and swept off with a

glance that Vicki swore felt like a fiery, sweet kiss on her skin.

CHAPTER 8



Confessing his Terrible Secret had gone so well that Zane had decided he'd better run before he blurted out his *other* secret.

It would have been fine, his wolf said wearily. The big furry beast thought all his dithering and fluttering about was exhausting, and that Zane needed to chill. Not that the wolf would phrase it that way, but that was pretty much the idea.

Not in the middle of a restaurant, Zane protested. *Shifters don't go around explaining their secrets in public*. For one thing, obviously, talking about secrets in public was a bad way to keep them secret. For another thing, though, Zane was fairly certain that most true humans needed to be *shown* the truth, not just *told* it.

And really, that seemed fair. If somebody told him they could turn into a wolf, he'd want to see it before he believed it.

No, you wouldn't.

"No, *I* wouldn't, but if I wasn't me—!"

His wolf lifted its head to give him a grey-eyed stare of bewilderment. *You wouldn't know what you would do, if you weren't you.*

Okay, I IMAGINE I would want to see it before I believed it!

The wolf stared at him a while longer, then, with a sigh, put its head down. Clearly humans and their imaginations

were too much for the wild creature. Zane gave its ears the mental idea of a rub, and the wolf relaxed back into sleep.

Victoria had been *so* understanding. Zane's chest filled with lighthearted relief, and the only thing that kept him from skipping back to the B&B was that his shoes really had no tread at all, and he'd probably kill himself slipping on the ice. He was even willing to give a couple of interviews on the B&B's front steps, mostly keeping it to *yes, Virtue is a lovely town*, and, *no, we only have a few preliminary ideas for the dress so far*, before he hurried inside when it started to rain.

Emmy Jones was at the front desk reading a book. She looked up attentively, then smiled in real pleasure as she realized she didn't have to stop reading. Zane waved, she waved back, and she went back to her book as he headed for the stairs.

Dion's voice, down the hall, drew his attention. He detoured to find his assistant lounging in a comfortable, cozy sitting area that had a *Guests Welcome* sign on the wall. A big, good-looking man with a distinct resemblance to Emmy was also in the...parlor, Zane decided to call it, with his thick sturdy legs stretched out toward Dion. The big man wore jeans, a flannel shirt, and sturdy brown leather work boots; Dion, as if a deliberate study in opposites, wore silk pajamas in orange and purple with a matching robe, and fluffy slippers.

"Zane, darling! This is Aaron Jones, seventh son of a seventh son, or some such nonsense. Aaron, this is Zane."

Aaron Jones stood up and up and up, until his broad, big self seemed likely to brush the rafters with the top of his head. "I'm really only the fifth son," he said in a very deep voice as he offered his hand. "And you probably don't remember me. I was about nine when you left Virtue."

Zane shook Aaron's hand. "Nice to meet you again. I assume you were shorter then."

Aaron laughed, a rumbling sound as deep as his voice. "Considerably. Nice to meet you, too. Todd is planning to drive down from Burlington tomorrow to say hi."

A pang of actual guilt sizzled through Zane. “Oh, no. I’d love to see him, but tell him not to. We’re leaving in the morning.”

Dion sniffed. “I still think we should stay until you have the design done.”

Since Dion had said nothing of the sort, it took everything Zane had to not blurt an astonished *What?* in response to that. Instead, after a startled heartbeat and then a second suspicious one, he bit back a laugh. Apparently Dion and Aaron were getting along very well. “I’m sorry, but your boss is a terrible taskmaster and has a lot of work back in Los Angeles.” And wanted to get out of Virtue as soon as possible, Zane added silently.

Dion gave a petulant sigh and folded his arms in a flurry of orange and purple silk. “Overworked and under-appreciated, that’s me.”

“Overworked, probably,” Zane said fondly. “Under-appreciated, never. I’m going upstairs to work on some design ideas. If you want to order dinner, The Italian Place is good.”

“All right. What’s it called?”

Aaron and Zane both said, “The Italian Place,” and Aaron’s big laugh rumbled through the parlor again. “It used to have a different name, but nobody ever called it anything but *The Italian Place*, so they eventually gave up and renamed the business. But I’m cooking for the B&B tonight, if you don’t want to order in.”

Dion, sounding awe-stricken, said, “You cook?”

Emmy, who apparently had very sharp hearing, yelled, “He’s a great cook!” down the hall, and Aaron laughed.

“She’s better, but I’m not bad.”

“I’m nooooooot!”

Aaron, still smiling, tilted his head at Dion. “How about you come keep me company in the kitchen?”

“I’d be delighted.” Dion bounced up, gave Zane a positively thrilled smile, and followed Aaron into the depths of

the house.

Zane said, “Well, that’s cute,” aloud once they were gone, and Emmy’s voice caroled down the hall again: “They’ve been being *adorable* at each other all day. I’ve only read two pages because they’re so *sweet!*”

“At least now you can read in peace.” Zane headed for the stairs with Emmy’s “*Right?!*” following him.

His B&B room was more than comfortable, and looked as if he’d set up shop permanently already, despite having only been there overnight. But there were sketches and papers everywhere, piles of notes that he’d brought with him, thoughts for future projects, and one single untouched sketchpad that he always carried around but never drew in. It was hand-bound in beautifully embossed leather, with a sewn spine so it would lie flat no matter what page it was open to, and had been a gift from a client several years earlier.

As was the case with any particularly beautiful sketch or notebook, Zane had always felt like it needed to be saved for something *special*. There had never been anything special enough to justify using it—thank goodness he didn’t usually own beautiful sketchpads, because otherwise he would have dozens of them, all ‘too good’ to draw in—but he thought this dress, for this woman, deserved to be thought out in its pages.

This woman. His fated mate, maybe. Zane sat down with the sketchbook, letting his fingers work while his mind wrestled with the idea. It was impossible to deny the connection he felt to Victoria Hawthorne, and almost as impossible to accept the idea of a fated mate.

He knew they were commonly accepted as real in the shifter communities. It was more the idea that *he* might have one that was hard to come to terms with. His parents’ contentious relationship had certainly not been one built on the kind of recognition he felt toward Victoria, and...Zane’s hand went still, his gaze unfocused as he finally put words to something he’d always subconsciously believed.

Other shifters, born of fated meetings and mates, might have the possibility of that kind of happiness in their own

futures. But Zane himself, born from an ordinary marriage between two people who hadn't, in the end, liked each other very much...he'd never thought he was special enough, really, to find a fated mate of his own. It seemed unlikely enough for shifters who were raised in a happy, fated family. For him? It simply had never seemed possible at all.

He glanced at his sketchbook, not surprised to see he hadn't really made much effort to draw any gowns. Instead he'd drawn Vicki herself in easy strokes of colored pencil that brought out the pink in her cheeks, the blue of her eyes, the soft golden fall of her hair. He murmured, "Cinderella," and turned the page, drawing her as the classic heroine in a gown of light blues and whites, trying to find a space for her preferences in the midst of making it clear which princess she was.

The pages filled up with sketches after that, some of them just drawings of Vicki, others of gown ideas, some of both. He fell asleep late, listening to the sound of ice-cold rain on the shutters, and nestling the sketchbook in his arms as he rested.



IF HIS ALARM hadn't been set so he'd get up for the drive out to the nearest airport, Zane would have slept through breakfast with Vicki. As it was, he woke with a jolt, disoriented, and had to call a taxi—a taxi! like some kind of twentieth-century barbarian!—to get him to the diner in time. He barely made it: last night's rain had turned to snow sometime during the night, and it lay thick over black ice, making the roads treacherous.

The Silver Dollar Diner was pretty much exactly as he remembered it, a 50s style diner decor, including a huge neon and chrome sign proclaiming the place's name up on the roof of the building.

Vicki was at the door, wearing her boxy coat. It was still muddy, but his heart jumped with surprise and understanding: she knew he'd remembered the coat, and wore it to help him recognize her. He said, "Thank you," in a rather overwrought way when he met her, and she smiled.

“It worked. That’s what matters.” Her voice had recovered considerably overnight, and she no longer winced when she spoke. “Good morning. I stuck my head in to ask them to reserve us a table, but...” Vicki gestured first at the parking lot, which had very few cars in it, at 8am on a Saturday, then gallantly held the door for him while he protested. “Well, you can either go in or we can stand here arguing in the cold,” she said briskly, and Zane, chastised, scooted inside.

It seemed like there were even fewer people in the diner than there were cars outside, which didn’t make sense until Zane considered the fact that the staff had also had to drive to work. It looked the way he remembered, too, although he was sure it had been updated in the years he’d been gone, or everything would be aged and faded by now. But the black and white checked tile floor and the dining counter with stools remained the same, and there was still an old-fashioned soda fountain that he bet he still loved. Everything was chrome and fake red leather, with little jukeboxes at each table that took quarters and had, the last time Zane had been there, worked. Right now there wasn’t any music playing, though, probably because there really weren’t many people there. Just a handful of them scattered around the room, eating separately, ignoring each other.

They took a seat and a waitress bustled right over to pour coffee and say, “How about this weather, huh?” before bustling off again.

“It’s been like this all winter,” Vicki said in the waitress’s absence. “It snowed a lot, really early, and it hasn’t stopped since. I had to buy huge warm boots that come up to my knees.”

Zane, who hadn’t seen her in those boots, glanced under the table to see if he’d missed a wintery fashion statement. She was wearing ankle boots that didn’t look very warm, and when he came back up from his investigation, her expression was faintly embarrassed. “They’re not cute,” she admitted. “I chose fashion over function today. And I’m paying for it. My toes are frozen.”

“The sacrifices we make.” Zane smiled to keep himself from offering to warm her toes up. Probably by tucking them under his leg or something, although he was open to other suggestions. In fact, he had a whole list of better ideas, but proposing them in a diner booth just didn’t seem like the right idea. “So I did some sketches...”

“Oh!” Vicki brightened with excitement, then tamped it down. “Wait, I have to choose food first or I’ll forget to eat. What are you having?”

Dion generally arranged for Zane to have a delicately scrambled egg white omelette with fresh herbs and tomato on weekend mornings, but he bet that wasn’t on the Silver Dollar Diner’s menu. “I haven’t eaten here in a long time. What’s good?”

“I have a personal weakness for the corned beef hash and eggs. It’s homemade hash and has spoiled me for the canned stuff forever. If I ever want to eat corned beef hash again, I’m going to have to come back to Virtue. How far is too far to drive for breakfast?”

“That might depend on whether you like to drive, or how much you like breakfast.” Zane smiled at a sudden memory. “Where I went to college, there was a pancake place that did Saturday morning brunch. They did like thirty kinds of pancakes, maybe more, and didn’t take reservations. People drove for a couple hours to go there, and stood around in line for at least that long waiting to get in. Sometimes when we’d been up all night we’d all pile into somebody’s car and drive over to be first in line. That’s where I met Dion, actually.”

“Oh.” Vicki’s smile went a little wistful. “So you’ve been together a long time.”

“God, yes. I couldn’t live without him. Okay, you’ve talked me into trying the corned beef hash. Do they still have good orange juice? They used to.” The waitress came to take their orders, and Zane cleared the table top between them when she left. Vicki watched with interest as he opened his sketchbook to the pages that were sketches of dresses, rather

than sketches of Vicki herself, and pushed the book across the table toward her. “Let me know if you see anything you like.”

“All of them,” Vicki said almost immediately. “How am I supposed to choose? Oh, but that’s pretty, though...” She traced an orange-and-red-stained fingertip above one of the gowns, lingering over the fitted bodice, particularly. Zane reached over and made a checkmark by the bodice, and checked off other elements she liked from different sketches. Vicki, skeptically, said, “You can’t put all those together into one dress, can you?”

“Maybe.” Zane took the sketchbook back, flipping through the sketches he’d marked thoughtfully. “You have rather classic tastes in a lot of ways, and the simple lines can mean getting away with a lot of extras, as long as we don’t go overboard. I’ll refine these more and text them to you until we’ve got something that makes your heart sing.”

Vicki gave him a shy smile. “That sounds wonderful and exciting. Oh, God, so does breakfast. I’m starving.” She pulled the paper placemat in front of her again as the waitress returned with enormous plates of hash, eggs, and biscuits, as well as giant glasses of orange juice precariously balanced on the edge of the tray. Zane glanced at the time and decided he’d better eat quickly, although he didn’t really want to leave Vicki.

Virtue, yes. It was something close to a miracle that he’d been in town almost thirty-six hours without running into his father, and he badly wanted to get out of town before his luck ran out. But he also wanted to sweep Victoria Hawthorne up and bring her back to LA with him.

For a moment, he imagined proposing that, and ended up chuckling quietly into his orange juice. Maybe she’d go with him, but not, he bet, until after the school year was over. There was fated romance, and then there were contracts and thirty little kids who needed a teacher. He knew which one *he* would consider more important, in terms of where he needed to be for a certain amount of time, and he was pretty sure Vicki would feel the same way.

Not that he could reasonably ask a woman he'd known for a day and a half to run away to Los Angeles with him. Zane chuckled again, and Vicki lifted her eyebrows, inviting explanation. "Aaah, just trying to think of how to do measurements and fittings and things," he said, not *entirely* untruthfully. "It'd be easier to take you to Los Angeles with me."

Vicki snorted, which gave him all the answer he needed. "Easier for you. It'd wreak havoc with my life."

"Well, I don't want that," Zane said with genuine sincerity. "I'll just have to come back."

"I look forward to it." Vicki sounded wistful again, which seemed hopeful, to Zane. He thought it probably meant she liked him, even if he *should* be sure of it, with the whole fated mate thing. "When do you leave?"

"Pretty much now," Zane said apologetically. "I have enough time to pour a bunch of honey onto this biscuit, shove it into my mouth, pay the bill—"

"I can get the bill!"

"Business expense," Zane said, which let him skip over the fact that he got paid a haute couture designer's salary and she got paid a first grade teacher's salary.

It might have let Vicki skip over that too, because she paused briefly, then shrugged with a quick, agreeable smile. "Fair. In that case, thank you."

"My pleasure." Zane finished pouring honey onto the biscuit and did, in fact, shove it in his mouth to keep himself from daring a kiss. Vicki laughed as he went all squirrel-cheeked, and did a little bobbing thing like a curtsy when he stood and sketched a quick bow, since his mouth was now too full to talk around.

"Do you need me to call you a taxi?"

He nodded, still squirrel-cheeked as he went to pay the bill, and by the time it was paid and his mouth was clear, the taxi was idling at the door. Vicki had gotten up to walk him

out, and he smiled down at her, oddly nervous. “Thank you. I’ll text you?”

“I look forward to it. Better go before you’re late.” Vicki nodded reluctantly at the door, and Zane went out with more than one glance back at her, although the parking lot was so slippery with snow over the black ice that he had to watch his feet as he approached the taxi. Once inside, though, he waved at Vicki as he was driven away. The memory of her pink cheeks and smiling face stayed with him until he was nearly at the B&B and his phone chimed with Dion’s notification sound.

Zane muttered, “Yeah, I’m on my way,” as the taxi pulled up. He paid for it and got out, digging his phone from his pocket on his way into the B&B.

A blast of welcome warmth hit him just as he read the text: *Might as well linger with Ms. Hawthorne for your breakfast discussion. The airport is closed for the next 24+ hours due to freezing rain.*

“What? No! No! Dion! No, I can’t stay here through the weekend!” Zane ran upstairs to thump on his assistant’s door.

Dion opened it with the expression of a man prepared for all the arguments. “I’ve already called around to the various private airfields. Nobody’s flying. They’re either snowed in or frozen to the ground. We can’t drive down to the city, or even Albany, because the roads are terrible, like, somebody skidded through the guard rail on one of the bridges levels of terrible. Most of the bridges are closed to traffic now, so unless you intend to hoof it through three hundred miles of bad weather, we’re stuck, Zane.”

We could paw it, his wolf said hopefully.

Despite his frustration with the situation, Zane almost smiled. *‘Hoof it’ means walk, whether we have paws or feet or hooves.*

The wolf, having woken up only for its hopes to be dashed, informed him that human language was dumb, and went back to sleep.

Dion was still staring at him belligerently, clearly expecting an argument, possibly a tantrum, from his boss. Zane felt more than a little tantrumy, but ended up sighing. “All right. Okay, if there’s nothing to be done. Can you extend our stay at the B&B, or do we need to find somewhere else?”

“I already did,” Dion said rather gently. “Our flight’s been rescheduled for Monday, but I’ll keep an eye out for whether any of the private airfields start flying sooner. I know you don’t want to be in Virtue any longer than you have to be, Mr. Z, but look, everybody thinks we’re leaving. You can hide out in the B&B if you want, and nobody’ll know any better.”

Or, Zane thought, he could go hide out with Victoria Hawthorne, and see if she believed fate was real, too.

Maybe being stuck in Virtue a few more days wouldn’t be *completely* awful.

CHAPTER 9



The problem with being up early on a Saturday was that Vicki had too many things to do to go back to bed. Cutting out crafty things for school on Monday, in this case, but it was always something. She thought she could talk herself back into bed if she could also lure Zane Bellamy into it, but since she'd watched him drive off into the...

She paused, glancing out her apartment window. *Snowstorm*. He'd driven off into the snowstorm, because it was hours until sunset and yesterday's freezing rain had definitely turned into a snowstorm, at least in these parts. She hoped the roads were clear enough for Zane to get out of town.

Well, the good and noble and true part of her hoped that. The hopeless romantic would prefer for him to appear on her doorstep, bedraggled, maybe amnesiac, but definitely handsome and prepared to be nursed back to health under her tender care. Although she didn't think amnesia would do her any good if Zane actually was gay, and also, his *partner*, *Dion*, would probably be with him in any vaguely reality-based version of this story.

Of course, a reality-based version of the story would also have to remember that he'd left maybe forty-five minutes ago, tops, and was unlikely to have become a bedraggled, amnesiac bisexual (to sort out the whole attraction problem) who needed caretaking in under an hour.

But then, even if he *did* become a bedraggled amnesiac bisexual, stealing him away from Dion with her loving ministrations didn't seem very fair.

“See,” Vicki said aloud to herself, “this is your problem. Even your fantasies are too respectful.” She finished cutting out what felt like the zillionth paper tulip and put the entire project into a craft box, then took her phone out and texted her brother: *so when you have fantasies do you just imagine they're totally into it no matter whether they would be in real life, or what?*

An answer came back way too fast, which meant he was up really, really early for work: *First, ew, I do not want to know why you're asking your very own brother about his fantasies, and second, everybody is in to me, so it's not an issue.*

Vicki laughed. *Yeah, yeah, Mr Fabulous, I guess I should have known that was the answer.*

So you think Zane Bellamy is hot, huh?

Not being dead, yes, I'm afraid so.

Want me to put in a good word for you? I'm very famous and well-connected, you know.

Vicki snorted and said, “Ugh,” aloud. “That will not be necessary.” Then she texted the same thing, and got back a series of laughing emojis, followed by, *gotta go, they're calling my name.*

Have fun storming the castle! Vicki knew there were step-families—and blood relations, for that matter—who didn't get along nearly as well as she and Chris did, but she'd always been glad their parents had gotten married. She couldn't really imagine a world where he wasn't her dorky big brother. She pulled out another crafting box and had just about gotten started on a new project when her phone chimed again.

Stop working on crafts for the kids and go do something for yourself, Chris said, although with more typos. *It's the weekend. Go use it.*

Says the man who's working at 6am, she texted back. *What'm I supposed to do? I have no life! Why are you texting, I thought you were busy!*

I am busy. Very busy and very important. But also looking out for my lil' sis because there are eight people trying to get one thing done here right now and I'm just in the way so I don't have anything better to do

Gee, thanks.

Any time. Go, honestly, get out of the house. See a movie. When was the last time you went to a movie?

The last Benedict Sinclair thing, probably.

**Benton*

**whose friends call him 'Ben,' apparently, according to Zane*

There's a new Benedict "Ben" Sinclair thing, Chris wrote back. Try that. Tell me how it is. Ok, now I really gotta go, love you sis baaaaaiiiiiiiiiii

“Oh my god. Bye, you dork.” Vicki sent a laughing heart, looked at her crafts box, and pushed it all back under the coffee table. She probably wouldn't go to a movie—although Chris would send her pleading-sad-eyes emojis if she admitted that to him—but she could at least not work. Go out for coffee. Maybe visit the library, a place she would *definitely* not be going in order to grill the librarian over whether Zane Bellamy was gay or not.

That sounded like a really good idea all of a sudden. But this time, Vicki had no reason to try to look cute and fashionable and snow bunny-ish for Zane. She put on snow pants, her big boots, and even bigger winter jacket than the wool one that she hadn't yet knocked the mud off. Anyone she saw would mistake her for an enormous pale pink marshmallow drifting through the snow, but at least she would be warm. Out she went, tromping through the snow.

Before she'd lived in Virtue, she'd driven everywhere. Part of that was because most places she'd lived were more spread out, but some of it was that *a lot* of people in this funny little town walked. It hadn't taken very long for it to start seeming strange to drive for anything less than a mile or two, or a big grocery store run. Vicki had thought chasing six year olds kept

her in pretty good shape, but it turned out walking everywhere did wonders for her cardiovascular health.

She was sweating in all her layers by the time she got to town, but felt annoyingly invigorated. Next thing she knew, she was going to start eating a lot more vegetables, or something.

Well. Maybe not as long as Kate's Cafe was open for lunch. She'd eaten a lot of breakfast, so clearly only needed to stop in for dessert, which was an ever-changing menu of pies, cakes, and custards. Noah Brannigan, whose mother ran a massage therapy clinic next door, came charging in at full speed a few minutes after Vicki sat down with a slice of apple pie, and was distracted from his task by seeing his teacher in public. He skidded to a stop, gaping at her, then whispered, "Ms. Hawthorne?" like he'd spotted an endangered animal in the wild.

"Hi, Noah. Are you here to get something for your mom?"

Still faintly awed, he whispered, "Yeah. Hot chocolate. Well, for me. Mom wants a coffee. Did you get your dress yet?"

Vicki laughed. "No, not yet."

A borderline stern look came over the little boy's face. "He's not gonna disappoint you, is he? I can make your dress if he does!"

"It takes a *little* longer than two days to make a very fancy dress like Mr. Bellamy designs," Victoria explained.

Noah's expression relaxed, although not by much. "Well, if you're sure."

"Pretty sure. What are you up to today?"

"Getting Mom her coffee!" Noah puffed up proudly. "And maybe goin' to a movie with Mr. Growly."

"Mr...*Growly*?"

Noah got a positively sly grin. "It's really my dad, Mr. Rowly, he and my Mom got married last year, but I call him Mr. Growly because—" His gaze slid around like he was

making sure nobody overheard him before he leaned in to whisper, “‘cause it’s *funny*.”

Vicki, who had been expecting some kind of actual secret, laughed in complete surprise. “Yes, it does seem to be. What movie are you seeing?”

A thrill of obvious excitement made Noah bounce on his toes. “*Star Captain and the Planet of Danger!*”

Vicki laughed again. “Oh, of course. The new Benton Sinclair thing. My brother said I should see that. Maybe I’ll see you at the movies, Noah. For now, you better get your mom’s coffee.”

“Yah, okay.” Noah hesitated, though, squinting at her. “Who’s Bendon Sinclair?”

“Benton. He’s the actor who plays *Star Captain*.”

“An actor? Like when we put on the Christmas show? That kind of acting?” Noah’s head turtled back in surprise as he took that in. “You mean he’s not *really* a star captain? Does he have a spaceship? Can he *fly*? What about his jet pack? Do you mean *there aren’t really any aliens*?” he asked with increasing horror.

“I’m afraid not. All of that is part of the magic of movies. They’re just stories like in books.”

A complex expression, dismay mixed with sudden cunning, washed over Noah’s face. “And acting is a *job* you can do?”

“It is. Sometimes, if people are very lucky like Benton Sinclair has been, you get very rich and famous as an actor. Although that has its down sides, too.” Vicki sort of wondered how she’d ended up in this conversation, and whether it was entirely ethical to tell a six year old the odds of success in a field like acting. “Not very many people get that famous, though.”

“I would,” Noah said confidently. “If I wanted to.”

Vicki grinned. “You just might. All right, go get your mom’s coffee before she starts wondering what happened to

you.”

“Okay! Bye, Ms. Hawthorne! It was nice to see you!” Noah bounced off and Vicki, having somehow finished her pie while they were talking, left a tip and pulled her hood up as she headed out to visit the library.



THERE WERE QUITE a few people out now, despite the weather. Or maybe because of it: Vicki was pretty sure Noah would be joining the crowd of kids building snowmen and having snowball fights in the enormous town square as soon as he had his hot chocolate. There were a lot of parents hanging around the edges of the square, sipping hot drinks and gossiping while their kids played.

Small roving packs of older children, tweens and young teens, alternated between playing in the square and pretending they were too old and cool to do that. Vicki loved kids that age, especially when they were given the space to still act *like* kids. Sometimes it was easy to forget that teenagers were still, in fact, children, and still needed the outlet of play.

There were also a bunch of older teens who had allowed themselves to be dragged into the little kids' snowball fight, and were helping to build forts and pack snowballs that wouldn't fall apart as soon as they left a mitten. Adults occasionally assigned them the task of watching the littler ones so they could go warm up or do some shopping, and most of them didn't object too much.

She waved at a few of her students as she crossed the square and got completely blank looks in return. With a laugh, she remembered she was entirely bundled and had her hood up. When she pulled it down, recognition flashed across the kids' faces and they waved energetically.

She had just *barely* gotten the hood up again when a snowball smacked her on the back of the head. She stopped dead and turned slowly with a deep warning look on her face. She had absolutely no idea who'd thrown the snowball, but the guilty party did: a small, *very* apologetic voice said, “Sorry, Ms. Hawthorne.”

Vicki kept the scolding expression as she nodded a stern forgiveness, but she giggled as soon as she'd turned away, and kicked some snow along like she was a kid herself.

A tense male voice said, "I suppose you're happy with yourself," as she reached the sidewalk on the square's far side. Vicki, surprised, almost slipped on the ice and steadied herself before pulling her hood back so she could see who'd spoken.

Arthur Lowell, her absolute favorite person in Virtue. Vicki sighed. He must have gotten a glimpse of her face while she had her hood down, or he wouldn't have any idea who she was any more than anybody else did. She told herself she had to be polite for at least the opening part of the conversation, and if he started acting like a jerk, she could be as rude as he was. "I'd say I'm pretty content, yes, Mr. Lowell."

Lowell was all too clearly accustomed to commanding what he thought of as respect, which was really authority. Vicki hadn't encountered him much since their first meeting, but every time she *had* met him, it had reinforced her opinion that he thought if people didn't bow to his authority, he didn't have to treat them like people. "Happy that you've brought all this attention to our small town? Are you trying to ruin Virtue?"

Vicki sighed deeply and inhaled just as deeply as she considered her answer. There *was* no right answer, of course: literally anything she said would be wrong, by Lowell's standards. So after a moment's consideration, she just leaned in. "Sure, yes, why not?"

The older man's pale eyes popped like he couldn't believe her audacity. "That's exactly why we don't need outsiders coming in here! People like you who don't care anything about the town's heritage! About our privacy! About the good, honest, hard-working citizens who—"

"—are all getting a little extra business at a quiet time of year because there's a media uproar in town, and all those media folks needed somewhere to stay, something to eat, and a massage or two after sliding around on the ice. Come on, Mr. Lowell. It's a flash in the pan. Zane Bellamy won't be back in

town for weeks, if at all, and everything will be back to normal by Monday.”

“Bellamy.” Lowell said the name like a cartoon villain would, dragging it out with incredible distaste. “There’s another problem with this town. Young men like him leaving without a word of explanation, turning their backs on their heritage and—”

“What heritage are you talking about, anyway? You keep going on about it. Virtue’s heritage, now I guess Mr. Bellamy’s heritage...I know Virtue was established a really long time ago, but what kind of heritage do you mean? Most of Virtue’s families have been here for a hundred or more years. None of you can really have that much connection to whatever European countries your ancestors came from, can you?” Vicki had started out exasperated, but genuine enthusiasm woke in her as she asked the questions. “Honestly, I’d really like to know, because if there’s some kind of significant heritage history or background I’m missing out on here, that’s terrible. I could be teaching it in school! That would be great!”

Arthur Lowell, however, turned nearly purple with rage as he spluttered a rejection of the idea. His eyes bulged, spittle actually forming around the corners of his mouth as Vicki watched in astonishment. He finally managed to say, “Never! *Never!* You’ll be the ruin of all of us!” before lurching away, visibly overcome with anger.

Vicki gazed after him in astonishment, torn between wondering if someone should help him out of his—his *apoplectic fit*—and being oddly pleased to experience what could be rightfully *called* an apoplectic fit. She’d known the phrase meant ‘incoherently furious’ in common usage, but she’d never actually seen someone turn purple and wheeze with rage before.

If she’d liked him better—or at all—she might have felt a little bad about infuriating him that much, but as things stood, she could only mostly hope he wouldn’t actually work himself into physical collapse before he calmed down. She still watched him go, making sure he was all right, and finally shivered. The library was only a few blocks away, but after the

encounter with Lowell, the idea of grilling Sarah the librarian about Zane Bellamy suddenly seemed rude and invasive.

That, and the cinema—a little locally-owned, independent, two-screen theatre was right around the corner. She could be there, warm, and eating popcorn while watching the latest, silliest *Star Captain* movie in less than five minutes.

Zane was already long gone from Virtue. Digging up all the dirt on him could wait until tomorrow. Vicki, smiling, scurried off to make her brother happy by watching a movie.

CHAPTER 10



A little after two in the afternoon, Zane crept out of the B&B like a man afraid he was being hunted. Realistically, most of the media crush had left Virtue the night before, well ahead of the bad weather, and those who hadn't were either staying in the town's single large(ish) hotel, or outside the township in one of the bigger cities within an hour's drive. But that was logic, which rarely had much impact on gut feelings, and his gut feeling was *this will all go terribly, somehow*.

If it does, we'll run away, his wolf promised lazily.

The idea of turning into a wolf in front of the press corps and scampering into the woods was entertaining enough that Zane stopped worrying quite so much, which was exactly what the wolf wanted. It slept better when he wasn't fussing. Unfortunately for it, he was by nature something of a fusser. Fussing over details made him very, very good at his job, but maybe made him slightly less good at the whole 'getting through a day without panicking' thing that so many people seemed to handle easily.

Of course, if he said that to Dion, his assistant would point out that that was *exactly* why Zane paid him the big bucks. Dion had, in fact, made some discreet calls to make sure most of the media *was* gone, and Zane was fairly certain he'd also spoken with the Jones's B&B ahead of time to request they not house any of the media while Zane was there. That was a big ask, but Dion would have played the home town advantage

card, and from Zane's memories of the Jones family, they probably would have obliged.

It was faintly possible Virtue wasn't *quite* as bad as he remembered it. Zane, collar up and shoulders hunched against the still-falling snow, squeaked and slipped his way through the back streets—as if Virtue was big enough to differentiate between the back streets and the main ones—to the library. Even if Sarah wasn't there, he wanted to see the building again. It had been a refuge for years, and he hoped it would still hold some of that old comfort.

The door swung open and a burst of warmth and laughter met him as he climbed the snowy steps carefully. It was louder than he remembered, then. Smiling, Zane caught the door for a young mother trying to wrangle three kids under the age of five, all of them carrying their own library books. She mouthed 'thank you,' gratefully, and he smiled even more widely as he went into the library.

A wave of pure hometown nostalgia hit him along with the familiar scent of old books and, unexpectedly, cookies. He stepped to the side so he wouldn't be in anyone's way as he got his bearings, and found himself grinning stupidly at the comfortable old building.

Off to the right of the main doors was what he'd insisted on calling a bear pit when he thought he was a cool teenager. It was really the kid's section, three steps down into a circular space lined all around with books and liberally scattered with pillows for young readers to lean on. There were tiny tables in there now, too, with coloring pages and signs that the intended audiences probably couldn't read, saying, *Books Are Not For Coloring In!*

Beyond the bear pit, tables stretched through the middle of the library, with computers, students, and a couple of nappers set up at them. To their right was the fiction section, starting with books for older kids and working its way to adult fiction, all exactly like he remembered it. The library had been expanded since he'd last been there, and now swept around behind the studying tables in rows of non-fiction that led to what had to be soundproof booths on the left wall, along with

doors that led into conference rooms. The checkout desk was right next to the front doors, on his left, and the woman behind it glanced his way as he came in.

A slow, startled grin split her face even though she turned her attention back to the family she was helping to check out, so Zane had a minute to take in his oldest friend. Despite his difficulty with faces, he could recognize her, at least in the context of the library.

Most of that was because in terms of fashion, Sarah Ekstrom hadn't changed all that much: she still wore, and rocked, vintage style clothing. She wasn't wearing the same clothes she did twenty years ago, obviously, but almost no one else would be wearing a blocky maroon jumpsuit with teal pockets and sleeves, very 1950s and setting off her dark golden brown skin tones very well. He would bet anything she was wearing stumpy boots that didn't go with the outfit, *per se*, but which went with her personal style flawlessly. So did the lion-colored braids she wore coiled around her head, a definite improvement on the fashion of their youth.

The thought actually made him laugh and lift a hand to his own hair self-consciously, remembering some truly epic mistakes that had been made. He was still grinning when Sarah disengaged herself from the desk and sauntered over to him, drawling, "Well, well, well, if Zane Bellamy hasn't dragged himself back home again," before hugging him so hard Zane actually squeaked. "Oh my God, Zane, look at you. *Hi.*"

"Hi." Zane's throat tightened up around the word as he returned the embrace. "Turns out I really missed you."

Sarah said, "Of course you did," into his chest, then backed up enough to grin hugely at him. "C'mon, I've asked Pam to take over the desk so I can catch up with *my best friend ever, oh my God!*"

Half a minute later, she'd dragged him to one of the small rooms, which had a small table, a desk against one wall, recording equipment, two chairs, and the slightly muffled air of soundproofing. At least, Zane hoped that was why the air

had that quiet feeling, because as soon as the door closed, Sarah shrieked, “Zane, oh my GOD HI!!!” and hug him again. “How are you? I mean besides rich and famous and like *stupidly* well-dressed, *look* at that coat—” She actually grabbed him by the lapels, not hard, but obviously admiring the workmanship in the long coat. “Dude, you never write, you never call...!”

That was true. They’d kept in touch through college, but as often happened, had slowly stopped communicating, until Zane no longer even knew how to reach her. He said, “Well, neither do you!”, but gestured at her in turn. “And look at *you*, speaking of well-dressed!”

“Yes, we’re fabulous. Now sit and tell me everything. Who’s your favorite movie star client?” Sarah threw herself into a chair and beamed at him expectantly, but also barreled on, asking, more seriously, “Are you okay with being back in Virtue? And if it’s not weird, *can* I get your number? I mean it’s been a million years, but we used to be thick as thieves, and...” She trailed off, clearly suddenly uncertain.

Zane laughed and sat with a little more dignity. “Telling you who my favorite clients are seems like it would be betraying confidence, somehow. Virtue is...not as bad as I was afraid it would be, and yes, absolutely, give me your number and I’ll text you right now. The fact that I could actually still pick you out of a crowd...”

Sarah wobbled a hand as she rattled off her number, and Zane put it in to his phone, sending her a text as she said, “The library isn’t exactly a crowd, but...so the face blindness thing is still a thing, huh? That must be exciting, working with celebrities. God, Zane. Honestly, how are you?”

“I—” The incredible urge to tell Sarah about Vicki nearly overwhelmed him. She’d grown up in Virtue, but he didn’t think she knew about shifters—the truth was, maybe only a quarter of the population did—and he didn’t know how to break it to her. It felt like that entire argument with himself played out over his face, but instead of giving in to it, he said, “I met somebody,” a little cautiously.

“No.” Sarah positively gasped the word. “Where? Here? Not here! Not in Virtue, after you hauled ass out of here back in the day! Or wait, is it your assistant? He’s gorgeous. I’ve seen pictures of you two on the red carpet, you’re a gorgeous couple.”

Zane wailed, “No!” through a laugh. “No, Dion is really my assistant, not my secret boyfriend. “He is gorgeous, yes, but no, not my type. Which I thought you knew.”

“Well.” Sarah waved a hand. You know, twenty years, journeys of self-discovery, all that kind of thing. I met somebody too, actually. Last summer. He’s amazing, Zane, you’ve got to meet him, he’s an archivist and he’s—” She broke off abruptly, a peculiar expression on her face.

It was, Zane thought, *exactly* the same set of expressions that had just played out over *his* face. Without allowing himself to think about it, he said, “He’s a shifter?”

Sarah’s jaw dropped like a marionette’s and she stared at him, absolutely speechless with shock for several seconds. Then, with obvious effort, she pulled her jaw back up, croaked, “You—” and stopped again, her thoughts almost visibly whirling in her eyes. After a *long* time, still in the same croaking voice, she said, “Zane Lowell. You know what, you’ve been a Bellamy so long, I forgot you were also a Lowell. The Lowell family goes back to the charter of this town. And all the founding members of Virtue *were shifter families*. Zane Bellamy, are you a *shifter*? And you never *told me*?”

“Wolf shifter,” Zane whispered almost apologetically. “We’re not supposed to talk about it, so...I didn’t.”

Sarah lifted a finger like she was warning him to be quiet, rose, turned her back to him, and flailed her hands like a puppet as she made a series of barely-contained shrieking sounds in the back of her throat. Then she straightened her jumpsuit, took a deep breath, turned back around, and returned to her seat. “Okay then. Go on. You met...” She brightened suddenly, clearly putting away her momentary angst. “You met your fated mate?”

Zane groaned and put his face in his hands. “I met... someone special. I don’t know if I believe in fated mates, but...someone special, yes.”

“I believe,” Sarah said almost dreamily. “If you’d dropped the idea on me before I’d met Matthew, I’d have thought you were nuts, obviously, but I just *knew*, Zane. And I’m not even the shifter half of the equation. I don’t have an animal telling me it’s right. Your wolf *is* telling you it’s right, right? What’s it like?”

“Quiet, mostly. It doesn’t interfere. Including in identifying people, which it would be a lot better at than I am, if it was at all interested.”

Sarah looked a little envious. “Matthew says his bear is mostly chill. But the wolf *is* telling you it’s right, right?”

“Yeah. Yeah, but...I mean, it’s a wolf. What does it know? And my parents weren’t fated mates, and Dad doesn’t believe in the whole thing at all, so I guess I’m not sure I believe it’s happening. And I haven’t told her yet. I just met her. And then I blew her off because I didn’t recognize her.” Zane winced.

So did Sarah. “Did you explain?”

“I did, and she was really kind about it. She even wore the jacket she knew I’d recognize when we met for breakfast this morning.”

“So she *is* in Virtue!” Sarah’s eyes widened. “Oh my God, is it Vicky Hawthorne?” At Zane’s nod, she clapped her hands. “Oh, that’s *great*! She’s really nice! The kids love her! I think she’s kind of lonely, though. I grew up here, so I don’t see it from the outside, but I think Virtue isn’t necessarily very friendly to non-shifters who move here.”

“She mentioned that. Not that I thought it was very friendly to shifters who were born here,” Zane said with a shrug.

Sarah wrinkled her nose. “Yeah, but you had your father to deal with. Have you seen him?”

“No, and I’m not planning to.” That came out a little more stridently than Zane meant it to, and Sarah raised her hands

apologetically.

“I don’t blame you. I just wondered. He’s a pain in my ass, too. Matthew and I...” Another peculiar, complex expression darted across Sarah’s face. “Boy, there’s a lot to catch you up on. Super short version is, you know how Virtue’s a chartered town from like George II of England? And a sanctuary city for shifters?”

Zane nodded cautiously and she went on with enthusiasm while also obviously trying to stick to the highlights. “Right, well, Virtue’s had a shifter protector for a long time, and Matthew and I have ended up taking on that role. But the truth is, one person wasn’t enough, and two people aren’t enough. We’re *trying* to build a city council, a—” She broke off to laugh at herself. “A shadow council, if you want to be really super dramatic about it. People who work together to both help Virtue deal with the modern world while *also* keeping the shifters here safe and protected. Because the thing is, Zane—”

Sarah leaned forward, suddenly impassioned. “The thing is, the town can’t survive without engaging with the world to some degree. We’re not Brigadoon. But the shifters need safety. It’s stupid to pretend we can just keep going along without anything changing. There’ve been multiple developers trying to get in here the past several years, and now they’re talking about bringing the train back up through the township to the border, so we *can’t* just ignore that.”

“And my father is holding a bunch of the other old family patriarchs hostage with his strong isolationist opinions, so you can’t get anything done,” Zane guessed.

“Basically.” Sarah flopped backward in her chair again. “I’d ask if you had any tips for handling him, but I’m fully aware the only way you handle him is to not engage. Which isn’t an option right now, so...” She let out a huge raspberry, then waved it, and her complaints, away. “But that’s not what we want to be talking about! You have a mate! Have you told her yet?”

Zane made a face again. “I have a woman I like a lot. And no, I haven’t told her anything, and I was supposed to have left

this morning. But we'll see each other again, because I'm making the dress for her..."

"You should go tell her right now," Sarah said enthusiastically. "I know it sounds crazy, but I *promise* she's going nuts with thinking how amazing and incredible and gorgeous and talented and kind and everything you are. And also definitely that she wants to bang you silly."

"Eeigh. I did not need you to say that."

Sarah laughed. "No, probably not, but you get the 'old friends filter.'" She paused. "To be fair, so does almost everyone over the age of eighteen."

"Probably everyone over the age of eighteen in Virtue is an old friend of yours. I hear the library is the heart of the town." Zane smiled at Sarah's surprised-but-pleased expression. "Vicki talked you up. It sounds like you've made the library everything you always wanted it to be."

"*And* I'm training up the next generations of librarians to do it all right," Sarah replied with satisfaction. "So how long are you here for?"

"Until the weather clears. I can't work from Virtue," he said with a helpless motion. "I can't get the fabrics I need here. And my scissors are at home!"

"I could help you on the scissors front, but not the fabric," Sarah said in sympathetic amusement. "I've got lots of fabric at home, but nothing that Zane Bellamy is going to use for a Starlight Foundation ball. Well, go tell Vicki you're still in town, anyway. It's not like the ball is next week. There's plenty of time to get the gown made."

Zane stood, smiling. "It's really good to see you again, Sarah. I'll see if I can figure out a way to tell her. Thanks for the support."

"Literally any time. Especially now that I've got your number." Sarah waggled her phone, hugged Zane, and escorted him out of the side room. "Oh, God, look at the mess. Excuse me, I have to run!" She did just that, making order out of chaos as she went, and Zane left the library with a smile.

He felt energetic, ready to take on the world, but new snow had fallen, so his walk back toward town was more cautious than brisk. But that turned out to be perfect, as he saw the recognizable shape of Vicki's blocky wool coat and her cascade of blonde hair coming out of a building about half a block from the town square. Feeling startlingly confident, he put on a burst of speed, caught up, and bumped his hip against hers. "Hey, gorgeous."

"*Excuse me?*" The face that looked up at his was not only not Vicki, but was seventy if she was a day. She did have thick blonde hair and the same boxy wool coat, but was evidently not the kind of woman who wanted to be flirted with by men half her age, because she whacked Zane with her handbag. "Rude! Good Lord, what is the world coming to! Go away, young man! Go learn some manners!"

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry! I thought you were a friend!" As he scampered aside, trying to avoid being smacked with the purse, he realized the woman's coat was entirely clean, and Vicki's, which he'd seen only that morning, had still been a muddy mess. He yelled, "I'm sorry!" one more time, and rushed down the street toward the B&B.

He burst inside like he could leave his embarrassment outdoors, and nearly ran over Dion, who was blissfully, reliably recognizable in orange. He also jolted back a step, then assembled his expression into a grimace that Zane thought was meant to be a smile.

"Oh, good, Mr. Z. I was just saying I needed to talk to you. Have a seat." His new friend Aaron was standing a few feet back, filling the B&B's foyer and projecting a kind of protective aura. Zane wondered if he thought he was going to take a temper tantrum out on Dion. He didn't *think* he had a reputation as a temperamental boss, but mumbled something about artistic temperaments under his breath as he went into the parlor under Dion's direction.

He sat, folded one leg over the other neatly, and sighed. "All right, I'm clearly not going to like it, so you might as well spit it out."

“You don’t have an artistic temperament,” Dion reassured him, then, less reassuringly, added, “I want you to remember that, okay? The...oh, let me just show you.” He offered Zane his phone, which was open to a tabloid’s website.

There was a genuinely lovely photograph of Zane and Vicki on the site’s main page, evidently taken at breakfast that morning. They were gazing intently into each other’s eyes—Zane imagined they’d been talking about the dress—and the headline said *Zane-y Love At Last?*

“That,” Zane said, “is a *terrible* headline.”

“But it’s a *great* story,” Dion said. “Listen to me, Zane, this is important.”

It must be, if Dion was actually calling him by his full first name. Zane nodded, indicating his assistant should continue, and Dion’s eyebrows drew down seriously. “The media is going to be all over this for weeks. Months. Until at *least* after the ball. You’re the leading man in a goddamn *fairy tale* right now, do you understand that?”

Zane said, “Uh,” and blinked at his assistant.

“Right. You’re the leading man in a goddamn *fairy tale* right now,” Dion informed him. “The handsome prince returns home to sew a ballgown for the girl next door. Huge swaths of people will *never forgive you* if you screw this up, Zane. I’m going to have to talk to Ms. Hawthorne about some fake dating, maybe, because you two are not going to get away with a ‘we’re just friends’ narrative on this. You can break up after the ball. Maybe. God, maybe we can get—I don’t know, I’ll find out what movie stars she likes and I’ll try to arrange for one of them to ask her out. Pull her attention from you, after the ball. Which you’ll obviously be taking her to.”

“What?” Zane blinked some more. “Uh, that’s not in the contest rules, is it?”

Dion lifted the phone with the picture of them gazing at each other again. “It is now. You’re going anyway. You always go to the big gala events. Now you have a date. Your *fairy tale princess* date. I’ll arrange it with Ms. Hawthorne.”

“Well, no,” Zane said, dazed. “No, I think I can manage that myself. But it’s just a picture, Dion...”

“There’s no such thing as just a picture in today’s media,” Dion said flatly. “Not when careers rise and fall on the right kind of story being told. You’re popular, Zane, and you’re a good designer—even a great one—but people want to know the man behind the gowns, and this is the perfect opportunity to show them that. So can you talk to Ms. Hawthorne about this, or do you need me to? Because I will. That’s my job.”

“No,” Zane said again. “No, I can do it. But I’m going to need a minute to think about all of this, Dion. Just...give me a little while to think about it.”

Dion made a noise that could pass for grudging agreement if Zane really wanted it to, which he did.

He nodded, got to his feet, and went up to his room to contemplate the idea that he might have to fake date his fated mate.

CHAPTER 11



The *Star Captain* movie was every bit as much fun as Vicki thought it would be, with an eight year old kid almost as cute as Noah Brannigan in a sidekick role that made Vicki laugh through the whole movie. Her only *real* objection was that the female lead—ingenue Nora Brusch, who Zane actually designed clothes for—was more than a little too young for both the *Star Captain* and *Benton Sinclair*. Vicki texted her brother to say so on both counts as she walked home, and laughed as he responded with, *omg, right? If only casting directors would listen to you, instead of their billion dollar franchises!*

Vicki snorted and put her phone back in her pocket, then pulled it out again as it chimed again, this time with an unknown number and a question: *I'm still in town. Dinner tonight?*

Only one person would be letting her know he was still in town. Vicki's heart leaped so hard she got dizzy and had to lean against a tree. She took several deep breaths without it calming her heart at all, then looked around to make sure nobody was watching before squealing with excitement and doing a little dance there in the snow by the sidewalk's edge.

Apparently that was what her heart needed, because while it didn't stop thumping like crazy, it felt better, like it had wanted a dance of joy. She texted, *I was going to cook lasagna, want to come over?* back, and rushed home to change clothes twice, as if Zane hadn't already seen her in the entire gamut of her fashion choices, which range from 'yoga class' to

‘prim schoolmarm’ with a stop at ‘1980s snowbunny’ in between.

Lasagne sounds great. Can I bring anything? Salad? Garlic bread? Dessert?

A warm flush ran through Victoria at that last suggestion. She had lots of good ideas about what to do for dessert with Zane Bellamy. *Any or all*, she agreed. *See you around six?*

It’s a date.

Vicki, now safely alone in her apartment, jumped up and down with glee for a minute. A date! She had a date with Zane Bellamy! Probably not a real date because that was just a thing people said, but she could hold it close in her heart and pretend!

She also might need to go for a run around the block to calm herself down. It had been a couple of days since she’d gotten any meaningful exercise, and there was plenty of time before six. She changed clothes again, put stabilizers on her shoes, and did, in fact, go for a run. More than around the block, although it was a large block and would have been enough for quick exercise.

Half an hour later, sweaty and less jumpy, she threw herself into the shower to clean up before getting dinner started, although in this case it really meant “take the lasagna she’d made last month out of the freezer and defrost it” rather than actually cooking everything from scratch. Things were pretty much ready just before six, when a knock on the door sent her heart fluttering again. She ran over to open it, and found Zane there, a small grocery bag over one elbow and a carefully-wrapped flower bouquet clutched to his chest.

“For you,” he said, without any motion at offering it to her. “But I’m going to arrange it for you, so I can’t give it to you until it’s done. Did you know you have to be really careful with flowers in this weather, or they’ll freeze and die immediately? I did not know that.” His eyes were a little wide. “Ask me how I *now* know it.”

Vicki laughed as she stepped back to let him in. “I’m guessing Delores over at Floral Delights spent at least ten minutes lecturing you?”

“Yes. Yes, she did.” Zane came all the way in, put the groceries down, and turned to her with the flowers still in his arms. “You look beautiful.”

“Oh.” Vicki tucked a strand of hair behind her ear self-consciously and glanced down at herself. She’d ended up wearing a cute little dress more suitable for summer, but layered with thermal tights and a contrasting long-sleeved thermal shirt beneath it, and felt rather cute, in fact. She still somehow hadn’t actually expected him to say anything about it. “Thank you. I...thank you. So do you.”

Of course, she hadn’t seen him looking *less* than beautiful, but this evening was no exception. He wore the same suit he had that morning, but it was the softness of his dark-lashed grey eyes that really arrested her. There was a smile in those eyes, and on his lips, and the faintest glow of roses against his jaw from where the top of the flower bundle had loosened. His hair looked windswept, like he’d been busy in the outdoors all day, although she couldn’t imagine him spending *that* much time outside with those shiny patent leather shoes.

Except he wasn’t wearing those ones anymore. She blinked at his feet, now in leather loafers. “You brought more than one pair of shoes on an overnight trip?”

“Oh, darling,” Zane said with an over-the-top flourish, “you should see what I bring for a weekend! Yes,” he said in a less dramatic tone. “Although I should have brought *boots*. Normally Dion would warn me about the weather. He’s falling down on the job.”

Right. Dion. Vicki should have invited him, too, but then again, if they were a couple, maybe Zane should have mentioned bring him. Or maybe this was just a professional dinner with a professional tailor and a random woman he was going to make a professional dress for.

In that case, it was entirely unfair of him to be so *handsome*, never mind for his presence to be so comforting.

Vicki felt like she could relax around Zane in a way she hadn't with anyone in years. Especially anyone in Virtue, she thought: they were all friendly, but kept their distance. She hoped it wasn't because there was some kind of terrible drug-running ring being hidden in the small town.

Zane took a deep breath, looking as if he might float away with happiness. "It smells wonderful in here, Vicki. Can I put these down and put the salad together for you?"

"Oh! No, I'll do the salad if you want to do the flowers."

"Sounds like a good balance of tasks." Zane smiled at her, and Vicki thought *she* might float away with happiness. For a few minutes they worked alongside each other, Vicki putting garlic bread in the oven and making up the salad, and Zane doing something arcane with the flowers in a vase he'd brought with him. She took the food out of the oven at almost the same moment he stepped back from the flowers, and she stood for a moment, eyes wide with appreciation.

A riot of orange lilies and pink roses made an absolutely gorgeous contrast with each other against a background of dark green leaves and tiny pale purple thistles. Zane had done something so they were all at different levels in the vase, showing each bloom off to its best advantage in a wonderful cascade of color. "Oh, Zane, it's gorgeous! Thank you! Oh, that should go on the table!"

"My pleasure." Zane carried the arrangement to the table, looking pleased with himself, and Vicki hurried the food over so they could sit and eat. She took one side of the table, gesturing Zane to the other, and they both sat, smiling at each other.

Then, after a few long seconds, they both giggled. The arrangement *was* absolutely gorgeous. It filled the room with the tender scent of roses, sent a shimmer glow over the table... and completely blocked them from seeing each other. Vicki leaned to her right; Zane leaned to *his*, so they went opposite directions and laughed again. Zane came back to his left, tilting far enough to see her around the beautiful bouquet, and

although he was grinning widely, said, “Maybe on the counter during dinner?” in very solemn tones.

“I think so, yes.” Vicki got up and moved it, then came back to the table to grin at Zane. “That’s better. No point in having the town’s most handsome dinner date if I can’t see him.”

“Or the most beautiful,” he said gallantly. “Oh, God, I have to tell you, Vicki, I mistook someone’s coat for yours this afternoon and accosted a complete stranger. It was not my finest moment.”

“Oh, no! Agnes Delacorte, I bet. About seventy and feisty? She and I complimented each other on our choice of coats at the last parent-teacher conferences.”

“...she’s surely not a parent?”

“No, but she’s the grandmother of one of my students, and their parents couldn’t make it in because of work commitments, so she came. It’s things like that that make me *like* Virtue, but then I run into Arthur Lowell...” Vicki sighed, then shrugged it away, except Zane’s expression darkened.

“You had a run-in with him? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine, yes. He’s just an unpleasant old man. Did you know him when you lived here? I have the impression he thinks everybody should know him. And do what he says. Immediately, and without question.”

A thin smile stretched Zane’s mouth. “I’d say you’ve got his number, then. Yes, I knew him.” He hesitated a moment. “He’s my father.”

“He’s what?” Vicki’s voice rose in surprise, although as soon as Zane *said* it, she could suddenly *see* it. Both men had the same length to their jaws, and the same wintery grey eyes, although the resemblance ended there, as far as Vicki could tell. “I had no idea!”

“I don’t advertise it.” Zane considered his lasagna for a moment before speaking again. “My parents divorced when I was seven, and I lived with my mother. When she went back to her maiden name, so did I. I was about nine, then. I changed

it legally when I turned eighteen. I also left town, and so did she.” He lifted that pale grey gaze of his to Vicki, smiling wryly. “Neither of us have been back since. She lives in Los Angeles near me. I’d love for you to meet her someday.”

A thrill shot through Vicki and she gave the flowers a quick glance. “Wow, from bringing flowers over to meeting the mother in less than half an hour. That’s quite an escalation,” she said breathlessly.

Zane grimaced. “Probably too much. Sorry, I didn’t mean right now!”

“No, I know. I’m teasing. Tell me about her? You’re—I don’t mean to be rude about your dad, but you’re way prettier than he is. Did you get that from her?”

“Yes, thank God. Mom’s gorgeous. Black hair, blue eyes, almost the whole Elizabeth Taylor thing. She dressed like a star, too. Between that and the whole sleeves problem, I think I was doomed to a career in the fashion industry. This,” Zane added with a wave of his lasagna-laden fork, “is delicious.”

A fashion designer mama’s boy. On one hand, he *could* be straight. On the other, he was a walking stereotype in all other regards, so he probably wasn’t.

He did, however, appreciate her cooking, so Vicki smiled at him again. “Thank you. I like to cook, but it’s a terrible effort doing it every night for one person, so I spent one Sunday a month cooking all the things and fill my freezer up.”

“Oh my God. So organized. I can’t usually find a fork.”

“But that’s what Dion is for.”

Zane touched the tip of his nose, and for a few minutes they ate in companionable silence, mostly interrupted by Zane mumbling about how good it was. “I don’t want to sound all Hollywood, but I don’t eat cheese very often. This is amazing.”

“Oh, I didn’t think of that. You said no allergies, so…”

“No, it’s not allergies, it’s vanity.”

“Oh.” Vicki’s eyes widened and she looked at her plate in dismay. “Oh no. Maybe I should be watching my weight before getting this dress made?”

“Not even slightly. For one thing, you’re a designer’s dream, with your height, curves, and bone structure. For another, I’d be embarrassed to call myself a professional if I couldn’t design a gown that you would look stunning in at any size. Good design isn’t about flawless figures. It’s about making what you’ve got look fabulous. That’s what I want to do. After dinner I can take your measurements, maybe, and then I’ll really know what I’m working with, but—”

“Take my measurements,” Vicki said wryly. “*After* I’ve eaten a plate full of lasagne?”

Zane grinned, that brilliant, inviting smile that she’d never seen in celebrity pictures of him. “Well, the Starlight ball goes on all night, and you’ll need to eat at some point. We’ll want to give you enough room to actually *do* that.”

She eyed him skeptically. “Do designers really think about that? Everybody knows there are sitting and standing dresses. Are there really eating dresses, too?”

“There’s every kind of dress,” Zane promised, but laughed. “I have to confess, though, that I feel guilty for designing standing dresses, even if the client is looking for that wonderfully fitted look. I always try to have them sit down at least during the measuring process so I can work *some* ease into the design, and ideally I have them in for at least one fitting where they have to do something like bend over to see if they can adjust a shoe strap. Speaking of shoes.” He actually looked under the table as they finished eating. “Do you wear heels?”

Vicki looked under the table, too, as if her feet were strangers to her. “Not very often. Never those four or five inch ones you see on the red carpet. Should I start practicing?”

An expression of such terrible conflict crossed Zane’s face that Vicki laughed out loud. “So the answer is ‘ideally, yes, but I don’t want to ask you to do that?’”

“See, when I got serious about fashion design, my mother got me half a dozen pairs of stiletto heels and made me not only learn to walk in them, but stand around for several hours wearing them, for weeks. Every time I started to get the hang of a pair, she’d switch them and I’d find out there were subtle differences in how they hurt, or how my balance changed, or just...all kinds of things. So from a *purely* haute couture viewpoint, yes, four inch heels would be terrific. But I swore from the beginning of my career that I would be prepared to design fabulous, flattering, elegant clothing for people who wanted to wear a pair of flat-soled sneakers on the red carpet.”

“You *are* a unicorn, and I *do* want to meet your mother, and how about we compromise on like...two inches? Three? I actually don’t think my feet will bend enough to manage four inch heels.”

Zane mumbled, “Definitely not a unicorn,” but smiled. “Mom will love you. Especially if my father doesn’t. Oh no.” Amused distress settled in fine lines around his eyes. “I can’t take your measurements, not unless you have a measuring tape lying around. I didn’t bring one with me.”

“No? You don’t just go around with a measuring tape and small sewing kit with you, in case of fashion emergencies?”

“I may have a small sewing kit,” he admitted almost guiltily. “Needle. Thread. Tiny but very sharp scissors. No measuring tape, though.”

Vicki laughed. “Well, technically speaking, I probably *do* have a measuring tape around here somewhere, but it would take me the rest of the night to find it, so we can wait on measurements until...tomorrow? When are you leaving?”

“Right.” Zane winced. “Right, Dion wanted me to talk to you about this. Somebody took our picture at the diner this morning, and we look sort of...intimate.”

A blush laced with confusion spilled through Vicki. The idea of intimacy with Zane was enough to make her want to knock all the dishes off the table and get down to business right there, but she was also pretty certain they hadn’t done anything at all intimate at breakfast that morning. “Um?”

“Very intense. Looking into each other’s eyes,” Zane said hastily. “Romantic. And there’s at least one tabloid running with it.”

“Oh.” Vicki’s eyes widened. “Oh. Um. Wow? Is that... something that happens a lot to you?”

“Well, no, it’s really not. And Dion thinks we look—sound—like a fairy tale. Small town boy makes it big, comes back to sweep the beautiful girl off her feet with a gown designed just for her...”

“Oh,” Vicki said again, faintly. “Oh, well, yes, I see your point. His point. So...?”

Zane wrinkled his face up in obvious apology, or maybe discomfort. “So he thinks I should lean into it. That nobody is going to believe a ‘just friends’ line, because they won’t want to. It’s too good a story to let truth get in the way, and he thought clients might go off my brand if I just ignored you. So he wanted me to ask you if you’d consider...well, dating me.”

Hope leaped in Vicki’s heart, and heat rushed through her. Maybe clearing the table for sex wasn’t out of the question after all. She drew a shaky breath to answer, but Zane blurted, “Fake dating, I mean! He said fake dating, and he’d arrange for somebody to give you an out at the ball so you wouldn’t be stuck with this insane celebrity-adjacent life of mine, and...oh, God, it’s a terrible idea, isn’t it,” he said as he took in her expression.

Fake dating was the worst idea she’d ever heard, in fact. If he wanted to fake date, then the attraction she felt couldn’t possibly be mutual. She’d thought they had—more than chemistry, really. She’d felt like they had a *connection*. She still felt that way. But Zane had been in such a hurry to clarify he meant *fake* dating...

Somehow, through the crushed remains of her ego and heart, Vicki dredged up a smile. “Sure, of course. If it’d be helpful for your career, I’d be glad to help out. I wouldn’t want to be the reason you fell out of popularity. Especially when you’re making me a dress. That would be a bad look, wouldn’t it?”

“Dion says it would be,” Zane said with an uncomfortable smile. “And...there’s some other things I’d like to talk to you about, if you didn’t mind?”

The last thing Vicki wanted to do was talk to him more right now. Or anybody in the whole world, in fact. She thought maybe she wanted to go live in the bottom of a depthless cave, or on top of a mountain like a hermit, just as long as she didn’t have to face people and the fact that her great big crush was so clearly not mutual. Her gaze skittered to a clock and she managed another weak smile. “You know what, that sounds great, but it’s getting late—”

It was not getting late. It wasn’t even eight p.m. yet. Vicki didn’t care. “—and I have a lot of school prep to do tomorrow, so maybe we can arrange a fake date for...for Monday?” Maybe he’d be gone by Monday. Maybe she’d never have to see him again, so she’d never be reminded of her foolish hopes. Maybe she could give her contest win to another charity, or even back to the Starlight Foundation, so somebody else could win it and she could go on living in a pit.

“Monday,” Zane said with a strange amount of eagerness for a guy who’d just destroyed her hopes and dreams. Not that he knew that, she guessed. “Monday would be great. I’ll text you?”

“Sure. Sounds good.” Somehow Vicki was pleasant and polite as she got him out the door, and then she went to bed without even brushing her teeth.

CHAPTER 12



Something had gone very wrong.

S Zane wasn't entirely sure how he'd blown it, but he had *clearly* blown it. Vicki had gone from bright and inviting, sweet and cheerful, to brittle and polite, all in a heartbeat. He'd *known* fake dating was a bad idea, but he'd hoped, somehow, that it might tell her that he really was interested in her. That was how fake dating worked in the movies, anyway. Two people who weren't an obvious match faked their way into true love. It was a tried and true method for romance.

Apparently not as tried and true as he'd hoped.

He stood outside her apartment door, wondering if he should knock and apologize, but he wasn't sure what he'd done *wrong*. He'd only known Vicki for two days. *Actual* dating seemed like asking too much, even if—

She's your fated mate, his wolf said with infinite patience. *How could it be too much?*

Zane could practically hear the wolf completely ignoring the entire concept of fake dating, or even real dating. That was beyond its understanding. What it did seem to understand in a way Zane didn't quite believe was that nothing could be *too much* when it came to romancing his fated mate. Even Sarah's assurance along the same lines didn't quite overcome his gut-deep uncertainty.

There were so many reasons Zane didn't date much. Not to get all Freudian about it, but his parents' relationship was

definitely one. He was also always incredibly busy with work, and he'd be lying to himself if he didn't admit that he'd been known, on occasion, to hide behind Dion and the assumption that they were a couple. And the truth was he really *enjoyed* taking his mom to red carpet events, never mind the fact that it also meant he didn't have to find someone else *to* take.

It now occurred to Zane for the first time that maybe another reason he didn't date very much was he was *really bad at it*.

Bad enough, apparently, that he couldn't even manage to date the woman of his dreams. Or even fake date her.

After what seemed like forever, he slunk away from Vicki's door and called a taxi back to the B&B, wondering what he could have done better. He didn't think trying to explain about his wolf and shifting and fated mates would have gone over well, even though Sarah had told him she was certain Vicki would accept it without hesitation.

Maybe he hadn't been enthusiastic enough about the idea of fake dating. Nobody ever was in the movies, but he could see why it might be a problem now. He could do better on that front. Zane was sure of it. And if he could nerve himself up to explaining his shifter heritage, that would probably help.

He crept into the B&B, hoping nobody would notice him, so of course Dion appeared in the foyer, a gleam in his eye. "Did you talk to her?"

Zane gave him a morose look and Dion's face fell. "Oh no. Did she say no? Well, if she's really not interested, I guess we'll have to play hardball with the 'just friends' angle—"

"She said yes," Zane said mopishly. "She just didn't seem very happy about it."

Dion's gaze sharpened and he indicated, imperiously, that Zane should go to the parlor. Zane went, but muttered, "Are you just living in the parlor now? Is that it?"

"No," Dion said in the tone of someone who had just been unexpectedly presented with a sullen teenager, "but neither of our rooms are suites, and it's more comfortable to have

conversations in here than with one of us standing anxiously in front of the other. What has gotten *in* to you? My God,” he added with more sympathy. “You didn’t run into your father, did you?”

“No!” Zane threw himself into the sofa, which he had to admit *was* very comfortable. Aaron Jones was at the far side of the parlor in a huge armchair, reading a book by the fire, and offered a nod of greeting as Zane, followed by Dion, came into the room.

Dion beamed at Aaron, but went right back to being piqued at Zane. “Well, in that case, what’s got you in such a mood? Why wasn’t Ms. Hawthorne happy about the idea? Most people would seize the chance to live the high life for a little while. Tell me *exactly* what happened.”

Zane recounted the whole thing up until the point where he’d said ‘dating’ and then hastily corrected himself to ‘fake dating.’ Dion practically pounced on that. “Is she interested in *actually* dating you, Zane?”

Zane opened his mouth and shut it again. Aaron, on the far side of the room, said, “Wow. You said he was dim, but I didn’t know he was *that* dim,” in a voice just *slightly* too loud to be ignored.

“You said *what?*” Zane, injured, looked at Dion, who completely ignored Aaron in favor of clapping his hands enthusiastically.

“But this is perfect! She’s beautiful, sweet, works with children...a regular Cinderella! Oh, I can work with this! Well.” Dion cringed delicately. “I may have some work to do to make you into Prince Charming, but the first thing you’re going to do is grovel and *flirt*, Zane, do you even know how to flirt?”

Up until earlier this evening Zane had believed the answer to that question to be an obvious ‘yes,’ but he was no longer certain. He wasn’t even sure if he’d *been* flirting with Victoria the past few days. He’d thought he was, but maybe they’d just been talking. There had been heat between them when he’d come out of her shower. He was almost sure of it. And even

when she'd fallen on him in the first place. And there had been a real intensity of connection as they'd talked about the dress and other things that morning.

Hadn't there? He didn't know anymore. He stared at Dion uncertainly, and his assistant groaned. "Start by groveling. Explain you really *do* want to date her and didn't want to seem like you were moving too fast. *Because that's true, right, Zane?*"

"Yes!" Zane was sure of that, at least.

"Thank *God*," Dion said rather melodramatically. "So apologize, explain, and the for the love of all that's merciful, do something sexy. Do I need to explain what *that* means, too?"

"No!" Zane was less sure of that, but wasn't going to admit it to his PA. He stared at Dion a long moment, partially offended on his own behalf and partially thinking fast, while also not letting himself think about what he was thinking. "I'm going to need you to get me some fabric. And a place to work. And you'll just have to tell my clients that if they want to see me for fittings over the next few weeks, they're going to have to come to Virtue."

Dion actually beamed and stood up. "You got it, Mr. Z."

Zane mumbled something, and went upstairs to think more carefully about what he wasn't thinking.



BY EIGHT A.M. MONDAY MORNING, Dion had worked actual miracles.

He'd somehow arranged a work space for Zane in one of the unoccupied shops on the town square. It had large, inviting windows that a day earlier had been coated in that white smeary stuff used to keep people from looking into closed-up store fronts. Now those windows were brilliantly clean, and the shop's interior had been turned into an entirely passable sewing center overnight. There was excellent lighting, with large, sparkling-clean skylights that made the new studio space bright and airy. Dion had acquired two sewing machines and a

Serger, all in working condition, and half a dozen long tables with flawless surface quality to work on. The floors weren't carpeted, but they did have rugs thrown down for warmth and softness, which would do nicely.

Stacked in the corner were long rolls of brown paper for developing patterns and cutting fabric on, and although *good* fabric wouldn't arrive for at least another day, Dion had found muslin for mockup work and rows of thread in almost enough colors to satisfy Zane's nitpickiest needs. There were a variety of scissors that would do for the moment, although if he was going to do this, really do it, he'd have his personal sheers expressed to him as soon as the weather cleared a little more.

Best of all, the new studio was *warm*. Shirtsleeve temperature, which was Zane's favorite way to work. There was a faint draft from under the door, but twenty minutes at a sewing machine with the muslin and some cotton batting made a perfectly serviceable, if not beautiful, draft-blocker that Zane tucked against the bottom of the door. He did a rough measurement on the front windows, examined the wall above it, and texted Dion to get some dowels for a curtain rod. While he waited, he cut muslin to size, hemming three sides and waiting to see what kind of dowels Dion came back with before finishing the curtains.

Then he sat down with his sketchbook and the notes he'd taken during his breakfast with Vicki, and started putting the design together in a more meaningful way. He lost track of time—he almost always did, when working—and gave a startled, appreciative groan as Dion rapped on the door to warn him he'd arrived, then entered with dowels, coffee, and a man around Zane's own age with silvering hair and blue eyes.

"Zane," the man said in obvious pleasure as he crossed the room to offer his hand. "Good to see you again. Don't know if you remember me. Jake Rowly. I was a few years ahead of you in high school."

"Oh. Jake! I do remember, yes. You left town almost as fast as I did, after graduating." Too late, Zane thought maybe that was the wrong way to remember him, particularly since he

remembered going out to play in wolf form with Jake a few times, but Jake chuckled.

“And yet here we both are, back again. I hear you need some carpentry work done.”

Zane, eyebrows lifted, glanced toward Dion, who gave an elegant shrug. “I thought hiring a professional was a better idea than letting you loose with power tools. Jake says it’ll only take a few minutes, so we can stay and drink coffee or walk around outside and drink coffee. We should walk,” he added with a bit of a severe glance. “You’ve been sitting for almost two hours.”

“Really?” Zane looked for the time, but his phone was on the table and there were no clocks on the walls, which was also as he preferred it. “But I could sew the last hem on the curtains now that I know how big the rods are.”

“Which you can also do in the peace and quiet of no drilling if you’ll go for a walk with me first,” Dion said patiently. “You know how you don’t like noise when you’re working, Mr. Z.”

“Are you handling me, Dion? He’s handling me,” Zane said to Jake, who grinned broadly.

“Yes, he is. Why don’t you let him handle you—” Jake coughed, trying not to laugh as he heard how that sounded, and plunged on, “—uh, handle you, while I get the rods up, and—oh, god, just go, this conversation is just going to get worse and worse with the innuendo if you don’t.”

Dion laughed and waggled his eyebrows. “I could handle your tools for you, too, if you wanted, Mr. Rowly.”

“Only if you’re prepared to face Mabs’s wrath,” Jake said, amused. “And let me warn you, she’s small but fierce, and way, way stronger than she looks.”

“Mabs Brannigan is the massage therapist down the row,” Dion told Zane, whose eyebrows rose again.

“Brannigan? Like the Old Brannigan Place Brannigan? I thought it was just Old Mrs. Brannigan out there now.”

“Doris died a few years ago,” Jake said, almost softly. “Mabs inherited the house and moved to Virtue about two years ago now.”

“Oh. I’m sorry to hear that, but I’m glad somebody’s in the old place. I remember running around the woods out there when I was a—kid. In fact, I think you showed me some of the best places to hide out there.”

Jake Rowly grinned, obviously remembering being a rangy teenage wolf showing the younger shifters how to get around. “Yeah, I think I did. Anyway, give me half an hour or so and I’ll have your curtain rods up for you, and then the place is yours. Planning on staying a while?”

Dion widened his eyes warningly at Zane, as if Zane was likely to say the wrong thing. Which he guessed he might, because he didn’t know how committed Dion wanted him to be.

He knew how committed *he* wanted him to be, though. “A while. I thought I’d work out of Virtue for the next month or so leading up to the Starlight Ball, so I can focus on Ms. Hawthorne’s gown.”

“She can’t be your only client for the ball,” Jake said, surprised. “Isn’t that going to inconvenience a lot of rich people?” He looked pleased by the prospect, and Zane laughed.

“It might, but who knows, maybe it’ll put Virtue on the map as a tourist destination.” That would really annoy his father, Zane thought with a note of satisfaction. “All right, we’ll get out of your hair. Half an hour, you said?”

“Enough to drink coffee and go over to Kate’s for breakfast. Or the Winter Doughnut Shop. They’re spectacular.”

“I don’t remember either of them.” Zane shook his head. “In some ways Virtue seems exactly the same, and in others I don’t recognize it at all.”

“Kate’s opened about ten years ago, I think. Imelda’s—the doughnut place—is only open over the winter. She runs a

coffee cart the rest of the year. A lot's changed," Jake said with a rather serious nod. "We should get together and talk about some of it sometime. There's a lot of pressure going on from the town council on some topics right now, and an old Virtue voice like yours might carry some weight."

"I'm not that old!" Zane knew what Jake meant, but the line got a laugh, which he and Dion departed on.

Dion breathed, "Silver fox," as they left, and Zane, knowing he shouldn't, said, "Wolf. Silver wolf," which made Dion purse his lips thoughtfully.

"I suppose. He's sort of tall for a fox. And those blue eyes. Too bad he's married."

"To a woman," Zane pointed out with amusement. "Besides, I thought you were currently madly in love with Aaron Jones."

Dion was too dark to blush, but shot Zane a slightly betrayed look, as if he'd struck on something he wasn't supposed to know. "Don't be mean."

Zane, genuinely surprised, put a hand over his heart in apology. "Sorry. He seems lovely."

Dion sniffed, said, "He is," and refused to be drawn out any more as they went for doughnuts. Or a cinnamon roll, in Zane's case. It was larger than his palm, and he only ate about a quarter of it, but the rest went into a take-out box so he could nibble on it for the next day or two. Dion, who could eat anything, probably due to a much-stricter exercise regime than Zane ever bothered with, ate an apple fritter that was almost literally the size of his face, and a cup of cinnamon-apple tea that apparently went wonderfully with the fritter. He ordered another one to go, and on the way out the door, said, "Remind me to always take dining advice from the locals while in a small town. You never told me Virtue had such good food, Mr. Z."

"When I was growing up it had the Silver Dollar Diner, the Italian Place, and a burger joint that burned down three times before the owners gave up on it."

“Sounds like an insurance scam.”

Zane’s jaw dropped. “That never occurred to me.”

“Ah, well, I’m handsome but cynical. My toxic trait. I’m going back to the B&B to call every purveyor of fine fabrics on the East Coast and offering the first one who gets us a decent range of fabrics an exclusive six month deal with Zane Bellamy Fashion Designs. Unless you want me to work from your studio.”

Zane never wanted anyone to work in his studio if he could help it, and Dion knew it. He gave his PA a dry look and Dion swanned off, grinning, toward the B&B, while Zane walked carefully across still-slick sideways to his new temporary workspace.

The curtain rods were up and Jake Rowly was gone by the time he arrived. It only took a few minutes to finish and mount the curtains, after which he finally got up the nerve to text Vicki with, *can we talk?*

As soon as he sent it he knew it was a mistake. Nobody ever wanted to have a conversation that began *can we talk?* Worse, she didn’t answer, making it very, very clear he’d made a mistake. Millions of mistakes. He needed a how-to guide on communicating with women. That was embarrassing, for a man of thirty-eight years. He alternated between working on her dress design and fretting, until about three-thirty, when his phone bipped with a notification, and there was a text from Vicki:

Sorry, I was at work. We can talk, sure. When/where?

Work. Right. She’d been teaching. No wonder she hadn’t answered. Zane really *did* need a how-to guide. He texted back with his new workplace address and she sent a confused emoji and a *see you in a while*, which didn’t exactly fill his heart with confidence.

On the other hand, she hadn’t said she never wanted to see him again, and Zane would take that as a win.

CHAPTER 13



Vicki wasn't really sure she ever wanted to see Zane again, but she hadn't figured out a way to give her dress to somebody else, either, so after finishing school paperwork, she slogged around the block toward the town square, paused, and went back the other direction to stop at the new gastropub. Their hot chocolate wasn't as good as Imelda's, but they had a liquor license, so she could get a shot of Bailey's in it. At the moment, Vicki wasn't sure which she needed more, the warmth or the liquid courage.

Nothing good ever came from a conversation that started with *can we talk*, but they'd left things very awkwardly—at best—on Saturday night, and...they probably needed to talk. About fake dating, if nothing else.

After all, Vicki knew how fake dating worked in the movies. Maybe it could turn into something real.

Or maybe it was just a career move for Zane. She sighed, finished her hot chocolate, and straightened her coat. She was a confident, intelligent, strong woman. She could go have an uncomfortable conversation with *the hottest guy she had ever laid eyes on* and it would be *totally fine*.

Oddly enough, that helped. She was even smiling as she marched back out into the weather and headed for the address Zane had given her: one of the shop fronts on the town square, but she didn't know which shop it *was*.

Because, as it turned out, it hadn't been one yesterday. Its windows were clean now, although she couldn't see more than

shadows inside through thin white curtains that hadn't been there either. Vicki knocked on the door hesitantly, wondering what was going on inside.

It took just long enough for her to wonder if anybody would answer, or if she should knock again, before the door swept open. The lightweight curtains billowed dramatically, briefly providing a pale, ghostly backdrop for Zane Bellamy, who wore slacks, shirtsleeves, and a measuring tape around his neck. His grey gaze was almost silver with bright hope, and the devastating smile that made Vicki's knees weak was currently shy and soft. "Vicki. You came. Thank you. Come on in."

He stepped aside as the curtains settled, and the room suddenly seemed less...gothy. Which was kind of too bad, because the gothic vampire look had worked rather well for Vicki.

On the other hand, the room now looked very much like a workshop where a professional tailor intended to set up shop for a while. It was also wonderfully warm. Vicki felt her shoulders relax in the heat, and sighed. "It's cozy. What, ah... what?"

She hoped a little gesture at the room explained what she meant by the question. Fortunately, Zane seemed to understand, although he started to answer, held his breath, and said, "I'd like to say something else before I explain this."

A nervous pit of cold appeared in Vicki's stomach. "Okay..."

"Okay. First, I'd like to apologize for being an idiot."

The cold disappeared into a coughing laugh. "Oh. Um. Okay?"

"I like you," Zane said, not gracefully but certainly hopefully. "A lot. I like spending time with you. I like talking with you. I like looking at you. I like the idea of sewing for you. And it *was* my assistant's idea for us to fake date, but I handled that really badly because I would really rather actual-

date you and then I panicked because you might not want to date me, so I wanted to give you an out.”

Vicki’s voice shot up. “You mean you’re not gay?”

Whatever Zane had been about to say stopped somewhere at the back of his throat as his jaw dropped and he gaped at her for a moment before collecting himself. “Aaah. Aah, no. No, I’m not. I’m...nope. Not gay. Common...common misconception, honestly, but, uh, no.”

“Well that—” Vicki ran out of things to say, too, until she finally landed on, “Well, that’s nice.” All of her fantasies suddenly seemed to be much sharper-edged. It was one thing to daydream about an apparently-gay fashion designer way out of her league. It was something else to have him say—

“So...” Zane gave her a nervous smile. “Would you like to not-fake-date me instead? I mean, really date? Would you like to...date? Go on a date? A real date, not a talk-about-the-dress date?”

“Do we *have* to not talk about the dress?” Vicki asked worriedly. “What if it comes up in conversation? Do we have to suddenly change the subject?”

“I don’t think so.” Zane’s bright grin flashed. “I think if it comes up organically, we’re allowed to talk about it. And since we’re talking about it now, and I just dropped a lot on you, I wondered if you wanted to look at the refined design I’ve done?”

Vicki squeaked, “That would be nice.” Her whole world felt turned upside-down. In the best way, but she needed a minute to recalibrate to the idea that she wasn’t nursing a hopeless crush. That, in fact, her crush might be reciprocated. Even if he *was* a fashion designer way out of her league.

Zane stepped up close to her, hands light on her shoulders. “May I take your coat?”

A shiver ran through Vicki, even though it was plenty warm in the office. “Please, yes.” She was suddenly glad she’d dressed nicely for school that morning, although she’d done so out of spite, as if being extra-cute at work would suddenly

scare up a host of attractive men who wanted to *actually* date her, and that would show Zane. Or something like that.

Zane tucked her coat over the back of a chair, then turned to consider her, a slow smile spreading across his face. He didn't *say* anything, though, at least not about her clothes, which, well. She'd worn a white blouse with a starched collar with just two buttons undone, and a snug black pencil skirt that hugged her legs all the way to just below her knees. Her blocky black shoes went well with her boxy wool coat, and she'd felt cute, anyway. *She* knew the vibe she was going for, even if she didn't really dare play it up all that much at school. But if Zane saw it, he didn't comment, only offered his hand to lead her to the drawing table.

His hands were *incredibly* soft. Soft enough that his touch made her gasp, and when he glanced down at her, surprised, she said, "I thought you'd have rougher hands? All that... needle handling and stuff?"

He nodded. "Fabric, needles, cuts from the scissors, the hot irons, pins...sewing a lot can be really rough on the hands. Most of the designers and seamstresses I know spend a fortune on hand creams, myself included. And manicures." He turned his free hand up, showing off the beautiful nails Vicki had noticed the first time they'd met. "Hangnails and rough cuticles catch on delicate fabric, so I spoil my hands. If we're working up to a big fashion show sometimes I hire a couple of hand masseuses to come in and keep everybody's circulation going while we're finishing the outfits."

"You sound like a pretty good boss," Vicki said faintly. She thought she'd be happy if he just kept holding her hand forever. "Perks of working for Bellamy Designs, huh?"

That devastating grin flashed across his face again. "I've been where they were, being the tailor working to get all the last-minute work done, so I know for a personal fact that well-paid, comfortable artists do better work than people who are exhausted and in pain. Now," he said, slightly more briskly, "I think I've got a design you're going to like, so once you've had a look at it, if I could take your measurements, we'd be off to a good start.

“Oh,” he added. “And if you want to call someone to have another person around while I do that, I’m happy to give you a minute. Usually I do measurements in my studio and there are a dozen other people around, but I’ve got sort of a start-up feeling going here, and don’t have my legions of staff on hand.”

“And I don’t have an entourage,” Vicki said wryly. “I bet a lot of your clients do. Um, no, I’m fine, really. I trust you.”

Which she did. Unconditionally, since the moment she’d met him. Which was strange when she thought about it, but felt good regardless. An awful lot about Zane felt good, and she could really enjoy it now that she knew he was interested in her. “Can I see the design?”

“Of course.” Zane led her to another table, almost bouncing with eagerness as he opened his sketchbook to a bookmarked page.

“*Oh.*” Vicki breathed the sound, brushing her fingertips a few centimeters above the watercolor sketch. “Oh, Zane, this is going to be *beautiful.*”

The gown on the paper was fluid, shimmering blues, sky-pale with hints of rich ocean green in its shadows. It had a relatively simple bodice, nothing that plunged too deeply or required a model’s exceptionally slender frame to wear, and had soft capped sleeves that fell gracefully around the upper arms, not really meant to cover the shoulders at all. The skirt was a work of art, delicate pleats beneath a delicate, flowing overskirt, and would swish around the feet like running water. “Zane, I love it!”

“I can’t wait to sew it for you.” Zane sounded as delighted as Vicki felt. “You’ll be the belle of the ball.”

She laughed. “There will be actual movie stars there, Zane. I won’t be able to compete. The dress will, though.” She turned toward him, smiling. “Thank you so much.”

“I haven’t done anything yet!” he protested with a grin, then took a deep breath and stepped back like he was reminding himself to keep a professional distance. Vicki

simultaneously appreciated it and really wished he'd stayed just as close as he'd been.

In fact, she *really* wished he'd stayed as close as he was. It was an absurd escalation to go from 'would you like to date' to...well, *anything* else within a few minutes, but...

But, well, the truth was, somebody like Zane Bellamy was a fairy tale prince, in the life as she knew it. She could have a more glamorous life if she wanted one, but that had never really been her thing. Still, just for a moment, to be the princess in the gown, adored by a handsome prince...just for a moment, that sounded wonderful. Exciting. Thrilling.

And if it was only temporary—which it was, because Zane had his life in California, and Vicki had hers in Virtue for this year, and somewhere else next year—then there was all the more reason to grasp it while she had the chance.

Somewhere in there, Vicki had made a decision, and hoped she knew the right way to get Zane up close and personal again. Heart suddenly hammering with anticipation, she wet her lips and gathered up the courage to say, "Would you like to do something now?"

His silver eyes went dark pewter with sudden interest. "What did you have in mind?"

Vicki whispered, "Take my measurements?"

All the breath left Zane's body. He took one rough step forward, not quite back into Vicki's space, and his gaze searched hers. "I think I should..." For a few seconds it looked like the rest of that sentence was 'try to remember how to talk,' and at his brief smile, Vicki thought Zane was thinking something similar. But he went on after a deep, slow breath. "I think I should understand very clearly what kind of measurements we're talking about here. The kind I'd normally have assistants in the room for, or..." He swallowed. "Or the kind I *wouldn't*?"

A trill of breathless laughter ran through Vicki. "I guess that depends on how much of an exhibitionist you are. The

kind you wouldn't," she added, almost dizzy with hope. "If... if you'd be interested in that kind of...measurement."

She didn't *mean* for her gaze to drop to below his waistband, as if she had some measuring to do herself. She yanked her eyes back up to his again, but despite his very well-cut slacks, it certainly *looked* like he was interested in the kind of measurements she was suggesting.

It also looked as though he was struggling not to sweep her off her feet as his voice dropped and he said, "Victoria, are you sure?"

She was going to explode of anticipation. "I am. I know it's moving fast, but I really like you, and...unless you don't want to?"

Zane closed the last of the space between them and curled his fingers at her jaw, a feather-light touch that made her whole body zing with excitement. He whispered, "I want to," before lowering his mouth to hers, as light and delicate as his touch. His lips were as soft as his hands, and he deepened the kiss only slowly, sending waves of aching impatience through Vicki's breasts and between her thighs. His thumbs stroked down her throat, incredibly gentle, until she whimpered with desire. He smelled so *good*, and seemed to instinctively know just how to touch her. She put her hands on his chest, and he shivered, breaking the kiss.

His eyes were dark with desire, although he crushed them shut for a moment. "There are some things I should probably tell you."

"I don't think I need to hear much else other than 'please lock the door,'" Vicki said breathlessly. Zane laughed, quiet and close to her, and she said, "Will anything you say change what we both want to happen right now?"

"I don't think so. I hope not."

"Then let's just trust the moment." Vicki stood on her toes to kiss him again.

It was even better than the first time, Zane letting a trace of hunger come into the kiss, so she could suddenly feel his

slender strength before he laughed again against her mouth, and murmured, "Please lock the door."

She groaned, not wanting to leave the safe warmth of his body, but then pushed herself away and ran to lock the door before returning, suddenly shyer now that she wasn't pressed against him.

There was nothing shy in his gaze, though, as he watched her approach. "Look at you." His voice was low, deep, almost dangerous. "It's actually quite perfect. The starched collar, even though you don't like doing laundry-related things. It's an excellent touch, although I think you could unbutton the blouse just a little more without being scandalous. You really ought to be wearing stiletto heels, but I suppose the weather isn't really suitable for them right now, and those shoes play into it very well, all things considered."

A thrill like nothing Vicki had ever felt stung her nipples into incredible hardness, and the heat between her legs into a near flood as she blushed all over. She actually stumbled a step, shocked with desire and denial and a kind of hope. Zane caught her, strong and utterly confident as she stuttered, "W-what are you talking ab-ah, about?" against him.

"I'm bad at faces," Zane murmured. He turned her in his arms and she moved easily, weak with stunned hope as he pulled her back against him and nuzzled her hair to the side so he could find her lips with his neck. "But I'm *very* good at clothes, Victoria. I know a sexy secretary when I see one."

Vicki's knees went weak, but Zane's strong arm around her waist protected her from any risk of falling. She'd been wearing the button-down white shirt and black skirt for *years*, and nobody had ever seemed to see the outfit for what it was. She remembered suddenly how Zane's gaze had darkened as soon as she'd taken her coat off, and realized he'd known *instantly*. Another rush of heat spilled through her and she whimpered, astonished to be *seen* that way, and overwhelmed with how much it meant to her.

"Now," he said beneath her ear, "to get your measurements, we're going to have to take these clothes off,

aren't we, sweetheart? Will you let me do that?" His fingertips brushed down the line of shirt buttons, and at Vicki's eager nod, undid them effortlessly before sliding his hand into her shirt and groaning aloud as he found the delicate, quarter-cup lacy bra she wore beneath the blouse, and flicked the nipple shields it required away. "My God, you *are* naughty, aren't you? What a good girl you are. Do your panties match, baby? Are they just as tiny and naughty?"

She was so breathless it took a few seconds before she could speak, and in that time he captured a nipple in his soft fingertips, rolling it and making her moan. "Yes! Yes, they're my...my secret, too sexy for school...again, please?" She whimpered as he cupped her breast and played the nipple, his mouth warm against her neck. "Nobody ever noticed me like that."

"Oh, but I see a pattern here." She felt Zane's smile against her skin. "The sexy librarian, that was the outfit with the vest and skirt, wasn't it? And now the sexy secretary...Victoria, I think I need to have a good look at your wardrobe, and see just how wicked a girl you are." He slid the shirt off her shoulders, leaving her shivering and excited in her half-nakedness, and groaned as he cupped her breasts again. Then his hand slipped downward, loosening the zipper of her skirt and pushing it away until it fell, pooled around her ankles. "Oh, dear God."

A tiny thrill of satisfaction shot through her as he actually moved her a few steps away from him, turning her to face him. She felt terribly vulnerable and incredibly excited in the racy little white bra and panties, and the thigh-high stockings he'd just discovered. "That's got to be a risk," he said in a low rough voice. "Wearing *those* in a school."

"It's why the skirt is long and fitted," Vicki whispered. "It can't blow up and...expose me." She'd never said those words aloud, and now she felt *extraordinarily* exposed under the heat of his gaze. The truth was she'd never been 'caught' in her nipple-baring bra or the barely-there panties; they'd been a secret for her to wear under school clothes, and no one had ever seen through the 'disguise.' She didn't wear these kinds

of things on dates. They were, she realized, all for Zane. All for the man who had really *seen* her.

He whispered, “Christ, I wish the mirrors were here already. You should see yourself, Victoria.”

A shudder of desire ran through her. No one ever used her full name, not like *that*, and it was going to kill her with anticipation. A glint came into his eyes, and he pulled her closer again so he could trace a thumb up her throat a second time. “You like that, don’t you? Victoria. You are *so* beautiful, Victoria.”

Trembling, she put her hands on his shirt buttons, and he let go a rough laugh. “Yes. Please.” He spread his arms a little in invitation, and she stripped the shirt away so she could run her hands over his bare chest—lean, strong, covered with silvering dark hair—and shiver again. “You are too. Beautiful, I mean. Can I, I want...”

Her hands dropped to his waistband, and another smile flashed over his face as he nodded, although a momentary look of surprised thoughtfulness followed it. “Not that I want to to distract from the moment, but...I have condoms in my coat pocket...”

Vicki’s hands went still for a few seconds, delight of a different kind washing through her. She wasn’t used to men who volunteered to use protection. Even if she hadn’t already really liked Zane, that was a huge point in his favor. “Um. I’m on birth control and last got tested before I came to Virtue, and haven’t been with anybody since, so...if you’re okay...?”

He ducked his head against hers, smiling with a trace of grateful astonishment. “I’m good. Tests every six months or more if it seems necessary for some reason, which it mostly doesn’t.”

“Well then.” Vicki kissed *his* throat this time, and unlike her, he toed his shoes off, and stepped out of his slacks and socks as she undressed him. That dark hair made a gorgeous trail downward, and she followed it with her fingertips to the band of his underwear, then glanced up at him. He was watching her intently, but a brief, gentle smile curved his

mouth. “You don’t have to if you don’t want to. We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to do.”

Vicki’s vision almost swam with heat and excitement. “I want to. I want...” She pushed his shorts down, kneeling as she went, her gaze locked on Zane’s thick, eager length as she finished undressing him. She brought her hands back up, tracing the size of him, and he shuddered from the bones out.

“Vicki. Victoria...what are you...”

She almost laughed. “Can’t you guess?” She traced him again, then brushed her cheek over his length before touching the tip of her tongue to the base of his cock and licking a thin hot line upward. He groaned and reached for the table behind him like he needed something to hold on to, and whispered, “You don’t have to,” in a voice that sounded like he’d forgotten words.

“I *really* like to.” Heat boiled through Vicki’s body, intensifying as she twirled her tongue over the head of Zane’s cock and he moaned, suddenly and helplessly submissive to her. She tasted him a little at a time, learning his size and shape, until he’d leaned on the table and spread his legs, every sound he made exciting her more and more. He finally put his hand in her hair, giving a desperate sob as she whimpered with excitement around him and swallowed him as deeply as she could.

“Oh God, Victoria, my *God*, what are you doing, what are you doing...” He was hoarse with need and the struggle for control, each word sending stinging desire into every part of her until he finally, urgently, whispered, “Stop, please stop, this isn’t all I want, Vicki, please, I can’t...”

She released him with a near-purr, and he slumped against the table a few seconds, gasping for breath and a little calm before dragging her close and kissing her hungrily. “Wicked, delicious woman. You’ll undo me, you’ll destroy me. I should have asked, is that all you like, do you like mouths instead of—”

She stopped him with a kiss, both of them breathless when it ended. “I like my mouth on you more than yours on me. I

like to be taken, or to take, yes.” She turned them both around to put herself between him and the table, and then turned herself toward the table, pressing her ass back into Zane’s hard cock. He put one hand on her hip like he was stopping himself, and she took the other to slide it into her panties. “And I like fingers to make me come, Zane.”

He shuddered with enthusiasm and stroked her, quick certain touches with those incredibly soft fingertips. Vicki spread her legs wider, whimpering, and he pushed the thin line of her panties aside to press the head of his cock just barely against her before groaning. “Yes?”

“Yes, please, oh my God, Zane, yes!” Vicki wriggled back against him and cried out in relief and pleasure as he slid deep inside her. She hadn’t felt so filled in a long time, and reveled in the magnificence of the sensation, and of the promising pinch of his fingers around her aching clit. Orgasm was so close, and she knew he would bring her to it with ease.

He shuddered again and for a few critical seconds held still, then whispered, “Yes, Victoria, beautiful girl, yes, oh, God, *yes*,” as he rocked into her, rubbing his fingers against her until she begged and cried out with the need to finish. His voice was ragged as he leaned closer, over her back with his weight pressing her hard into his fingers and breathed, “How naughty are you? Are you so naughty it’s exciting knowing there’s only a thin curtain between us and the world watching? Are you that naughty, Victoria?”

Vicki had never in her life dreamed she was that kind of naughty, but the orgasm that exploded through her said otherwise. Bodywracking pleasure shattered her in relentless waves, pulsing against Zane’s fingers until she sobbed, overwhelmed, and thought she would die of fulfillment as his release came in thick throbbing pulses inside her.

After a long, gasping minute, Zane moved off the table and onto the floor, keeping her warm and safe and comfortable in his arms, and for the first time in her life, Vicki felt like she was home.

CHAPTER 14



There were probably a lot of things Zane should say to Vicki, but in the aftermath of the most incandescent sex he could even imagine, never mind have experienced, all he could really manage was, “Wow,” breathed against her shoulder.

She was so small and delicate and drowsy in his lap, but she laughed at that and tipped her head back against his shoulder to look for a soft, languid kiss. Her eyelashes were dark blonde against her cheeks, sleepily closed as she whispered, “Yeah. Wow,” and then after a long, lazy moment, added, “No one has ever...seen me like that, Zane. The clothes, they just...look like clothes, to other people.”

Given that he still had his fingers and cock buried in her beneath the tiny panties she wore, given that one of her stockings had lost its grip on her thigh and slid down to gently wrinkle against her knee, given that the way her back arched as she leaned against him made her breasts rise beautifully in their scandalous little bra, Zane had never been so glad in his life for being profoundly aware of *clothing*. “I’d be extremely glad to keep it that way. I’ll notice anything you wear, Vicki. What do they call it.” He laughed, soft and amused. “Everyday cosplay? You keep cosplaying the strait-laced school teacher in outfits like these and I *promise* I’ll know who you are underneath the good girl clothes.”

He hugged her on the *promise* and she shivered and moaned softly, clearly enjoying the feeling of his body still in hers. Zane kissed her throat and she tilted her head to make it

easier, a submissive act that made the wolf in him—not the actual one, but the wild part of himself—thrill with interest. He explored her breasts with his fingertips, watching her nipples harden again and feeling the heat between her thighs begin to throb again. He passed his thumb over the swelling nub there and Vicki jolted, whimpering, and spread her legs across his a little more.

“You really like fingers more than tongues?” he asked, interested and intrigued by both the question and the need growing in her.

“Mm. Hmm.” The sounds came in little gasps. “Mouths are nice but not usually enough to get me there. Tongues are strong but not hard enough. I like it. Please don’t stop.”

“What if I took you very close to the window,” Zane murmured against her throat as he touched her lightly, listening to her breathing grow more and more ragged. “What if I kept you just like this, in your little bra and panties, with your stockings falling down, and took you right up to the window, so close people might be able to see, and put your arms around my neck and made you stand up against me while I touched you until you came for me? Would you like that, Victoria?”

She surged against his fingers, heat flooding them. “I couldn’t. I can’t. I’d fall down.” She sounded desperate and excited all at once, her nipples so hard he thought they must hurt.

“Well, I couldn’t have that. Maybe I’d wrap a tape measure around your wrists, behind my neck, to keep you from falling...” He reached for one, grateful to have them nearby, and lifted her arms to lace her hands behind his neck before wrapping the tape measure around her wrists. That was a two hand job, so he had to take his fingers from between her thighs, and she whimpered a protest before becoming so compliant with her wrists bound that his cock jerked inside her. “Oh, God, you *are* a good girl, aren’t you?”

He withdrew and put her on the floor this time, leaving her wrists wrapped up, although not around anything, and turned

his attention to her achingly hard nipples in that gorgeous little bra, until she was bucking and twisting beneath him, legs spread and hips lifted to try to rub herself against him. He claimed her slowly, watching color suffuse her with each inch he sank into her, then sat up, pulling her hips over his thighs so he could tease her rigid nub as she cried out and begged to come. When she did it was magnificent, body-rippling pleasure that brought him over the edge as an incredible afterthought; he could have kept her there, playing with her, and been satisfied forever with just that.

They collapsed together after that, drowsing for a long time. Zane pulled a rug over them for warmth, and Vicki giggled but didn't object. Eventually, after he thought they'd both slept, she giggled again and murmured, "So how are those measurements coming along?"

Zane actually laughed aloud, although he turned his head so he wouldn't be shouting laughter into her ear. "I suspect I've now got a better idea of them than you'd be comfortable with, so we'll just go ahead and use the tape measure."

"Oh, you can't really know them," she said with a sniff.

"Shall I write down what I think they are, and compare after we've done the real ones?"

Half an hour later Vicki, now dressed again, stared at the paper he'd written both his guesses and her actual measurements on. "I don't understand how you did that. They're all exactly right."

"Mmm, not exactly. I got your inseam off by a centimeter, and that threw the hip to ankle off by..." Zane grinned at her expression. "It's my job. I could have guesstimated most of those fairly accurately *before* I got my hands all over you, and once I did..." He shrugged.

"You're right," she said, still staring. "That's sort of uncomfortable. Do you do that to all women?"

"Um. Will it help if I say I also do it to all men?"

Vicki glanced up, startled, and laughed. "Yeah, it sort of does. It's kind of a hell of a party trick, I guess. So all of

this...” She gestured at the studio, which they’d put back together into some kind of order. “Does this mean you’re staying in Virtue?”

“It does. At least for a while.”

“Why? I thought you hated it here.”

Zane lifted his eyebrows. “Because you’re here, obviously. I can’t date you, fake or otherwise, from California.”

“Boy, if that was fake dating, I can’t wait to get to the real thing.” Vicki grinned and stepped up against him, her warmth and scent a vivid reminder of how close they’d been. Her blouse was unbuttoned farther now, and she’d found, but not re-inserted, the nipple shields that kept her tiny little quarter-cup bra school-safe. Zane, gaze arrested by the sharpness of her nipples against the white blouse, was torn between delight at being the only one who knew how provocative her underthings were, and greedily wanting to see her visibly wearing that kind of thing in public all the time.

He tried to drag his mind back to the topic, which was... California. Dating. Being with Vicki. Important. More important than sex, although with her lithe body warm against his, it was very hard to remember that.

It was very hard, anyway. He muttered, “Down, boy,” to himself. His wolf gave a sense of vague offense that made Zane laugh, and Vicki, glancing down, smiled too.

“Not that I have any objections, but can we order Chinese in or something, because I’m also starving.”

“Yeah, but before we do that—Vicki, there really is something I need to talk to you about. It doesn’t—I hope it doesn’t—change anything, but you need to know that I’m—”

A wolf shifter. It should be reasonably easy to say. Just four syllables, none of which were difficult ones.

No, the difficult part was that true humans didn’t generally know about shifters, so the whole thing required a total realignment of their way of thinking. And that, somehow, was even more difficult than bringing up the idea of dating, which Zane had already completely blown.

“If you say secretly married,” Vicki said in a very steady calm tone, “I’m going to actually kill you.”

“Oh my God, no! No, I’m a wolf shifter.”

Well, on one hand, that hadn’t been so hard after all. On the other, Vicki was blinking at him slowly in complete bewilderment. After a long, uncertain moment, she said, “Is that...some kind of furry? Do you have a...fursona?” carefully, as if she wasn’t absolutely certain of her terms.

“No! Oh, Christ, I’m doing this really badly. No, look, I... no, look. That’s easier. That’s better. Sorry. I should have started here.” Zane backed up several feet and held his hands up. “Please don’t scream.”

Amusement creased Vicki’s beautiful eyes. “I promise not to scream any louder than I did earlier, how’s that.”

“That’s not really screaming, though, is it? It’s getting really loud, but it’s—” Zane swallowed. “Never mind. We’ll come back to that. Just...don’t scream.”

With that, he turned into a wolf.

To his surprise, Vicki *didn’t* scream, ore even shriek. She clapped both hands over her mouth, but the sound she caught behind them was a laugh.

Laughing, Zane thought, was *probably* better than screeching, but somehow it didn’t make him any less nervous. He sat down, then lay down on his belly, watching her hopefully. The end of his tail even thumped, which was moderately embarrassing, but

Vicki stood there, hands over her mouth and her eyes enormous above them, for several seconds. Zane sat very still, although his heart was beating wildly. Eventually Vicki dropped to her hands and knees and crawled toward him, almost as if she was afraid of frightening *him*, as if he really was a wild animal. Although he hoped she’d be smart enough to not crawl right up to a wild wolf, or to stare at it, wide-eyed, from only a few inches away. She tilted left and right, gazing at him in astonishment that seemed lace with bright-eyed delight, and finally whispered, “That is a *heck* of a fursona.”

Zane barked—actually barked—laughter, and shifted back to human, still lying on his belly. “I honestly never thought of it like that, but I guess it sort of is. I have no idea if there’s a large shifter population in the furry community...”

“I mean, on one hand I’d be really tempted, and on the other, why would I wear a giant extremely hot wolf costume when I could actually turn into one?” Vicki’s voice quavered between laughter and awe. “Zane, you turned into a *wolf*. Is that co—”

She sat up abruptly, expression purely at war with itself, as if laughter and indignation were vying to have first say. Laughter won, because she blurted, “Wait, oh my *god*, you’re a *tailor* who turns into a *wolf*, Zane, you’re a *wear wolf*!” through giggles.

He groaned. “No, honestly, we’re not bound to the phases of the moon or anything, we just shift int—”

“Nooo!” she howled with delight. “A *w-e-a-r* wolf!”

Zane stared at her a moment, then buried his face in his arms and laughed. “Oh my God. You’re right. I am a wear wolf. That is the worst thing I’ve ever heard.”

Vicki actually clapped in delight, although her previous indignation suddenly rose to the surface again and she put her arms akimbo. “But wait, is this *common*? Is it common *here*? In Virtue? My God, no *wonder* everybody’s so closed-mouthed! Oh my God! Your father! Is he a—what did you call it? A shifter? Is that why he hates me? Because I’m not? But everybody here can’t be, right? Or can they? No, no way, there’s no way the kids would all stay human on the playground. I certainly wouldn’t. Whfhfhafllffff!” The last sound was accompanied by a wild flailing of her hands. “What the *heck*!”

“So you’re taking this well,” Zane said cautiously. Vicki gave him a *look*, but he shook his head as he sat up. “No, I mean it. Those are all good questions, and I was afraid you’d scream and run away, so this is definitely taking it well. It’s pretty common in Virtue, yes, and it’s part of why my father doesn’t like you, yes. He’s never liked any outsiders, and he

especially doesn't like people who aren't shifters coming to Virtue, not that the town could sustain itself meaningfully on just the shifter population, and—”

“Oh, you sounded just like Librarian Sarah there, except she never said anything about shifters.” Vicki's eyes popped. “Wait, is she a shifter too? Is Virtue full of *wolves*?”

“Not...*full* of them...? And wolves are a pretty common shifter species but there are a lot of others in town. There's at least one rabbit shifter family I know about, for example.”

“...don't the wolves eat them?”

Zane laughed. “Shifters can sense each other, or recognize each other, kind of. We wouldn't generally eat another shifter. If it came to that I'd assume there were some much larger problems going on around us.”

“Right. Right, good. And what about Sarah? Wait, are you allowed to tell me, or is that like outing somebody?”

“It is like outing somebody, but Sarah isn't a shifter.” Zane hesitated over telling her that Sarah's *mate* was, and winced at the very idea. Or at the word, maybe. Saying Sarah's boyfriend was seemed much better than using the word *mate*, or trying to tell Vicki about shifters and their fated mates.

Something in his expression gave him away, though, because she put her arms akimbo again and tilted her head. “Sarah's not, buuuut...?”

“Her boyfriend is,” Zane replied slowly. “Which...*is* complicated for me to tell you. It could be fine, it *is* fine because I trust you, but...” He finally got to his feet, raking a hand through his hair. “Obviously we don't tell people about ourselves, for safety reasons. The exception is...”

After a moment, Vicki got up, too, and leaned against a table with her arms folded under her breasts. Zane wasn't exactly distracted, but it was difficult not to admire the lift of her chest, and impossible not to remember the sexy, revealing bra hugging those curves. He actually closed his eyes for a second, trying to keep himself on point, then opened them to

meet Vicki's confused gaze as she said, "Whatever it is can't be as dramatic as 'I turn into a wolf,' right?"

Zane chuckled. "No, I guess not. It's just that most shifters believe strongly that there's someone in the world for them. A very special someone, someone we're fated to meet, and who we'll recognize instantly as being the person we're supposed to be with all our lives. We're allowed to tell those...those 'fated mates'...about other shifters and *their* mates."

Vicki had gone very still, and echoed, "'Most' shifters," after a momentary pause.

Zane exhaled. "My parents weren't fated mates and my father absolutely doesn't think they're a real thing. He's completely dismissive of the whole idea. I..." He trailed off, then gave Vicki a lopsided smile. "I want to believe? And I know we have a connection, and my wolf says it's real. It's just..."

"It's just that it's like a fairy tale," Vicki offered. "And fairy tales don't really come true." She lifted a finger, saying, "I want to come back to that 'my wolf says' thing, but...does it matter, Zane? I think we have a connection, too. I felt it as soon as we met. Does it really matter if it's magic or fate, if we both feel it and want to do something about it? Normal...I mean, not-shifter humans...what do you call us? Because 'normal' implies you're not, and I don't exactly like that."

"True humans."

Her eyebrows flickered up. "Woo, that sounds like it carries a lot of baggage, but okay. True humans, even true humans experience love at first sight, right? Or a strength of connection they can't explain? If that's easier...why can't what we're feeling be that? I don't need it to be fate. I just want it to be real."

"It is real." Zane crossed to tuck her into his arms, nestling his nose in her hair. "I believe that, at least, Vicki. Victoria. I wish I could tell you it was fate and we were meant to be together forever, but I have a hard time believing that, even if my wolf thinks I'm an idiot."

She laughed against his chest and looked up with bright eyes. “Your wolf talks to you?”

“Not very often, but yeah. Most shifters’ animals do.”

“And...he doesn’t help you with recognizing people?” She looked faintly offended on his behalf. “Can’t he tell the difference between one person and another by scent, at least?”

Zane groaned and put his forehead against hers. “You’d think, wouldn’t you? But it’s *incredibly* indifferent about people. They’re all loud and smelly and they wear things that make them move strangely, so it prefers to ignore them as much as possible. It’s no help at all.”

“Well but that—that...!” She clearly had protests, but couldn’t actually verbalize them. Zane grinned sympathetically.

“I know, right? That’s basically how I feel about the whole thing. But it’s been like this my whole life, so I’ve just had to accept it and do my best without any help.” He wobbled his head, forehead still against hers. “Without any wolf help. Dion’s a *huge* help, and so is my mother. They get me across the red carpet and through interviews without completely embarrassing myself.”

“Oh! Oh, is that why they’re always your dates to those big events? I thought—”

“That I was dating Dion or a complete mama’s boy, or both,” Zane said with a chuckle. “Everybody does. Annoys Dion to no end, because he says it limits his prospects. He’d never admit it, but that’s at least half of why he wants us to have a public romance: so it’s obvious he’s single.”

“And what about you?” she asked. “Do you want a public romance?”

“God, no. Not that I don’t want a romance!” he said as her face fell. “But a public one would upend *your* life, and I don’t want that. If the just-friends-in-public thing would work, I think it’d be better for us, regardless of smoldering pictures taken at the diner.”

“Oh. That’s thoughtful,” Vicki admitted before her stomach gurgled so loudly Zane heard it. “Oh my God, I’m sorry, but I’m *starving*. And I’ve got to go home and finish tomorrow’s class project.”

Zane loosened his arms reluctantly. “Does that mean I should let you go?”

“Unless you want to come over to my place and order pizza and cut out felt bunnies for Easter...”

“Know what?” Zane smiled down at her. “That sounds terrific.”

CHAPTER 15



Vicki couldn't decide which was more incredible, the fact that Zane was a wolf shifter, or that he had all the felt bunnies cut out before the pizza arrived, even though she'd ordered it on the walk home. They were cut out much more neatly than she could have done it, too, and before the end of the evening he'd put together entire sewing kits for the kids' craft projects. Vicki, awed, said, "You should have been a first grade teacher," and he laughed.

"I wouldn't be nearly as fast at any of this if I was, though. Ah, irony."

After a brief discussion, he reluctantly went home, as neither of them could think of a professional excuse for Zane Bellamy, Fashion Designer, staying overnight in her apartment. He did promise to come help the kids sew the bunnies, and Vicki, thinking ahead, got out all of the dress designs they'd done early in the year, with the intention of passing them out to the artists first thing in the morning. The kids would want to show them off, if Zane actually dropped by.

To her surprise, he was there at ten, just as he'd promised. Her heart knocked around in her chest a bit as he tapped on the door and waited in its frame for Vicki to beckon him in. He was, as always, dressed flawlessly. She watched several of the students respond on an instinctive level: there really was something about a sharp-dressed man, even if the kids didn't have any technical fashion knowledge. "Class, this is Zane Bellamy. Mr. Bellamy, this is my first grade class this year.

They're the ones who encouraged me to enter the Starlight ballgown contest.”

Zane grinned at the little faces gazing up at him, and visibly—to Vicki, anyway—tried to hide his amusement at the ones who were obviously in awe, and the smaller handful that were thoughtfully critical in their expressions. Noah Brannigan, of *course*, was one of the latter, as if an internationally renowned fashion designer had to meet up to his personal standards. Vicki wondered whether Zane would pass muster.

Michaela, the little girl who'd drawn the formal “ball suit,” raised her hand. Zane flickered a glance at Vicki, making sure it was all right to call on her, and Vicki nodded, saying, “Go ahead, Michaela.”

“Are you making Ms. Hawthorne a dress or a ball suit? I don't like dresses.” This was delivered with an air of authority, or perhaps even warning.

“I've designed several...” Zane was trying really hard not to grin, and not quite succeeding. “Several ‘ball suits’ for women like you who don't like dresses very much, but in this case, I'm designing a dress for Ms. Hawthorne. She told me you all had designed some clothes, too. I was hoping I could see them.”

Pandemonium erupted. Most of the class jumped to their feet, swarming Zane with their art waving in the air and their voices lifted, each of them trying to be heard over the others. It took several minutes to get them back into their seats, although Zane helped considerably by going and standing next to one of the desks and repeating, “I'd like to see the drawing the person who sits at *this* desk did, as soon as they're sitting in it again!” at loud intervals.

He took a minute with each kid and each drawing, making a fuss over some detail or color they used, until there was a class full of beaming children and a teacher who was convinced all over again that Zane Bellamy was the most attractive man imaginable. He even went back to one child, a shy boy with a studious nature and considerable artistic talent,

and tapped on his creation. “Keep drawing,” he told the boy. “Keep designing. And call me in fifteen years.”

The little boy—Mohammad—beamed and nodded. Zane went back to the front of the class, grinning at all the kids. “*All* of you keep doing art. It could take you places you’d never imagine. Now, I know your teacher has some sewing planned next. I do a lot of sewing myself, so I was hoping I could help out...”

The rest of the day was spent making little stuffed rabbits with varying degrees of success. Zane finished his almost literally in seconds, and alternated between making it increasingly impressive and helping kids who were struggling. Eventually everybody had a bunny, and as Vicki went around the class admiring their work, she realized Zane had added a little unique something to each of them, and had helped all the kids embroider their own initials beside his into the bunny tails.

“Good grief,” she said when the kids had said goodbye to their special guest and gone out for recess, “you made all of those Zane Bellamy originals. If they hold onto them, they could be worth a fortune.”

“What do you mean, if they hold on to them? They could sell them *now* for a fortune.” Zane tossed his hair arrogantly, although Vicki suspected he was probably right. “It was fun,” he added. “I haven’t spent much time around kids since I was in school. I forgot how naturally creative they are.”

“It’s impossible to get tired of that,” Vicki said happily. “Even when they drive you absolutely bonkers, one of them will do something so charming that you momentarily forget that you wanted to walk off the job. Thank you. This has been a wonderful treat. You’d better get out of here before they come back, though, or you’ll be stuck here the rest of the afternoon.”

“Dinner tonight?” Zane asked hopefully.

“I don’t know. Are your paparazzi going to follow us around and take pictures?” A few of the reporters and photographers had come back to Virtue when it became clear

Zane was setting up shop there for a little while, and it was strange to have such unfamiliar, *investigative* faces in town.

Zane made a face. “Probably. But I suppose they can’t make a fairytale romance out of us if we don’t go around being romantic in public.”

“Well, in that case, dinner tonight. You could even meet me after school and carry my books home.”

“Do kids still do that?” Zane laughed, looked around, and stole a kiss. “After school, then. See you in a while.” He slipped out, and Vicki spent the rest of the day smiling in anticipation of getting off work.

A great deal of snow had melted when she left that afternoon, winter wonderland dissolving into mud and slush. As long as it didn’t get cold again, that was okay, but late March in upstate New York could bring all kinds of unexpected weather. Vicki, like the kids from her class walking ahead of her, kicked a trail through the slush until her shoes were soaked, and only after the fact realized that was a bad idea. Zane came up to her as she was staring at her feet in dismay, and joined her in the activity. “What happened?”

“I forgot I wasn’t six and had to wash my own socks.”

Zane burst out laughing. Vicki looked up at him as he tried to recover himself, got a glimpse of her expression, and laughed even harder. “Sorry. Sorry! I just didn’t expect that answer!”

“Truth before pride,” Vicki said ruefully. “Honestly, it just looked like fun so I started doing it too and now my feet are soaking.”

“That’s the most wonderful thing I’ve ever heard.” Zane, still laughing, offered his elbow. “All I can tell you as a saving grace is that the town council has apparently forbidden the paparazzi from coming near the school, so your drenched sneakers may not go down in internet history as a new fashion look.”

“Oh, well, that’s something. In that case, want to sneak around the block and get a coffee?”

“I can’t make any promises about who’s lurking around the block, but if you don’t mind that, absolutely.” Zane’s voice dropped. “After that, maybe we can stop by my studio for some more measurements.”

Vicki’s core went liquid with anticipation. “I’d like that. Although I’m really just wearing jeans and a t-shirt today.”

Zane, nearly purring, said, “There may be a few more costume pieces waiting for us at the studio,” and Vicki blushed crimson as she got even hotter. She tried to ask ‘how?’ but the word only came out as a squeak. Zane evidently understood, though, as his smile turned soft and wicked. “I’m a tailor, Victoria, and I’m still waiting on the fabric for your dress. I had to do *something* with my time.”

Vicki, completely breathless, said, “You *made* me an outfit? Today? While I was at work and you weren’t there with me?”

“It’s a very small outfit,” Zane promised.

Vicki said, “Oh my God,” in anticipation. “Maybe we should skip the coffee.”

“Maybe we should.” He tucked his arm around her waist, nestling her close, and they took the slushy corner toward the town square at pretty high speed, shouting with apologetic laughter as they nearly ran into someone. Zane, making sure Vicki was steady on her feet, stepped away to say, “Sorry, sorry,” to the man. “We really weren’t looking where we were going.”

“*Zane.*” The single word was filled with so much venom that Vicki instinctively stepped back, and then, as she realized they’d run into Arthur Lowell, stepped forward again with a fierce protective impulse.

Zane, at her side, drew himself up carefully, squaring his shoulders like he was putting on armor. “Hi, Dad. Sorry. I didn’t see you there.” He sounded stiff and angry, unlike Vicki had ever heard him. “Are you all right?”

“You didn’t see me here,” his father sneered. “Too high and mighty for the town you came from now, is that it? Look

what you're doing to Virtue, you glory-hogging f—"

Vicki snarled, "Hey," and Arthur Lowell turned a momentary blank look on her, obviously not knowing who she was for a few seconds before his expression turned even uglier.

"Oh, the outsider. Making things worse right along with my useless son. With people like you in this town it's a wonder it hasn't all gone to hell. But we know. The Council of Elders know. We're not going to let you—"

"The Council of *Elders*?" Vicki breathed. "Are you leftover French nobility?"

For a heartbeat, Arthur Lowell was off his game, the blank look returning as he stared at her. Vicki, seizing the opportunity, put on her very best bright, cheery first grade teacher voice. "The Council of Ancients was part of the French legislature during the later half of the French Revolution, and as you might guess from their name, they all had to be," she took a breath so she could properly emphasize the word, "*old*."

Lowell spluttered and Vicki plastered on a big fake grin to go with her super cheery voice. "They had no useful power," she went on, "except accepting or rejecting laws put forth by the lower house, which was *full of people who actually knew what was going on*. So whatever's got your panties in a twist, Mr. Lowell, maybe you should step back and—"

"How *dare* you!" Lowell found his voice again and surged forward, visibly startled to crash into his son, who put himself between them. "Get out of my way!"

"I don't think so," Zane said in a low, calm voice. "You're a bully, Dad, and I'm not going to let you bully Ms. Hawthorne. Whatever issues you have with me, or even with Virtue, we can discuss those, but you'll leave her alone."

"Who do you think you are?" Lowell switched targets effortlessly, contempt dripping from the question. "You abandoned this town, your family, your heritage, everything that ever mattered, for what? For *fashion*?"

“For freedom,” Zane said, so sharply and with such passion that it briefly silenced his father again. “For getting out from under your thumb. Know what I found out by coming back here, Dad? That actually, Virtue’s not a bad town. It’s just that it’s got you in it. That’s all that’s really wrong with it. We’ve gotten along just fine without speaking for twenty years. Why don’t we just pretend this never happened, and go along with our lives?”

A crowd hadn’t exactly gathered, but there were quite a few people around the square who were not going about with their lives at the moment. Vicki had the sense that half of Virtue had been waiting for this moment since Zane had arrived back in Virtue, and nobody was willing to miss it. Part of her wanted to point out the audience, because she was sure Zane wouldn’t care but Arthur Lowell, who apparently held his place in town as a point of pride, might.

On the other hand, if anybody in Virtue liked him, maybe watching him make an ass of himself in the public square would help set them to rights, so Vicki decided to keep her mouth shut and let the men sort things out themselves.

“You are back in my town, and you’ll do as I say, boy,” Lowell growled. Vicki’s eyebrows shot up, but Zane just looked down at his father—he was a good three inches taller—and after a moment, shook his head.

“I haven’t done what you said since you left Mom when I was seven. I don’t know why you imagine I’d start now.”

“For the good of the town,” Arthur snarled. “There’s a referendum coming up and in order to protect this town it needs the support of all the old Virtue families. I expect your vote to align with mine.”

Zane paused a few seconds, taking that in, and then, in a pleasantly neutral tone, said, “Sure, Dad. I’ll check the town hall’s bulletin board for when the meeting is. Ms. Hawthorne, I apologize for this unpleasantness. Why don’t we go ahead and go back to the studio to continue our discussions?”

A look of genuine satisfaction settled into the lines of Lowell’s angry face. Vicki thought he was either so convinced

of his superiority and rightness that he couldn't imagine someone just agreeing to end the conversation, or...not terribly bright. Either way, she murmured, "Yes, of course," to Zane, and put her hand back into the crook of his elbow so they could walk past Lowell together.

All of a sudden everybody who'd been watching was in motion again, too, although from the corner of her eye Vicki could see them making beelines for each other, clearly so they could discuss what they'd just seen, and get the details if they'd been too far away to overhear it. Zane escorted Vicki down the sidewalk, neither of them looking back, and they walked up the steps to his temporary studio like nothing was wrong.

Once on the other side of the door, though, Zane simply slid down it and folded his hands behind his neck, forehead on his knees. Vicki dropped to her knees beside him, putting an arm around his shoulders and pulling him a little closer so she could press her mouth against his hair and wait for him to be ready to speak.

When he did, it was to say, "Are you all right?" in a low voice. "I'm really sorry about that."

She murmured, "I'm fine," into his hair. "I was about ready to throw down with him on your behalf, but no, I'm fine, and you handled that as well as you possibly could have, I think. You didn't give him much to fight with."

He breathed a short, hard laugh, then lifted his head with an equally hard little grin. "What was that about the French Revolution? That was amazing. How did you know that?"

"The Council of Ancients. They weren't even really that old. You had to be over forty, I think, to hold a position, but that wasn't sticking him where it hurt. I don't know, I was looking up some craft thing for the kids and went down a rabbit hole that ended in the French Revolution, and that stuck."

Zane thumped his head back against the door, eyes closed. "I'm afraid to ask what kind of craft project led you to the French Revolution. It was great, though. Virtue's Council of

Elders is a real thing, though. Or it was, like actual hundreds of years ago. As far as I know it hasn't been invoked in decades, at least. It *is* meant to protect the city, on the assumption that the wisdom of the elders will guide us through times when we might be in danger of being exposed. But..." He rubbed a hand across his forehead and opened his eyes, staring sightlessly across the room. "Those assumptions were made most of four hundred years ago. They had no idea what was coming. You can't just...pretend the world away. I think my father really believes you can, though."

"Your father," Vicki said after a measured moment, "is a real jackass."

"Wolf's ass, technically." Zane gave her a brief smile. "Yeah, he is. There are some other elders—David Whelan's one—who are less isolationist, but there are always factions, even in small towns. Sarah was telling me a little about what they're trying to do...I should text her and find out more. She said she'd learned a bunch of things about the town that she hadn't known, or rather, that I think even a lot of the shifters here don't know. Things she thought were important for bringing Virtue into the future without breaking it. I should talk to her more and find out what exactly she's talking about, because I'm sure that's what Dad is so pissed off at."

"Why don't we ask her to come over and tell us?" Vicki suggested softly. "Or we could go to the library."

Zane smiled again, wanly. "That wasn't exactly the evening I had in mind."

She grinned. "No, me either, but it's only late afternoon now. There's still time for...what *did* you sew?"

"Oh." Zane brightened at the reminder and pointed with his chin toward the back of the studio. "Why don't you go look?"

Vicki, amused, went to open a store room door at the back of the shop, taking half a beat to notice it had been outfitted with mirrors, a changing area, and a dais for a model to stand on. But *much* more importantly, a...police woman's uniform hung on the inside of the door. Most of a police woman's

uniform. Well, maybe *part* of a police uniform. A little tiny blue jacket with brass buttons that had long sleeves but would barely cover the breasts, and a dark blue pleated skirt that was barely wider than her hand. It would have to be worn precariously low on the hips to have a hope of covering *anything*. She made a small sound, and Zane, who had come into the changing room behind her, slid his arms around her and down her belly toward the heat sizzling between her thighs.

“I’m going to make you another one,” he murmured. “Appropriate for school wear, so you can look prim and proper and so, so naughty all at once. But this, well. I thought we could just go straight for naughty.”

Vicki turned around in his arms and said, emphatically, “I think we should go to the library *later*.”

CHAPTER 16



They made it to the library before it closed, but only just.

Zane, in fact, had to run ahead as the second librarian—Pam, he thought her name was—was about to lock up, and blurt, “Sorry, can I talk to Sarah? She’ll want to let me in.”

Pam eyed him momentarily, then shrugged elaborately, as if to say *on your head be it*, and Zane held the door for Vicki as she hurried to catch up. They exchanged a sheepish glance, both fully aware they *could* have gotten to the library in a more timely fashion, and slipped inside to a mostly-dark, mostly-quiet space of comfort and familiarity.

Sarah and a good-looking man around her own age were working behind the library desk, clearly tidying things up before leaving for the night. They both glanced up, and Sarah’s expression brightened as she realized Zane was with Vicki. “Oh, yay! You two talked? That’s amazing! Congratulations! Are we going on a double date or something?”

Vicki breathed, “Wow, that’s fast moving even for small town gossip,” as Zane chuckled.

“No, no dating. Hi,” he said to the man. “Zane Bellamy. This is Victo—”

“I know Matt,” Vicki said dryly. “Matthew Rojas, this is—”

“Zane Bellamy,” Matthew agreed. “Sarah’s told me about you. Good to finally put a face with the name, and yes, I know

that doesn't work so well for you, so I won't be offended if we run into each other later and you can't figure out who I am."

Zane, genuinely grateful, said, "Nice to meet you too, and thanks. No, sorry, not here for a date, Sarah. I ran into my dad this afternoon and I wanted to ask you what exactly is going on around here that he's so uptight about."

"I mean, it's your dad," Sarah said with a dramatic eye-roll. "What isn't he uptight about? No, come on and sit down, though, I'll fill you in. Can I get you coffee? Water? Soda? Just don't tell the kids I've let you have a drink in the library..." She went off to get water, which was all anybody asked for, and Matthew led them to one of the big tables near the back of the library. He was handsome, with huge dark brown eyes, and had a casual personal style that made Sarah's retro look stand out even more. Zane figured she probably loved that.

Sarah rejoined them with a, "Okay, tell me what your dad's trying to pull so I can be efficient about what I tell you," as she sat.

"He's talking about the Council of Elders, which..." Zane grimaced. "I don't know if you even know about that. It's shifter stuff."

"Is that in the charter?" Sarah asked Matthew, who shook his head. "Yeah, no, I didn't think so. Hit me with it, because...well, we've been reading up on as much Virtue history as we can, but even the secret town meeting notes don't cover everything. But the Council of Elders sounds like something Wallace Evans would be involved in."

"The secret..." Zane took a few seconds with that, then switched to trying to remember Wallace Evans. "The weird old man in the woods? Is he even still alive? He must be ancient!"

"Oh, you have no idea. But yes, he's alive. He's been protecting Virtue for a long, long time—do you know Helen? She lives in the woods, too, an old Native woman, and she's all tied up in the charter and the history and...no," Sarah said firmly to herself. "Focus. There's way too much to explain otherwise. Tell me about this council thing."

“You know the old shifter families here hold a lot of power,” Zane said cautiously. At Sarah’s nod, he found himself also looking for the quickest way to explain things, and landed on, “The Council is—or was—made up of the oldest people from those families. The Barlows, the Hartnells, my family, um.” He closed his eyes, trying to remember other names, then shrugged it off. “Anyway, the founding families. They used to guide the town council in times of crisis, or that’s what my father said. He’s actually the only person I’ve ever heard talk about it, and it hasn’t been convened in his lifetime, I don’t think, or not since he was young, anyway. He thinks he can use it to stop...” Zane waved a hand. “Whatever you’re doing? And he wants me to support him. What *are* you doing?”

Sarah sighed explosively and gestured to Matthew, who exhaled almost as heavily. “We’re trying to maintain Virtue as a shifter sanctuary town that can also survive the modern world. Which does *not* mean selling out to developers, but it also means not trying to pretend we can live in the past. I told you about the upcoming state proposal to re-open the northern train line, for example. It used to come right through Virtue, but it closed down decades ago. Your dad and a few of the other older families think we should fight it tooth and nail, but...”

“But Virtue, like everywhere, has a responsibility to the future of the world as much as to itself and the shifters here,” Sarah said passionately. “We need more rail lines and easily accessible mass transit. Which would you rather have, hundreds of cars driving into Virtue for the holiday market, or people being able to take the train and not have to worry about parking or pollution? Because they come for the market, and the fair, and for a dozen other things over the year anyway, whether Arthur Lowell and his ilk like it or not. There’s a town council meeting next week to discuss the rail line, and I don’t know which way the vote is going to go.”

“That must be what your father wants your support on,” Vicki said to Zane. “He wants you to help him shut down the rail line development.”

“Mnnngh.” Sarah wobbled her hand. “Maybe. Arthur—oh.” She sagged as understanding seemed to wash over her, and then nodded. “Yeah, okay, look, um, I’ll explain all the details later, but the super short version is that last year Matthew and I found Virtue’s original town charter, and ended up with the responsibility of protecting the town and its shifters, all right?”

Zane opened his mouth, considered, and closed it again. “Okay. That sounds fascinating and I *am* going to want the details later, but I’m going to assume you’re going somewhere with choosing now to tell us this, so let’s go there.”

“Right. Thank you. I’m not a shifter, and Matthew is new to Virtue. We’re not exactly the blue blood your father thinks should be in charge of anything here, much less protecting the town in general. I mean, the man wants to build a wall around Virtue. Not quite literally, although I think he would if he could. He wants to throw everybody who isn’t a shifter out, which frankly goes to show the dangers of inbreeding already, so how does he think that’ll work out in the long run.”

Zane tried not to laugh, and said, “A lot of the old families are pretty closely linked through marriage now,” to Vicki, who made a delicate face, and to Sarah, said, “So...?”

“So the rail line is a controversial point already,” Sarah said. “The town’s divided over it. I’m guessing that your dad thinks he can use this ‘Council of Elders’ thing to sway people against it, but even more, I bet he’s hoping he can get that council to agree Matthew and I aren’t the right sorts to be Virtue’s protectors.”

“Is that something he can do?” Vicki asked.

“I’m not sure,” Matthew admitted. “The passing of the torch from the last protector to us, it was—I’d say it was binding. Magical, even. But I also don’t know that it can’t be taken from us. It was willingly given, but that doesn’t mean it can’t be taken by force.” He shrugged and offered a crooked smile. “I have no idea. I don’t know anything about magic.”

Vicki and Sarah both burst out laughing. “No,” Sarah said to Vicki, “he just *is* magic.”

“Exactly!” Vicki agreed. “But okay, let’s take that at face value. You don’t know anything about magic. Does anybody else?”

Sarah and Matthew exchanged glances. “Wallace, obviously,” Matthew said.

“Never mind *Wallace*,” Sarah said. “*Helen*.”

“You really think she’ll show up again?”

“No.” Sarah laughed, glanced at Zane and Vicki’s expressions, and laughed again. “Sorry. I mentioned her a few minutes ago, the old, *old* Native woman who lives in the woods. Except I legitimately think you can only find her if she wants you to. Wallace is more...normal.”

“Wallace Evans has been a weird old man for my entire life,” Zane said disbelievingly. “I don’t see how you can call him normal.”

Sarah gave a high laugh. “No, but he’s closer than Helen is. Tell you what, I’ll see if I can scare him up and see what he knows about the Council of Elders, and whether they *can* take the charter from us, and...stuff.”

Matthew’s eyebrows furled in thought. “They probably can. Helen said she’d stolen it from people who wanted to use it to their own ends.”

“But that wasn’t the *charter-charter*,” Sarah pointed out, and for a moment or two they mumbled at each other, nearly speaking a language of their own while Zane and Vicki blinked curiously at them. “Never mind,” Sarah said after a minute, firmly. “We’d have to go out for a drink for me to explain all the details, and three of us have to be at work in the morning.”

“I have to be at work,” Zane protested. “But—shouldn’t I go talk to Old Man Evans, if somebody needs to? I’m technically a Lowell, at least.” He made a face. “Technically.”

Sarah made a noise that suggested she was afraid she might give offense, but she went ahead and said, “You’re technically a Lowell, but you haven’t been part of the Virtue community for the past twenty years or so, Zee. Right now

you're kind of more of an outsider than either Matthew *or* I am, and we already have a rapport with him.”

Matthew snorted. “I think ‘rapport’ is a dramatic overstatement. I’m not sure anybody can have a rapport with Mr. Evans.”

“All right, fine, but it’s more than Zane’s got,” Sarah pointed out. “Besides, you have a dress to make, Zee. How’s it going?”

“It’s going to be *beautiful*,” Vicki said happily. “And that’s all I’m going to tell you. You’ll have to wait and see.”

“Hmph. What good is it being the designer’s best friend twenty years ago if I can’t get sneak peeks now?”

“Absolutely none,” Zane told her, and Sarah laughed.

“Yeah, that’s fair. All right, you crazy kids, it’s time for you to get out of here. I want to finish locking up and go home.” She stood to offer both Vicki and Zane hugs, while Matthew shook Zane’s hand and smiled at Vicki. A few minutes later Zane and Vicki were out of the library and walking toward the town square, both thoughtfully quiet until they both started talking at once.

“Go ahead,” Zane said, more curious about her thoughts than sharing his own.

“I’m beginning to feel more like I belong in this town,” Vicki said as if it surprised her. “Or at least, to understand why I felt like I didn’t. I’ve been doing long-term substitute teaching since I got my teaching certificate, so I’m always on the move, and I know that’s not a great way to put down roots, but I haven’t been looking to. That said, there’s usually a broader sense of community that I fit into. And I’ve found some of that at the school, of course. Connie, and the other teachers. They’re great. But beyond that...I know peoples’ names, and we’re friendly, but it feels really on-the-surface. It makes more sense now.”

“May I ask you something?”

She looked startled, and smiled. “Of course.”

“Well, speaking of roots and community...I feel like I’m getting to know now-you pretty well. But I don’t know much about past-you, and...I’d like to.” An unexpected sting of shyness ran through Zane, as if he wasn’t sure he had the right to ask.

“Oh.” Another expression of surprise crossed Vicki’s face. “Oh, yeah, sure. I kind of do the rolling stone gathers no moss thing, I guess, maybe even in talking about where I used to live and stuff. I’m actually from Los Angeles.”

“What!” Zane’s voice rose and cracked, then turned to laughter. “Are you serious?”

“Completely! What, you think all this blonde hair came from a bottle and not the natural West Coast sunshine? Yeah, I was born in Pasadena, but my parents got divorced when I was really little, and my mom married my stepdad, who’s British, when I was eight. We moved to the UK, and—” She dropped into a suddenly posh British accent— “I went to school there, but honestly I never got used to the rain, so I came back to the States for college.”

“In California?” Zane asked, fascinated. “Don’t tell me we were going to school alongside each other and I just missed you for five years.”

“Three,” Vicki said cheerfully, and back in her American accent. “I finished my undergrad degree in three years out of some misguided sense of urgency. If I had it to do over again, I’d relax a lot more. But then I started taking teaching jobs wherever one cropped up, so I could see the States and decide where I wanted to settle. So far I’ve worked in Montana, Washington, Alabama, Oregon, Alaska—”

“No way.”

“Yeah. It was beautiful, but the darkness got to me. I was living in North Pole, and it’s dark like twenty hours a day in the winter up there. Too much dark. On the other hand, it’s light *all* summer long, which is incredible. Just not worth the dark, for me. Um, then I went to Georgia, and...you get the idea. All over. I’m going to have to make a decision soon, though, or I’ll never be anywhere long enough to get a decent

retirement.” She tilted her head as they reached the town square. “Should we get dinner somewhere? The Italian Place, or there’s a little noodle shop that opened up recently...”

“Noodles sound good.”

They turned that direction, while Vicki continued talking about her adult life of living all over the place, and her next job, which was down in Boston. “Although, I don’t know, now that I know about Virtue’s secrets I’m a little more tempted to stay. It’s a little like a fairy tale, isn’t it? And there must be kids who need teachers who know the truth. Not that I know who else knows, so how would I go to the administration and say ‘Hey, you know that secret Virtue is keeping? Well, I know it, so I can help out.’ If I talked to the wrong person, they’d think I was nuts!”

“Sarah will have some idea of who knows and who doesn’t. And Mabs Brannigan might, too.”

Vicki’s eyebrows lifted. “Mabs? Noah’s mom? She’s a shifter?”

“No, but her husband Jake is. I knew him when I was a kid. I suppose that might mean their son is, too.”

“No, Noah is Mabs’s son, not Jake’s. So...it, er, breeds true? Being a shifter?”

“Usually. More often with fated mates, I think, but usually.” They went into the warm, delicious-smelling noodle house, and without discussing it, changed the subject. By the time they were finished eating, Vicki’s eyelids were drooping, and Zane couldn’t help smiling.

“Let me call you a taxi home,” he offered. “You’ve got an early morning, and if I come over to your apartment, you won’t get to sleep until very, very late.”

She said, “Mmm,” happily. “Promises, promises. But no, you’re right. So I’ll see you tomorrow for more, ah, measurements?”

Zane grinned. “As many as you could possibly need.”

CHAPTER 17



Zane had a celebrity in his studio the next day when Vicki arrived after school. She could tell because of the gigantic limousine stretched in front of his store front, and the two very large burly guys who were obviously somebody's protective detail standing on the front stoop. They both had that kind of bored-but-alert look she'd seen of bodyguards in paparazzi, and despite her curiosity about who had come to see Zane, Vicki took a minute to look around Virtue's town square.

There were a bunch of inquisitive kids, obviously. Some of them were clearly playing Bodyguard themselves, standing around looking super serious and swole until the giggles got them and they had to run around laughing. Most of the adults, though, were passing by with curious glances, some judgy looks, and no further interest. Maybe living in a town full of shifters had taught them to mind their own business.

Actually, since that had been exactly what Vicki was complaining about to Zane—the odd lack of community—she thought that might really be true. It was good for the famous, though. People sometimes needed to be treated more or less like everybody else, or they'd lose their minds.

Which was why Vicki hesitated on the sidewalk. She was invited to Zane's studio (although they clearly wouldn't be doing any 'measuring' right now), but it wouldn't be appropriate to just walk in on him and his client. She should probably go get some coffee.

Instead, one of the very large men, who had been observing her hesitancy, said, “Can I help you, Miss?”

“Um, yeah, no, I’m Zane’s...” *Girlfriend*, Vicki thought, but didn’t say. They hadn’t discussed anything as formal as girlfriend or boyfriend titles, and bang-buddy was beneath her willingness to say. After a brief pause, she started over with, “Mr. Bellamy is designing a dress for me.”

The other extremely large man, without changing expression, lifted his wrist to his mouth and spoke into it in such a low rumble Vicki wasn’t sure she even *could* understand what he was saying. She hadn’t known people could speak in subsonic tones. He waited a moment, head tilted slightly to one side, and then in a voice that lifted hairs on Vicki’s nape, said, “If you could wait a few more minutes, our client would appreciate it.”

“Yeah, of course! I’ll go grab a cup of coffee.” Vicki’s eyebrows crinkled. “Can I get you guys something? Are you allowed?”

Mr. Deep Rumble cracked the tiniest bit of a smile. “We’re not Beefeaters. We’re allowed. A small single shot caramel latte, please.”

“I’m a Beefeater at heart,” the other guy said, now in a passable British accent. “Tea for me.”

Vicki laughed. “All right. Can I get your client anything, while I’m at it? Not for me to bring in,” she added. “Just so they have something to warm them up.”

The bodyguards exchanged glances before Rumble said, “Red berry tea,” as if he might be divulging a state secret. Vicki suspected that it might be enough to tip off a fan to who the celebrity behind closed doors was, but she knew exactly one celebrity’s favorite drink, and it was not red berry tea, so Benton “my friends call me Ben” Sinclair was not in Zane’s studio just then.

“One red berry tea, one regular tea, and one small single shot caramel latte. Gotcha. Back in a few.” She bounced off to Imelda’s doughnut shop feeling pretty cheerful about things,

and got back just in time for the limo door to close behind someone, and to hand over three drinks in a carrier to the bodyguards. “Drive carefully!”

Rumble said, “Thank you,” in a tone that suggested the bodyguards weren’t used to being noticed, much less treated like people, and Vicki bopped up the steps to Zane’s studio with the last two drinks balanced in their carrier.

“Vicki’s coffee delivery service—whoa.” Vicki stopped as the door swung closed behind her, and gawked around the studio wide-eyed.

A fabric tornado had hit the place. Or maybe a fabric landslide, followed by a tornado. Something that first dropped a lot of fabric in the workspace, then flung it all over the place, wildly. There were bolts of beautifully colored silks and velvets, acres of delicate netting-like fabric—Vicki suddenly realized she knew absolutely nothing about what any fabrics were actually called—scraps everywhere, and Zane draped dramatically in a chair in the midst of the chaos.

Vicki, cautiously, said, “What, ah...what happened?”

“The creative process,” Zane said theatrically. He rose, murmured a blessing for the coffee, and pulled Vicki in for a rueful hug. “Seriously, this is what my workshop usually looks like. Controlled disaster.”

“This is controlled?” she asked dubiously.

“Oh, yeah. I still know where everything is, and we have a plan of sorts.” Zane took a sip of coffee, which, from his grimace, was still very hot. “I also have a full agenda of clients driving—or sometimes flying—up to Virtue over the next three weeks. I have no idea how Dion talked them into it, but I think my father may straight-up murder me. Talk about putting my home town on the map.”

“But the ball is in a month,” Vicki said in a little dismay. “How are you supposed to get my dress done with all those clients coming up?”

“Most of their work will be done by my team in Los Angeles,” Zane promised. “A Zane Bellamy design doesn’t

mean Zane Bellamy sews it all. It means his company does. *Your* gown, however, I intend to sew myself. Come on, this is the fabric I'm thinking of." He put his coffee aside, and then put hers aside too, which Vicki thought was fair. The fabric filling his studio all cost a great deal more than a cup of coffee did, and she dreaded the idea of ruining any of it.

Together they went through the fabrics, Vicki mostly running her hands over them gently and sighing at the soft swishy hiss or plushy napes. "I don't know how you decide which ones to use. I want all of them."

"They don't all go together," he said in a slightly stern tone that made her laugh. "See, for this, for the skirt, I'm thinking of pleating it..."

For the next hour he talked her through design and dressmaking, all the while flinging stretches of fabric around, showing her how they moved and flowed, pulling them under different lights to compare their reflectiveness, until Vicki, laughing, said, "Now I understand how the tornado hit. Tornado Zane. I can't wait to see what you do with it," she said happily. "But should I just drop by after school tomorrow, or wait until you text? Because if you've got a bunch of Hollywood stars in here, well, I'm not buying coffee for all their entourages."

"Maybe wait until I text," he admitted. "Although the hours I'm keeping will be all over the place, because some people are coming in between shoots so will be here in the middle of the night. No, it's not normal," he said to her expression. "But I'm not normally in small town New York, either. And sometimes," he added solemnly, "there *is* a fashion emergency."

"What on earth constitutes a fashion emergency?"

"A dress doesn't fit, a designer doesn't come through, there's sudden political pressure over something someone said or did, a hundred things that can lead to suddenly finding yourself twelve hours out from a huge event without a dress. There have been entire scandals over people wearing similar dresses. And also over them *not* wearing similar dresses."

“How can you have a scandal for wearing the same dress *and* not wearing the same dress?”

“Welcome to the fashion industry,” Zane replied solemnly, then made a little face. “I knew there would be people coming in, but I didn’t expect them to start showing up this fast. Dion may do his work too well, sometimes. So I’m sorry in advance that I’m going to be busy.”

“Well, it’s all right. It is your job. It’s not like I’m blowing mine off to come spend time with you.”

“Huh. I guess not. And why not, young lady?” Zane pulled her close again, and for a breathless little while, Vicki forgot about her job, his job, and the world in general. They ordered dinner in at the studio, and reluctantly went their own ways as the evening got later, which set the pattern for the next several days together.

A few of Zane’s famous clients were less standoffish than the first one had been, and one, a young woman with an equally famous boyfriend who were together carrying an entire superhero franchise on their backs, spent half of Saturday afternoon playing with kids in the town square, trading off with each other as Zane worked with them. Vicki thought Noah Brannigan was actually going to explode of joy, and that Arthur Lowell might literally expire of rage.

By the time the next week’s town hall meeting came around, there was a palpable tension in Virtue. Vicki had seen Zane’s father everywhere in the intervening week, stirring up passions, arguing about the dangers of so many strangers, especially famous ones, coming to Virtue and drawing attention to it. Even locals Zane said weren’t shifters were on Arthur’s side, clearly afraid their small town was going to be overrun by—

“What,” Zane had asked impatiently at one point, “impossibly attractive human beings? Film studios? Tourists hoping to catch a glimpse of the rich and famous? I’m only going to *be* here a few weeks, and all the interest will die down.”

Vicki had been trying not to think about that. The Starlight ball was at the end of the month down in the city, and after that...

...well, after that, the only reason Zane had to stick around Virtue was her, and even she knew that wasn't practical. Given that his clients *were* coming to see him suggested he *could* run his business out of his home town, but the reality was, he was a fashion designer for film stars and other celebrities. The closest he would possibly settle, realistically, would be the city, and even that would mean upending his entire business and moving it across the country. The reality was that he would go back to Los Angeles, and she would stay in Virtue until her contract was over, and then...

...then she didn't know. The part of her that understood about Virtue's secrecy made her want to stay for good. The part of her that would always miss Zane if she stayed, though, seemed much stronger and more powerful. The idea of being where he'd grown up, but hadn't chosen to stay, was just too painful.

They were having a moment, she told herself. An absolutely glorious fairy tale moment, acting on an incredible attraction that neither of them quite believed was *fate*, but which was certainly real and wonderful and all-encompassing. But all fairy tales came to an end, no matter how much Vicki might hope otherwise. She had to be brave and sensible when the time came, because she simply couldn't imagine asking Zane Bellamy to stay in Virtue for her.

Not with his appalling father getting louder and nastier every day. Vicki could almost see people picking sides even before the town council meeting. The discussion about reopening the train line was meant to be the major topic, but Vicki knew it would be masking an entirely different conversation, and she had no idea which way it would go.

Wednesday afternoon before the meeting, an announcement went out that it would be held at the high school gym, as so many people were planning to attend that they wouldn't all fit in the town hall. Sarah, stopping by Zane's shop after the announcement, breathed, "This has never

happened before in the entire history of Virtue. Please tell me it's not going to be a disaster," to the two of them.

Zane, gamely, said, "It's not going to be a disaster," but he didn't sound confident, and Sarah groaned and dropped her head against a table.

"At least we'll look good," Vicki offered.

Sarah, currently dressed in an absolutely fabulous crisp red dress of vintage cut, with a black bolero jacket thrown over it like a reverse matador, lifted her head with a brief, wicked smile. "Well, there is that. Wear your battle colors, kids. We're gonna have a fight on our hands."



THE HIGH SCHOOL gym had a decidedly less friendly atmosphere than it had the last time Vicki had been in there. Everybody had been excited about a local girl winning the local boy's contest, then. Tonight people were almost physically divided, one side of the gym against the other, on the topic of the railroad coming in, and...a lot more besides, Vicki knew.

Arthur Lowell had rounded up a few of the other town elders; she recognized Tom Barlow, who was around Arthur's age, and Michelle Whelan, whose kids were in fourth and sixth grade. They were both from old shifter families, even if Michelle was only in her mid-forties at most. There were a couple of other people with them that Vicki didn't know at all: an older woman with amazing cheekbones, and a slender, handsome old man who looked worn down, as if this was already more than he wanted to deal with. That was, Vicki guessed, Arthur's 'Council of Elders.' From the respectful glances and nods they got, she thought their opinions were going to hold significant sway.

On the other hand, David Whelan, Michelle's father, was chatting with Sarah and Matthew, his back angled to the Elders in a way that suggested he was strongly Not With Them. A number of other prominent townspeople, including Judge Owens and Sheriff Brown, were on that side of the divide. Vicki breathed, "This is going to be like the shootout at the

O.K. Corral,” and Zane, next to her, gave an uncomfortable laugh. After a few seconds, she realized he probably didn’t have a *clue* who was who, or on what side, so she gave him a rundown, and watched relief and gratitude come into his eyes.

“There’s too many people,” he said quietly. “If there aren’t too many I can sometimes figure them out from context or their clothes or their voices, but...” He shook his head. “Thanks.”

“Sure. Look, I’m nobody here, but you better go take your side. On the left,” she told him, mostly teasing. “Sarah’s over on the left.”

He gave her a dry look. “Thanks, yeah, even in a crowd I *am* able to identify the person in vintage polka dots and a bateau neck.”

Vicki called, “I have *no idea* what a bateau neck is!” after him, although she assumed it was the correct, or at least fancy, name for a boat neckline, which was what Sarah’s dress had.

He shot a grin over his shoulder at her, then was suddenly part of Sarah’s team, his tall, well-built and *incredibly* well-dressed form bringing a certain seriousness to their side of the argument. Arthur saw him joining that side and his face went florid with rage. He actually broke away from the Elders, clearly intending to go yell at Zane and possibly drag him where he thought he belonged. Tom Barlow, who was older, in better shape, and generally more dignified, brought him up with a sharp word. Rage flashed over Arthur’s expression, but he didn’t make any more of a fuss, at least not then.

Vicki took a seat on the bleachers with other teachers, including Sondra and Carol, both of whom immediately nudged her and demanded to know all the details. When Vicki protested innocent, Sondra snorted. “You’ve been spending a *lot* of time with Zane Bellamy, Vicki. What’s the story?”

“He’s making my dress!”

Carol said, “Uh *huh*,” but someone called the meeting to order then, and the crowd mostly settled into attentive quietness.

The return of the train line *was*, technically, the topic at hand. It was also very, very clear to Vicki that the arguments both for and against were really about so much more. Arthur Lowell introduced the entire ‘Council of Elders’ individually just to make sure everybody understood they were old Virtue families and to be taken seriously before talking endlessly about tradition, safety, and protecting what Virtue had. He was asked twice to wrap it up, as he only had ten minutes to speak and talked for at least twenty, and Vicki felt the people around her growing restless.

Of course, she was sitting on the ‘pro train-line’ side of the gym, so she had no sense of how Lowell’s target audience was responding. When Lowell finally finished to a smattering of applause, Zane, gave Sarah a brief glance, then Vicki, as if her support would bolster him. She gave him an encouraging nod, and he rose to speak just after his father sat down. Arthur Lowell turned deep red with anger again, but Zane, mostly keeping his eyes on Vicki, murmured, “Thank you for letting me speak,” and then took a deep breath and spoke more confidently.

“I haven’t lived in Virtue for a long time, so I recognize my input may not be as valuable as others’ here. But I do want it to be said out loud and clearly that while the Lowells are an old, respected family in Virtue, my father doesn’t speak for me. I disagree with his stance on closing Virtue off, and I know that’s easy to say, as someone who left town a long time ago. But I’ve been back for a few weeks now, and this is a much more vibrant, exciting community than I remember it being when I was a teenager. I just want to encourage the citizens here to look forward and be ambitious in their goals for this town, because as true as it is that you can’t come home again, I have to say, the direction Virtue is taking is a great new version of ‘home’ to come back to.” He hesitated a moment, nodded, and stepped back to considerably more applause than his father had earned.

Both David Whelan, on their side, and his daughter Michelle, on Arthur’s side, stood to present their own arguments, and for an uncomfortable heartbeat, the gathered town got to weather Michelle’s glare of angry betrayal toward

her father. Before either of them could speak, though, the gym doors banged open and an old man Vicki had never seen before stomped in. A murmur of audible surprise ran through the whole audience, and Michelle Whelan's expression danced toward hopeful before settling thoroughly on dismayed when the old man walked up to the microphone and with a gesture, told the Whelans to step back.

Vicki glanced around, both at the other teachers, who looked as astonished as many other people did, and then to Zane, whose jaw was pretty well dropped. Sarah and Matthew were struggling to contain smiles, as if they'd pulled off a coup of some kind.

If the old man—scowly, with wispy white hair and a huge handlebar mustache that ran along the deep lines of his face, and wearing ancient Carharts overalls spattered with mud—was a coup, Vicki had a lot to learn about Virtue. Then he growled, "My name is Wallace Evans," and she realized he *was* a coup. This was the old man Sarah and Matthew had thought could help, and from the rush of astonishment that went around the gym again, she could tell that even though the townsfolk knew who he was, the fact that he was speaking at all was significant.

"I'm older'n all of you," Evans said grumpily. "I'm older than half of you put together, so shut up and listen to me, and that means you, Lowell. You're not wrong that Virtue's got a lot to protect."

A shout of triumph went up from Lowell's faction and was silenced almost immediately by the most threatening growl Vicki had ever heard from a human being. Wallace Evans genuinely looked like he'd bite somebody's face off, given half a chance, and apparently she wasn't the only one who thought so.

"This is a special town," Evans went on. "Always has been. Special places require special protection, and people who've got the right ideas in mind for it. I oughta know. I been watchin' over this place a long time now, and the truth is, I didn't do good enough by it. I did my best, but the world kept changin' and I wasn't ready to deal with that. Might be 'cause

of me that Virtue got as small and small-minded as it did. Might not be, too, I don't know. But I do know these kids here," he waved at Sarah and Matthew, "got nothin' in their hearts but the best for Virtue. You wanna fight with them..."

The old man straightened for the first time, turning to face Lowell's Council of Elders full-on, and it was as if he threw a mantle of power over his shoulders. He practically hummed with strength and resolution. Vicki had never seen anyone wield shifter power like that before, but she was new to all of this.

An awful lot of people in the gym *weren't* new to it, though, and even they—even Lowell's Council—moved uncomfortably, as if they'd never experienced anything like it before, either. Evans met the gazes of the 'Council' one by one, obviously challenging them before speaking clearly. "You wanna fight with them, well, then, I reckon you're gonna fight with me first, and believe me when I say, you don't wanna do *that*. Not even you, Shelly." His voice softened toward sadness with the last words, but they were still implacable. "Do you idiots know what a real Council of Elders needs?"

A murmur of denial went through the gym, although Lowell stood his ground, chin lifted in defiance. Evans shrugged, answering the curious, not the 'Council.' "A real Council of Elders is convened by the people of Virtue. Hasn't happened in generations, but that's what it takes. Not a bunch of trumped-up rich men trying to drag things back to the way they were, but the folks here asking their wisest and most compassionate elders to gather and advise them. The lot of you couldn't be a Council of Elders if you were the last people in Virtue."

He turned away from Lowell's group and scowled hugely at the gym at large. "Trust me, not many folks hate change as much as I do, but it comes anyway. This is a good town. Keep it that way."

He glared around at everybody once more for good measure, then stomped out again, leaving a stunned populace behind him.

CHAPTER 18



Debate went on for hours after Wallace Evans's surprise speech, but from the table where he sat with Sarah and the others, Zane could see that his father's side had lost the moment Evans stomped into the building. A lot of his father's supporters quietly got up and left as the evening progressed, until there were no more people to speak on behalf of keeping Virtue isolated. There would be a referendum for the town to make an official statement on the matter, but Zane felt a little as if hope for the future had won.

That was not a feeling he would have ever imagined experiencing in Virtue. Not with his history here. Not that meeting Vicki—who had waved goodbye as the meeting crawled past eleven at night—didn't count as hope for the future, but that was...

Fate? his wolf asked dryly as Zane began to help clean up after the meeting.

Zane was a little startled by the comment; the wolf had been its usual quiet self for most of his time in Virtue. *Luck*, he replied, although he wasn't entirely sure he was arguing. *Fate is so...big. Luck feels less...I don't know. Good luck happens to people. Even my father would agree with that.*

The wolf gave the sense of really considering that, before eventually saying, *If luck is easier to believe than fate, then we are very lucky to have met...*

"My one true love," Zane said aloud, wryly. The wolf exhaled with satisfaction and retreated, apparently done with

the conversation.

Sarah, who'd overheard him, nudged him as they finished tidying up after the meeting. "You never did like the idea of fate, did you. I guess I know why, now. Your parents weren't fated mates, were they?"

"No, and my father..." Zane gestured at the man across the gym. He was still ranting, furious at being put in his place by Wallace Evans and, in their way, the townspeople. "He didn't believe it was real, although I can't imagine fate being mean enough to saddle somebody with *him*."

"Well, maybe you ought to believe it's real just to spite him. Either way, though, Vicki is great and I hope you two are happy. Have you talked about what happens next? After the ball, I mean?"

"Not even a little bit."

Sarah paused her cleaning efforts and gave him a serious look. "You need to. The ball is in five days, Zee. Is the dress done?"

"Almost. I've got to trim it, but...basically, yes."

"Good. But look, everybody assumes you're going back to LA after the ball, and Vicki isn't going to just assume her way into anything. She's way more likely to assume her way *out* of it. And who could blame her? You're Zane Bellamy, and she's a substitute first grade teacher."

"But that's the problem!" Zane spread his hands. "Even if I moved back to Virtue, she's got another job lined up somewhere else for the fall, and it was obvious from the minute I met her that her job is where her sense of responsibility lies, which is, I mean, of course it is! So she's not going to just walk away from it because I'm crazy about her."

"She might because she's crazy about you, though."

"And what kind of jackass would I be if I asked her to? One like my father. And realistically, my job is big-city-based. Los Angeles, New York, Milan, Paris, London, whatever, but not *Virtue*. Especially because—" He realized his voice had

been rising, and managed to lower it. “Especially because on this one topic, my dad isn’t wrong. It’s *not* safe to be bringing endless numbers of A-listers here, because their fans *will* come, and eventually that’s going to expose Virtue’s shifters. And I’m sorry, Sarah, but I’m not going to come back here and make a living altering dresses and sewing costumes for school plays.”

He sighed hugely and passed a hand over his eyes. “I mean, for one thing, I’m pretty sure that second one is something you do, and I wouldn’t want to put *you* out of a job.”

Sarah laughed, quick and quiet. “I don’t get paid for it, so if you came back and made a job of it, you’d be taking something off my plate. But no, I get it. Which is why you really have to talk to her, Zane.”

“I will,” he promised. “I’ve just got to find the right time. And the right words.”

“Well, don’t put it off too long. Like I said, you’re running short on time. I got lucky with Matt.” She glanced toward her boyfriend, smiling. “We were headed opposite directions, too. He had a dream job lined up down in New York, but he chose to stay here. Maybe you’ll surprise yourself.”

“Maybe.” He didn’t see how he could.

He also didn’t see how he couldn’t. Asking Vicki to uproot her life for him was ridiculous, but uprooting his own was equally insane, and even dangerous for Virtue.

So maybe his wolf was wrong and it *wasn’t* fate. As Vicki herself had pointed out, people did feel instant attraction without fate pushing them around. Maybe the conviction that Vicki was his fated mate when Zane had met her had simply been that kind of attraction, but because he was a shifter and had heard stories of fate all his life, he’d just used those words to describe it.

Or maybe fate didn’t actually promise happily ever after, no matter what the storybooks said.

Zane, with a sigh, finished tidying up, and went back to the B&B.



TO HIS SURPRISE, Dion was waiting up for him in the lobby. His assistant had avoided the debate around Virtue's future, and had pointedly said nothing about Zane getting involved in it. That, judging from the PA's expression as Zane came in, was about to change.

He held up palm up to whatever Dion was about to say, pleading, "Let me get a drink, first," and then did so, raiding the liquor cabinet in the B&B's comfortable parlor. They had some surprisingly good whiskey, which he wouldn't usually indulge in, but between the town council meeting, Sarah's encouragement, and his own doubts, a shot of liquid courage seemed in order.

Dion followed him into the parlor and closed the door, which couldn't possibly be a good sign. Zane poured himself a double, and lifted the bottle toward Dion in question. "You know, I think I will," Dion murmured.

This was going to be *very* bad, then. Zane poured a second drink, gestured to the couch, and handed it to Dion when he sat down. He swallowed most of his own in a single burning gulp, grimaced, and sat himself. "All right, hit me with it."

"I'm thinking of staying in Virtue." Dion was so nervous his voice shook, but he still sounded sure of himself.

Zane's jaw dropped. Whatever he'd expected, that had *not* been it. It took a long, *long* time to scrape enough brain cells together to say, "I take it things are going well with Aaron, then?"

A vivid combination of relief and embarrassment swept Dion's face. "He's *incredible*, Zane. Have you ever met somebody and just felt instantly like you *knew*? Well, obviously you haven't or you'd be with them, that's a stupid question, but—but it's like fate. Like we're meant to be together. And, oh, there's so much I can't tell you, it's private, but—"

Zane, very, *very* unwisely, said, “You mean like the fact that he turns into a giant rabbit on occasion?” and this time Dion’s jaw fell open. After another long, painful moment, Zane muttered, “God, I hope he’s already told you that, because otherwise I have just fucked up beyond all *possible* comprehension.”

“But how did *you* know?!” Dion’s voice shot up like a schoolboy’s, astonishment at war with outrage and excitement.

“Oh, thank God.” Zane finished his shot of whiskey, exhaled, and said, “This is how I know,” before shifting into wolf form.

He’d asked Vicki not to scream. He’d forgotten to suggest as much to Dion, who absolutely did screech, although he managed to clap his hands over his mouth first, so it was somewhat muffled.

Almost instantly, the door burst open and Aaron Jones burst through it, huffing and puffing with the expectation of danger. Almost anybody else probably would have been at least a little alarmed at a man his size bludgeoning his way into the room, but Zane, at the moment, was a wolf, and the wolf thought, *mmm, rabbit!*

We do not eat other shifters!

The wolf shrugged, and Zane shifted back to human before the animal decided to act on its more hunterly instincts. Aaron Jones relaxed with a huge sigh, and closed the door behind him. “Oh. He told you. I thought something terrible had happened.”

“Something terrible did happen!” Dion said indignantly. “Nine years, Zane! *Nine* years! We’ve been together *nine* years, and you never told me you were a shifter?”

The way he said it made Zane blink. “Did you know about shifters before Aaron told you?”

“No! Obviously! Of course not! *Because you never told me, you—you—*” Apparently the English language lacked the words to describe whatever offensive thing Zane was, because

Dion spluttered into miffed silence. Aaron, trying hard to look solemn, came to sit at Dion's side.

"Secretive son of a bitch?" Zane offered. Dion sniffed, which seemed to indicate agreement. "Look, Dion, I'm sorry, but I'm also not, because this is obviously not something shifters admit to very many people. If I'd been going to tell anyone, it would have been you, but I've literally never told anybody who wasn't from Virtue, before coming back here."

Dion sniffed again. "I *suppose* I understand."

"I know you do," Zane said gently. He couldn't help the smile that started, though, as he looked at the two of them. His PA wasn't a small man, but beside Aaron he looked rather delicate and fragile. Furthermore, *Aaron* looked like he was probably a bear shifter, not a rabbit, and would knock the head off anybody who bothered Dion in the slightest.

They were, in Zane's estimation, *adorable*. "I'm really glad for you. You two look great together. I mean, I'm never going to forgive you for stealing him away, Aaron, but...I'm really happy for you. Tell me everything."

"I'm gay," Aaron said, somewhat unnecessarily, under the circumstances. "All the stories I've ever heard about fated mates are heterosexual and end up with people shacking up and having zillions of shifter babies, so I didn't even know if it was possible to find one if you were gay. I just kind of figured I was out of luck. Until you and Dion showed up, and just...I knew," he said in stunned happiness. "I just knew."

"Did your rabbit tell you?"

Dion giggled. Actually giggled. "I'm sorry, that's never going to not be funny."

Aaron looked pained. "My rabbit isn't very coherent most of the time. Overexcitable, yes. Convinced of Dion's perfection in every way, yes. Afraid of the wind? Also yes. So in between the gibbering, yes, it did tell me, but it's like being informed of something by a toddler hyped up on sugar. I wasn't sure it was *reliable*, you know? But it didn't matter," he added more softly. "I knew. I knew I wanted to spend the rest

of my life with this man from the minute I first saw him. And that I was going to have to negotiate with you for visiting rights.”

“I would never do anything to stand in the way of Dion’s happiness.” That was the simple truth. “I’m also never going to find another PA of his calibre, but that doesn’t matter. I genuinely hope you live happily ever after, whether it’s in Virtue or anywhere else.”

“I’ll find you somebody,” Dion promised. “They *won’t* be as good as I am, but they’ll be good. And they’ll be on a temporary basis in case I can’t handle small town living and have to convince Aaron to come back to LA with me.”

Zane ducked his head, smiling and half wondering if he could be as brave as his assistant, then looked up with genuine joy. “However it works out, I’m happy for you, Dion. I had no idea coming back to Virtue was going to be this complicated.”

“Oh my God, yes, tell us about the meeting tonight. Did you punch your father in the nose?” Dion’s eyes widened. “Wait, is he a wolf, too? *Is your mother?*”

“Ah, no, Mom is a true human.”

Dion’s eyes narrowed. “Pity you said that so fast, I had a follow-up line about her being a stone cold fox on the way.”

Zane laughed. “I’ll tell her you said it anyway. She’ll be delighted. No, I didn’t punch him in the nose. Better yet, a crazy old man from the woods punched him in the ego, and turned the town against him. I haven’t missed Virtue,” he said honestly, “but I’m not sorry to have been here for that.”

“You’re going to have to come back to visit.” Dion actually sounded worried. “Aaron has eight thousand siblings, but you’re the only person I *know* in Virtue. God, Zane. Imagine if Ms. Hawthorne hadn’t won that dress. My whole life would have been different, and not in a good way.”

“Imagine,” Zane murmured. “Thank goodness for luck, right?” He rose and said his goodnights, and went to bed thinking hard about luck.

CHAPTER 19



Vicki almost didn't want to go to the ball anymore.

It was three days away, and the dress was all but finished, but sitting in the high school gym watching the debate the night before had made her realize how close it all was to over. Zane had looked calm and handsome and—most importantly—like everything her heart had ever wanted.

And he was going to go back to Los Angeles after the ball. She couldn't blame him. His life was there, his clients, his design studio, his everything.

Everything except her.

So if she didn't go to the ball, obviously that would mean he had to stay. Vicki wasn't quite sure how that worked, but little details like how reality actually worked weren't the point when she was deeply involved in magical thinking.

She tried to keep herself cheerful as she taught that day, but she caught a few kids giving her worried looks, and suspected she wasn't doing as good a job as she would like. After class, as they packed up their stuff, Noah came over and gave her a hug. "It'll be okay, Ms. Hawthorne. The dress will be really pretty, and if it's not, my mom is a good sew-er. I bet she can make you a costume really fast."

Vicki laughed and returned the hug, genuinely touched. "Thanks, Noah, but Mr. Bellamy has almost finished my dress. I'm going over this afternoon to try it on."

His eyes widened. "Can I come see?"

“Nope! Nobody but me and Mr. Bellamy gets to see it until we’re on the red carpet.” Her stomach gurgled horribly and she suddenly wondered if she didn’t want to go to the ball because she was *absolutely terrified* of the idea of walking a red carpet. That was not an item on her bucket list.

Noah, awestruck, whispered, “Are you going to be on *TV*?”

“I suspect so.” Vicki’s stomach gurgled again. “I think I may not be ready for that.”

“You’ll be great! We’ll all watch you!”

That was not really the reassurance Vicki wanted, but she couldn’t exactly say that to the enthusiastic six-year-old. She smiled instead, and remembered just in time not to ruffle his hair. “Thanks, Noah. I’ll wave at you, okay?”

“OKAY!!!!” Noah tore off yelling about how he was going to be on TV, so Vicki was at least smiling as she made her nervous way over to Zane’s studio, carrying a bag of *stuff* ranging from shoes to shape wear. They were going to have to talk about so many things, and it all seemed so impossible and overwhelming.

Maybe it would be better not to talk at all. Maybe she should just live in the fairy tale right up until the moment the clock struck midnight, and then go home with her magical dress and her glass slippers, and have a fond memory of what it had been like to be a princess for a little while.

That honestly sounded better than trying to deal with messy, messy reality. She actually felt a little lighter of heart as she rapped on the studio door, then let herself in.

As had happened many times before, she gasped when she stepped into the room. Today, the chaotic whirlwind that was Zane’s workspace hadn’t just been cleaned up. It had been put away entirely. The scraps everywhere were gone, the bolts of fabric and the wall of threads were gone, even the tables had disappeared. The dressing room mirrors were out now, reflecting the only other things in the room: her dress, gracefully waiting on a dressmaker’s dummy, and Zane sitting

tailor-style at its hem, a thread and needle in his fingers as he finished the last stitches.

He looked up with a smile, shimmering blue fabric spilled over his lap and his shirtsleeves rolled up again so he could work. His thick hair was tied back so it wouldn't be in his way, and he looked both casual and impossibly, formally gorgeous in his slacks and vest. "Darn it, I meant to be done when you got here!"

Vicki, speechless, shook her head and came to kiss him, surprising him as she bent to do so. For an incredibly heated heartbeat, she felt his vulnerability with her above him like that, and knew, with a piercing sweet ache all the way through her body and soul, that he would do anything she asked in that moment. She could knock him back and take him with ferocity, and he would be completely hers.

Or she could tell him to stay, and he would agree. She knew it. She *knew* it, in the way she knew they had a connection, whether it was shifter fate or just pure human luck in love.

And she knew what Virtue would be risking to have a fashion designer of his calibre, of his celebrity, back in town for more than a few weeks. Her desire to have Zane all to herself, forever, wasn't fair to the whole town, never mind Zane and his career. So she held onto that kiss as long as she could, devouring, hungry, desperate, memorizing it, searing it into her mind, and finally broke away, tears in her eyes as she lifted her gaze to the dress. "It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, Zane."

He said, "Wow," hoarsely. "If only all my clients thanked me that way."

She gave him a look, and he gave an equally hoarse chuckle. "Well. Maybe not *all* of them. Do you want to try it on? I can make sure there aren't any flaws in the hemline."

"I'm almost afraid to," she whispered. "It's so beautiful, Zane."

“Almost as beautiful as its wearer.” He rose and pulled her into a startlingly gentle hug. “Vicki, I was thinking we should—”

“Try it on,” she said in a rough, hasty voice. “You’re right. I need to make sure I know how to get dressed!”

He paused, then chuckled again, more smoothly this time. “I do expect to have an entire team of people there to help you get ready, but in the worst case scenario, right, you should be able to dress yourself, I suppose. Did you bring the shoes?”

“And the horrible underwear, just in case.” Vicki dug the shape wear, which really was horrible, out of the bag, and then pulled her shoes out.

“I feel confident you don’t need the horrible underwear oh wow. Victoria. The shoes! Holy shit! They’re glass slippers! Where the—how did you—where did you *get* these?” Zane took the shoes from her hands, balancing them on his own palms in awe. They had three inch heels, the way she’d promised, and were set with glimmering, glittering faceted blue-white crystals that caught the light and shone like blue glass. Zane moved them closer to the dress, watching how they picked up its colors, then turned to her with an admiring, astonished gaze. “They’re perfect. Where *did* you get them?”

“Etsy.”

Zane blinked at her once, then laughed. “That’s incredible. They could have been made for the dress.”

“They were. I sent some scraps to the maker and asked if she could match it.” She had also paid more for the shoes than she’d ever paid for any item of clothing in her life, but the dress deserved that much, at least. “They arrived yesterday, and I am incredibly relieved they fit because I don’t know what I would have done if they didn’t.”

“We would have managed something,” Zane promised, but he was obviously delighted. “Shall we dress you?”

Nervous all over again, Vicki nodded and put her bags down, then unbuttoned her shirt, shivering it to the floor. She’d worn a more practical bra today than she often did—strapless,

because the dress was, but otherwise ordinary in its coverage—but still wore stockings, because she liked them.

Zane made a delicious sound when she dropped her skirt. Voice deepening with interest, he said, “Or maybe you could just put those shoes on and we could go from there.”

The fairy tale wasn’t going to last, Vicki told herself, and stepped into the shoes.



QUITE A LOT LATER, after the dress had been tried on and the hem checked, and after they were back in their clothes, Zane put his arms around Vicki and groaned. “I have to go to the city tomorrow. I’ve got a half dozen other clients who’ll be at the ball who need their last-minute hand-holding. Come with me?”

“Tomorrow’s Friday,” Vicki pointed out, “and I *am* the substitute teacher. There isn’t anybody to come in and cover for me, especially on no notice.”

“What happens if you get a cold?”

“Elementary school teachers have caught all the colds already,” Vicki said with a note of genuine, if somewhat wry, doom in her voice. “I have the immune system of a tardigrade.”

“A...what...?”

“You know, those little bitty indestructible water bear thingies that live in deep sea volcanic vents and can survive the vacuum of outer space?”

“I do not know,” Zane said after a long moment. “My education is apparently lacking. But I’m glad you’ve got a strong immune system. And I know you can’t come with me tomorrow, but I wish you could. Do you want me to bring the dress down, or will you?”

“Oh, I will. I’m not letting it out of my sight. And I’m coming to your hotel, right?” Vicki gave a nervous laugh. “I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“A driver will pick you up at the airport,” Zane promised. “From the minute you get to the city, somebody will be spoiling you rotten and taking care of you the whole time. You’ll have a great time.”

“How do you do it? The red carpet? Without dying of terror, I mean?”

“Well, you get used to it, but you probably won’t have time for that. Mostly I concentrate on not blinking too much. The lights are really bright, and if you can not blink too much you look fairly composed. And you’ll be new, so you’re allowed to look excited and overwhelmed. Vicki...” He hesitated. “I think we should talk about what happens after the ball.”

She closed her eyes. “I know what happens. The fairy tale comes to an end.”

“What if I don’t want a fairy tale?” He offered a smile that turned to dismay as Vicki blanched. “No, I mean, what if I’m looking for the real thing?”

“Then we should get through the ball, first,” Vicki said weakly. “It’s too much right now, Zane. I can’t think about it all. All I can think about is tripping and falling on my face on those stairs.”

“A time-honored tradition,” Zane said gently. “You’ll be fine. Look, I have some surprises planned, is that going to be okay?”

“As long as you’re not going to propose on the red carpet, probably.”

“Oh my God, no! I’m not going to propose at all, but if I was, I wouldn’t do it there! That’s horrific!”

Vicki thought he maybe didn’t need to be *quite* so firm about not proposing at all, even if it would be ridiculous for him to and he shouldn’t, when they’d only known each other three weeks. But still, somehow, his certainty that he wasn’t going to do that sort of stung.

Because humans were complicated, she told herself, and could hold different opinions and feelings on one thing, all at

once. She mumbled, “Like an onion,” and Zane crinkled his face.

“Layers, huh? Sorry. I didn’t mean to be quite that, um, brutal, about the idea of proposing. I just think public proposals are awful and I can’t imagine doing that to somebody on a red carpet. Not unless they knew about it ahead of time.”

“Well, okay then.” Vicki softened. “Glad we’re on the same page about that. What time do you leave in the morning?”

Zane shuddered. “The flight’s at seven a.m., so I have to get up at about four to get to the airport in time. I’ll go back to the B&B tonight. There’s no reason for you to be woken up in the middle of the night like that.”

“Don’t take this wrong, but thank goodness.”

“No wrongness taken.” He stole a kiss, then reluctantly untangled. “I should go back and pack up, in fact. I’ll see you Saturday morning?”

“Yeah, although *I* am taking a ten a.m flight so I don’t have to get up at three in the morning. The whole thing is going to be overwhelming enough without being six hours short on sleep.”

“You’ll be perfect,” Zane promised, and let himself out.

Vicki just about floated through the next day at work, excitement and happiness overcoming her nerves. The kids were beside themselves, supercharged with energy and anticipation. There was apparently a *viewing party* being arranged so they could all get together to see their teacher on TV, which was simultaneously the cutest and most alarming thing Vicki had ever heard.

On the other hand, *she* didn’t have to supervise that party, which made it slightly less overwhelming than it could have been. All *she* had to do was get on a plane, spend hours being primed and pampered, and then wear the most stunning dress she’d ever seen to an event filled with the some of the world’s

most widely-acknowledged beautiful people. But she would be on Zane's arm, and everything would be wonderful.

The hyper-excited kids were finally set loose for the day, and Vicki went to the teacher's lounge to—well, to squeal excitedly at her coworkers before she went home to get her stuff together, really.

One of those terrible silences that meant something was really wrong descended as she came into the lounge. Vicki heard it: everyone was talking loudly as she opened the door, and the sound cut out like a plug had been pulled as soon as they saw who it was. There were groups of people all standing together, heads bent over their phones, and they jumped apart guiltily, like she wouldn't notice. Some of them even put their phones away, as if whatever they were watching wouldn't exist anymore if they did that.

Vicki froze in the doorway, heat rushing her face and a dreadful coldness dropping through her belly. "What happened? Is Zane okay?"

The glances that went around the room at high speed didn't reassure her at all. Vicki fumbled for her own phone, hands icy and shaking, but her friend Carol squared up and came over with hers extended. "He's...okay, I mean, he's not hurt, but..."

A photograph of a high-end entertainment industry party filled the phone's screen. It was, technically speaking, gorgeous: on a boat out on the Hudson, the skies brilliant blue and the water just as beautiful, the city a soft blur in the background, and Vicki knew she was looking really hard at those, because she didn't want to see the focus of the picture.

Because it was a picture of Zane Bellamy and film star Nora Bruschi, locked in a passionate kiss.



IT WAS A MISUNDERSTANDING. Obviously it was a misunderstanding. That was all Vicki could think. She reeled out of the school and went home, not wanting to face anybody,

even though she thought better of Zane than that, and wasn't going to distrust him over a stupid picture in the papers.

Only when she got home, it wasn't just the picture. It was the film footage from the party, too, with Zane and Nora cozied up to each other, laughing, comfortable, talking to the press about her dress for the evening with their arms around each other. It was the way he smiled down at her, and the absolutely infatuated look *she* had, gazing up at him.

She was an actor, Vicki told herself. Nora was an actor, and it was all probably good press, except the way she nestled up to Zane as he leaned against the boat's rail, his phone in one hand until she stood on her toes to say something in his ear. He ducked his head to listen, then laughed with easy comfort, and their mouths met as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

It was fine. It was *fine*. It had to be fine. Zane wouldn't—he wouldn't. Whatever was going on, Zane...*wouldn't*. Vicki was sure of it. She sent him a text with the photograph, saying *do you care to explain yourself, young man?* along with a laughing emoji, and tried not to be concerned when he didn't answer.

The mistake was watching the interview with Nora later. Zane wasn't there, but the press had dozens of pictures of them together, and not just the footage and pictures from the boat that afternoon. Vicki thought she could handle those, almost, even though it was so *painfully* clear that they were both beyond her level of beauty and had palpable chemistry.

What was harder to cope with were all the pictures from other events that Vicki had never seen. Red carpet pictures, shots from fittings, casual evenings out that nobody had ever cared about. *Those* photos told a story about a couple who obviously knew each other well, and cared about one another, and looked incredibly good together.

In the interview, Nora brushed the romantic narrative the press was building off with a careless wave of her hand and a sparkling sideways look at a camera that was as good as a wink. She might as well have said that with the release of the

new *Star Captain* movie and her own star on the rise, she and Zane weren't keeping things secret anymore.

She started to text Zane again, decided to call instead, and had to walk nervously around her living room when he didn't pick up the phone, either. There was a good explanation. There had to be.

Maybe Dion would know. She sat down again, typing out, *I'm sorry to bother you, but I haven't heard from Zane, and...* Vicki's stomach clenched. It was ridiculous to text Dion. There was a perfectly reasonable explanation for everything.

She just couldn't think of it. Starlets did not assault fashion designers by throwing themselves into their arms and kissing them like that. Not in anything but the movies, at least. Hands shaking, Vicki sent the text.

Dion texted back, *I don't know what's going on. I'm not actually with him, and he's not answering my texts either. Or the hotel phone.*

Vicki actually called him, at that. "You're not *with* him? I thought Zane didn't go anywhere without you."

"Normally he doesn't." Dion sounded tense, unlike his usual efficient briskness. "But he said he could handle it, and that he needed to do some things that I wouldn't be necessary for, especially with..."

Vicki's stomach sank. "Especially with what?"

"Well, with me and Aaron being new and everything. He said he wanted to give us the time."

"You and Aaron?" She'd seen the two men around town a couple of times without thinking anything of it, but suddenly understood and said, "Oh! Congratulations!" in a whiplash of emotion. She was genuinely delighted for them, and also... freaking out, if she was going to be honest with herself.

"Thank you. Look, I'm sorry, Vicki. I don't know what's going on and I hate it. One day," he snapped, not at her, but in general. "I let him out of my sight for *one day* and he goes and blows up the whole fairy tale we were telling." Then, almost

instantly, with a note of horror, he added, “I mean—I don’t mean it like that...”

Dizziness swept Vicki and she had to sit down before she could respond with a faint, “No, no, it’s okay, Zane and I talked about the...the fairy tale, the fake dating, the...the breakup,” she finished even more faintly. “I thought we had something a little more real going on, but...”

But what better way to make her believe in the fairy tale, than to tell her stories about fated mates and *wanting* to date her? Wanting to get into somebody’s pants wasn’t exactly the same as a long-term relationship promise. She whispered, “Have they, uh, Zane and Nora, have they known each other a while?”

Dion sounded completely pained. “Since she had a bit part in her first movie. She hired him for a gown she couldn’t afford for the red carpet event, because she knew it would gain attention. He’s done all her dresses since, and...I didn’t think there was anything else going on there, but Zane is very private about his affairs. I mean his relationships! I mean—”

Vicki whispered, “Thanks, Dion,” and hung up to text Zane again.

He didn’t answer. Not the texts, not the call she made a little while later, and not the anguished yell she muted with her pillow after it became clear he *wasn’t* going to answer.

Because of course he wasn’t. Of course, of course, of *course*. She was an idiot, and she’d fallen for a player. A *great* player, but a player.

Because Zane had been very, very careful not to say that she was his ‘fated mate.’ Vicki really hadn’t minded that, not at all. She’d meant it when she’d said she didn’t need fate, just as long as what they had was real. And she’d absolutely, *completely* believed him when he’d said it was.

But that was ridiculous. There was no way she could compete with someone like Nora Brusch, a literal ingenue. Vicki was a first grade school teacher in her thirties, for God’s sake. The girl was staggeringly beautiful, wealthy, talented,

and as much too young for Zane as she was for Benton Sinclair's Star Captain. But that never stopped men, did it. Of course it didn't.

Vicki had known the fairy tale wasn't going to last, but she *had* thought it would last until the end of the ball, at least. That was how the stories were supposed to go. And just to add to the humiliation, the entire *world* knew it had gone completely, horribly wrong. They were going to laugh at her for aiming above her station. The cinder girl left alone at the foot of the palace stairs, wondering what had happened to her prince.

"Fuck *that*." Vicki actually spoke aloud, startling herself with her vehemence. If Zane wasn't answering her texts, at least her brother would. She sent him a note that sounded furious even to herself, and he wrote back within seconds, saying, *You okay? You want me to go punch him in the face?*

No. Vicki's hands were shaking with anger and embarrassment. *I mean, tempting, but no. I have a better idea. Can you maybe drive up here and get me tonight?*

Yeah. Yeah, of course, Vic. I can't drive up fast enough, but I'll fly up and get you and we'll get it taken care of. It'll be okay. Love you, sis.

Vicki texted *Love you too* back, and lay down on her bed to cry.

CHAPTER 20



Zane's phone was at the bottom of the river, and Dion, who would have fixed *everything*, was three hundred miles away.

He'd dropped the stupid thing when Nora had kissed him, a fumble from pure shock, and hadn't even realized it had gone over the side of the boat until Nora's bodyguards had gotten between the paparazzi and them, and Nora had broken the kiss, gazing up at him with laughing adoration. Zane, horrified, said, "Oh my God, Nora, I'm sorry, but *no*."

Her pretty expression sharpened into a shark's smile. "Don't be silly. I saw all those pictures of you with that blonde woman up in Virtue, and you obviously need a wicked witch to break the fairy tale princess's heart. I can go for *years* on being the home wrecker, and you'll get all the sympathy you need from the press when it's over."

"I don't *want* to break her heart!" For some reason Zane was keeping his voice low, trying not to draw attention. He should be drawing attention. He should be making it clear to the entire world that this wasn't what he wanted at all. "My God, Nora, you're going to ruin everything!" He stepped away from her, trying to get to the press, but her wretched bodyguards were somehow in the way no matter where he went.

Nora was there, too, right in the way and still smiling like a shark. "Come on, Zane. You know we've been flirting around the edges of each other for years. This is perfect."

“It’s not perfect! We haven’t been flirting!” Zane said desperately. “I haven’t been flirting, at least!”

Surprise filtered through her expression, slowly washing the shark’s gaze away. “You’re kidding.”

“I’m not. I’m sorry, Nora, but I really wasn’t flirting. You’re a good friend and a great, insightful client to design for, but that’s all it ever was on my side.”

She stared up at him for what felt like a long time before sighing. “Well, great. I guess instead of being the wicked witch home wrecker I’ll just be the desperate ingenue making a fool of herself in a last-ditch attempt to win the hero.”

“You can probably go for years on that, too.” Zane walked away, heart hammering with worry. He didn’t care if this had ended his client-designer relationship with Nora. All that mattered was how that had *looked*, and how many people had taken pictures, and how he needed to talk to Vicki *immediately*. But the phone was gone, and by slow horrified moments, he realized what a mess he’d gotten himself into.

He’d thought he was being *so* clever, canceling the big hotel in favor of a small, intimate, private suite at a boutique hotel where he and Vicki could have first-class service without anybody knowing where they were. It had been a great idea as a romantic gesture. It was a terrible idea when everybody who knew where he was staying thought it was the big hotel.

It was an even worse idea when he *had no idea what anybody’s phone number was*. He knew his own. That was it. His phone—the one at the bottom of the river—remembered the rest of them for him. He didn’t know Vicki’s, he didn’t—mortifyingly—even know *Dion’s*. He wasn’t even sure he knew his own studio number back in California, and his damn business cards were digital, kept on the phone! He stopped a friend on the boat and asked to borrow their phone, only to have Nora appear, pluck it out of his hand, and take some selfies before handing it back to the other actor. The guy laughed and moved along, leaving Zane to his frustration while Nora smiled at him with nasty sharpness.

The *minute* the boat docked, Zane rushed back to his hotel and used their landline to call the Jones's B&B, which got him voicemail and an invitation to book online. He'd tried calling Virtue Elementary School, but not only was it after business hours, they were absolutely not going to give him Vicki's number. He even tried calling Kate's Cafe, and Kate said she'd pass a message along if she saw Vicki, but her tone of voice said the entire town thought he was in the doghouse and no explanation was going to be enough.

In the town's defense, no explanation was *ever* going to be enough. Zane had never felt the press of somebody's mouth against his with the same horror he'd felt when Nora Brusch had kissed him. It was lucky he'd only dropped the phone, and not flung himself—or worse, Nora—over the edge of the boat in an attempt to escape.

Although if he'd thrown himself off the boat, it would have made it harder for her to manipulate the press into wondering if he was a predator of some kind.

You are a predator. The wolf's observation was so unexpected that Zane laughed out loud, and with the laughter, felt a little better.

“All right. I'm a very stupid predator who doesn't know anybody's phone numbers, but not so stupid I can't rent a car and drive up to Virtue and explain myself. Vicki's not leaving until morning. It'll be okay,” he told the wolf out loud. “Or fly up.”

He took a minute to look at flights, but between the time it would take to get to and wait at the airport, fly to the nearest airport to Virtue, and drive into town, he might as well just drive. Even a private flight wouldn't be faster, because he'd have to arrange it. Determined to make this right, Zane rented a car and drove out of the city, cursing Nora Brusch, his own reliance on his phone, and the fact that Dion had found true love at such an inconvenient time. Which wasn't fair or nice, and probably said more about Zane's reliance on Dion, too, than anything else. It was possible he shouldn't be allowed out of the house by himself, for heaven's sake.

At least the snow had melted and the roads were clear, which made the drive north pleasant, once he got out of the city's traffic. Somewhere around Albany he realized he should have emailed Dion from his tablet, but he rarely *used* the tablet for email, so it hadn't occurred to him, and because he was an idiot, he'd left the hotel without anything but his wallet.

It was going to be *fine*. Vicki would understand. He *knew* how bad it looked, and he knew how much worse not talking to her immediately afterward was, but she had to understand, Zane told himself desperately. He didn't know why she had to, except he needed her to, and because—

—because it couldn't really be fate, if she didn't, and Zane suddenly realized he badly, *badly* wanted it to be fate. He wanted them to be meant for each other, not just in an ordinary love at first sight kind of way, but in a magical, fairy tale way. He'd spent so much time resistant to the idea, and now that he was on the verge of losing it, he knew it was all he'd ever really wanted in the world. He should have embraced it from the start.

So it was going to be *fine*, because it had to be.

It was nearly eleven at night before he pulled into Vicki's apartment complex parking lot, and staggered upstairs to knock on her door.

There was no answer.

Zane pressed his forehead against the door, trying to be loud enough to be heard while also not being so loud he'd wake up the neighbors. "Vicki? It's me. It's Zane. I'm so sorry. I'm sure you don't want to see me, but if you'd give me a chance to explain..."

No one answered, and Zane, after a long, nervous moment of glancing up and down the hall looking for both security cameras and any chance of someone stepping out of their apartment suddenly, took a risk and shifted into a wolf.

It only took a few seconds to be sure Vicki wasn't home. Her scent wasn't strong enough, and he couldn't hear her moving, or breathing, or anything. Zane shifted back to

human, stared at the door in dismay, then said, “Dion,” under his breath, and went to the B&B.

Emmy Jones answered the door resentfully, which was fair, given that it was now past eleven. She also closed it in Zane’s face, which was *also* fair, although he blurted, “No, please, wait—!” and she cracked it open again, glaring at him.

“Dion checked out this evening to go down to New York to find *you*,” she told him icily. “Aaron’s all in a tizzy and the whole town is mad at you, so go away.”

“But—”

“I don’t care! Go sleep in a ditch for all I care!” Emmy closed the door again, and this time she didn’t reopen it. Zane, simultaneously indignant and crushed, slunk away, looked around the square, and with a sigh, went to curl up in the gazebo. It was perfectly warm and cozy as a wolf, and he would be awake long before anybody had a chance to see him. He tucked his nose under his tail, and went to sleep.



A CREAKING noise woke him hours later, and he opened his eyes to find a small boy sitting on the gazebo rail, staring at him with interest.

Zane froze, a dozen conflicting impulses running through him at once. Part of him wanted to run away. Part of him wanted to...well, maybe most of him wanted to run away, except the child wasn’t in the least concerned by the fact that there was a wolf in the gazebo. He tried to remember if he knew this kid, and his wolf said, *Rowly’s cub*, with faint impatience. Zane knew he wouldn’t have gotten that much identification out of the wolf if he hadn’t been in wolf form, but he was grateful for it, and said so. The wolf ignored him.

No wonder the kid wasn’t bothered by a wolf in the gazebo. He was Noah Brannigan, and his stepfather was a wolf. That explained *that* part.

The other part was that it was very, very, *very* early, and the little boy had no business being up, alone, and in the town square at this hour. After a minute or so of staring at each

other, Zane cautiously shifted to human, and watched Noah's expression go from interested to surprised. "How come you're sleeping in the gazebo, Mr. Bellamy?"

"How come *you're* up at six in the morning all by yourself in the town square?"

Noah looked scornful. "I'm always up early. Why are you sleeping in the gazebo?"

"Because Emmy Jones shut the B&B door in my face and wouldn't let me stay there."

If possible, Noah's expression became even more scornful. "Yeah, well, you deserved it. You're a big ol' jerkface. Everybody says so. Ms. Hawthorne was so mad she was *beautiful*."

"She's beautiful anyway." Zane had a faint sense of disbelief as the conversation progressed. He couldn't possibly be *having* this conversation with a little kid at this hour of the day. Or any hour, but he really was concerned about the time. "Why *are* you here? Where's your mom?"

"Oh." Noah waved toward his mother's massage clinic. "She's open early on Saturday."

"At six in the morning?!"

"It's almost seven," Noah said with the same scorn as before. "And she's not opening until eight but she likes to get set up. I came in with her so Dad could sleep when I forget to use my inside voice with the dog." His tone suggested that inside voices were for suckers.

Zane took a breath to start defending inside voices with, then held that breath instead, trying to focus on what was important. "Noah, when did you see Ms. Hawthorne being so mad she was beautiful? Do you know where she is?"

The kid lit up from the center of his soul out. "*Everybody* saw. It was when Star Captain landed his helicopter RIGHT HERE IN THE TOWN SQUARE and FLEW AWAY WITH HER!"

Zane's eyebrows rose so high he thought he might lose them in his hairline, and he had to blink slowly a couple of times, trying to process that. It didn't work. "...what?"

Noah leaped down from the gazebo railing and jittered his way down its steps into the grass. "See, over here, over HERE! You can see the, uh, the footprints that the helicopter left! He landed RIGHT HERE!"

Zane, dazed, got up and followed Noah into the muddy green. There were, indeed, something that looked a great deal like helicopter 'footprints' in the soft dirt: two long stretches from the skids, where its weight had pressed into the ground. "A...*helicopter*...came to get Ms. Hawthorne?"

Noah howled, "*Star Captain* came to get Ms. Hawthorne IN a helicopter!!!" as if Zane was very, very dim, which right now, Zane thought might be true.

"Sta...Star Cap...you mean..." Zane stared at the little boy in bewilderment. "You mean Benton Sinclair came to get Ms. Hawthorne?"

"No, *Star Captain* did! Except she called him Chris while she was waiting for him. Everybody was here," he told Zane, quite self-importantly. "The helicopter was going WHP-WHP-WHP-WHP-WHP so everybody came out to see what was going on and then they called everybody else to see what was going on until everybody came to see what was going on and Ms. Hawthorne was just standing there with a big poofy bag and I said what's going on to her and she said her brother Chris was coming to pick her up' and then A HELICOPTER LANDED IN THE MIDDLE OF THE SQUARE AND STAR CAPTAIN GOT OUT AND THEY FLEW AWAY TOGETHER LIKE IN A *MOVIE*!!!!!"

At that point, Mabs Brannigan ran out of her clinic, parental alarm obvious even from half the town square away. She relaxed as she visibly realized that all of Noah's noise was not because he'd hurt himself or the world was otherwise ending, and she whisper-shouted, "*Quiet*, Noah, there are *people sleeping around here!*"

Zane breathed, “Not anymore,” as Noah looked marginally guilty, but then lit up with the memory of the helicopter and, apparently, the Star Captain himself making a surprise appearance in *Virtue*. He reached into his pocket for his phone, intending to call Benton, then swore sharply enough that Noah widened his eyes at him. He muttered, “Sorry,” and then went across the square to Mabs, who looked grateful that Noah trailed after him. “Could I borrow your phone? I need to call...”

It was not quite seven in the morning. Zane sighed. No one in their right mind would call somebody at this hour unless it was an emergency, and while the disaster unfolding around his relationship certainly felt like an emergency to *him*, he wasn't sure Benton Sinclair would agree. Especially if Zane was somehow misunderstanding, and the movie star was not, somehow, also *Victoria Hawthorne's brother*.

“Never mind,” he said wearily. “I'll drive back down to the city and try to find a pay phone on the way. Do those still exist?”

“In some places,” Mabs said tartly. “There's a good explanation for all this, right?”

“There is, but I dropped my phone in the Hudson so I haven't been able *to* explain it. It'll be fine,” he said for the hundredth time, more to himself than Mabs. “I know where Ben is staying. I'll just...go down there...” He turned away and went back to his car, grateful that it was so early that he'd at least make it back down to New York at a reasonable hour. Early enough, at least, to apologize to Vicki *before* the ball.



THE HOTEL BENTON was staying at didn't want to give Zane his room number. This was, of course, reasonable and sensible of them; it was not good policy to tell people off the street what room the celebrity guests were staying in. Unfortunately for Zane, when he identified himself to the front desk, the woman behind it grew cool and judgmental. “Ah. Mr. Bellamy. Yes. We've been asked to specifically *not* put through calls from you. Good afternoon, sir.”

Zane resisted thumping his head against the counter, and instead managed a polite smile. “Right. Of course. Sorry to bother you.” He worked his way back into the lobby—all pale marble and cream-colored upholstery, with glittering crystal chandeliers and a great deal of staff all moving around quietly to keep things clean and quiet—and, once he was out of sight of the front desk, followed someone into the elevator.

They had upgraded the security system since the last time he’d been there, and it now required a key card to choose your floor. Zane cast a glance to the elevator’s mirrored ceiling like he might get help from above, then smiled at the older gentleman tapping his card to select his floor and said, “Same floor, what a coincidence.”

They had not, at least, upgraded the stairways to use the same key card access. Probably because it was a fire hazard, but maybe just because Zane got one tiny break in this whole mess.

Not enough of a break for the older gentleman to have been staying on the fourteenth of fifteen floors, of course. No, he’d been on the fifth floor, which meant Zane had ten flights to walk up, and he couldn’t risk shifting into a wolf, not in a highly secured hotel. The truth was, if anybody was paying enough attention, he wouldn’t even make it to the penthouse floor—which was where Ben always stayed—without being thrown out.

Nine floors later, sweating like a horse, he thought getting thrown out of the hotel might make a better impression than arriving at Ben’s door sweaty and smelly. But he would never get to apologize properly to Vicki if he waited until the ball, so he slogged his way up the last set of stairs, and at least took a few minutes to catch his breath before going onto the penthouse suite floor, following the single hallway, and knocking on the double doors.

Audible surprise came from inside the suite, with a woman’s voice coming closer to the door as she said, “Did you order room service? Good, I’m starving!”

She opened one of the doors a heartbeat later in a froth of familiar blue skirts and blonde hair. Relief crashed through Zane so hard he nearly dropped to his knees. His wolf said, *Wait*— and Zane said *No, I can't, if I wait she may never forgive me!*

The wolf said, *But*— and Zane shook his head. *Not now!*

To his relief, the wolf went quiet as Zane received the full force of a feminine glare. He lifted his hands, trying to stop whatever she might say so he could blurt, “Please, wait, hear me out. I’m sorry, Vicki. I’m so incredibly sorry. I dropped my damn phone in the harbor yesterday when Nora kissed me and I’m an *idiot* who doesn’t know anybody’s numbers, so I couldn’t call you and I *did* call the B&B and the school and Kate’s Cafe and nobody would talk to me and I can’t blame them because you must feel like you’ve been played, and I swear, nothing could be farther from the truth.”

She inhaled and Zane stumbled on, talking faster and faster in his desperation to be heard. “I’ll understand if you never want to see me again. It’ll break my heart, but I’d deserve it and I swear I won’t bother you, but please at least let me explain. I am not in a relationship with Nora Brusch. I’ve never even considered such a thing. She blindsided me yesterday and now that I’m thinking about it I can see that she’s been working up to something like this for years. I have no feelings for her, that’s the only time she’s ever kissed me, it was horrible—”

That, at least, got a coughing laugh, which made the dress shift a little, which it shouldn’t have done, because it had been fitted perfectly on Thursday. Zane still plunged onward, saying, “This is probably a terrible time to confess it because anybody could be listening, but I should never have doubted my wolf, Vicki, or my feelings, or you, or anything. I knew the moment I saw you that it *was* fate. I was just afraid of it, because what if it was wrong, what if I was a terrible person like my father who didn’t really deserve someone as incredible as you are. If you’ll even *consider* forgiving me, I’ll spend the rest of my life making it up to you, I swear I will, Vicki. I love

you. I love you so much, and I'm an idiot for not telling you as soon as you fell out that window on top of m-me...?"

The last word trailed off into uncertainty as Benton Sinclair pulled the second suite door open. He was more disheveled than Vicki, but wore the signature jacket that Zane himself had designed for him, a velvet Rocketeer-style jacket in dark blue that was a shout-out to his Star Captain costume while also being perfect for the modern red carpet. He had on a white silk shirt beneath it, only partially buttoned, and was still wearing jeans, which Zane hoped to God he'd be changing before the ball.

He said, "Zane," in a tone that managed to be both disapproving and amused, a trick of his rich English drawl. "I see you've met my girlfriend Marguerite."

A cold drop of horror started at the back of Zane's neck and crawled its way down his spine, through his throat, and into his stomach as he slowly turned his gaze back to the blonde woman, who was very clearly trying not to laugh.

She was the right height. She was blonde. Her eyes were blue. Maybe not *quite* the same shimmering blue as the dress, and Zane had tried very hard to match the gown's colors to Vicki's eyes, but close. She was *unquestionably* in the right dress. And...she was a little less buxom than Vicki, a little slimmer through the hips, which...explained why the dress wasn't fitting *quite* right, and...

His gaze sank to her hands. To her fingernails, which were polished a pleasing pale peach, and which had no sign of fingerpaints staining them at all.

Zane said, "Oh, my God," faintly, and staggered back to lean against the hallway wall, face in his hands. He mumbled, "I'm so sorry. I thought Victoria was here."

His wolf said, *I tried to tell you!* and Zane realized it had: *that* was why it had said 'wait' when he began to apologize.

You've never cared if I was talking to the wrong person before! he protested, although that, of course might have been enough to make him listen. He said, *I'm sorry*, to the wolf, and

repeated, “I thought—” into his hands before snapping his gaze upward. “I thought Victoria was here. But she is, isn’t she? Or she was? Because that *is* her dress, that’s—I’m not losing my mind,” he said, no longer certain of that. “Ben, look, I understand if she never wants to talk to me again, but...is she okay?”

His throat tightened around the words and he made a helpless gesture. “I didn’t mean to hurt her, and I know I did. Please, if you could tell her I’m sorry...”

A *familiar* woman’s voice said, “Scoot over, Chris,” and this time Vicki, definitely Vicki but wearing a very pretty pink gown that was as slinky and snug as her blue one was frothy, ducked under Ben Sinclair’s arm, and walked into Zane’s arms to whisper, “That was a pretty good apology. Even if you gave it to the wrong person. And I love you, too, with all my heart.”

Zane, relieved beyond words, buried his face in Vicki’s neck and held on like he’d never let go.

CHAPTER 21



The last thing Vicki had expected was to hear Zane’s voice at the door, and the second-last thing she’d expected was for him to pour out a heartfelt apology to her brother’s girlfriend. For the first few seconds she’d been too surprised to move, and for the next minute or two after that, joy and relief had blossomed in her as he spilled all the explanation to a woman whom he’d never met before. Chris tried once to interrupt—so did Marguerite, for that matter—but Vicki waved him off, more interested in the apology than who he was delivering it to. Finally, as Zane started to peter out, Chris *did* interrupt, and Vicki could almost audibly hear Zane nearly expiring of embarrassment.

That, she thought, was enough groveling for one apology. She ducked past her brother and into Zane’s arms, and knew, without a doubt, that she never really wanted to be anywhere else in her life. He held on so hard, still whispering apologies, until she stopped him with a kiss and whispered, “I didn’t believe anything bad at first, I really didn’t. It’s just, then I couldn’t get hold of you, and it all started to seem so awful, and...it’s okay, though. It’s fine. We’re okay. Come on in. Chris, I think you *should* order room service, Zane looks like he’s going to pass out.”

“Zane *is* going to pass out,” Zane announced as Chris backed up and let them into his suite. “Zane is very, very confused. Zane is also going to stop talking about himself in the third person now. Why does she keep calling you—no, wait, I know your real name is Chris. I just forgot. *How is*

Benton Sinclair your brother, Vicki? And why is his girlfriend in your dress?”

“Well, I didn’t want to wear it after all this, did I? And I knew Marge and I were the same size, so we thought we’d just switch dresses because I *also* wasn’t going to just slink away and not go to the ball because I wasn’t going to let you win—” Vicki tugged Zane to the sitting area of the suite, which had soft suede couches in delicious burnt oranges and deep browns, and sat with him while his gaze bounced from one person to another in confused delight.

“Start at the beginning,” he said hopefully. “Start with ‘Benton Sinclair is my brother.’”

Chris sprawled on the other couch—his incredibly dashing velvet coat was much more forgiving than the pink sheath dress Vicki was wearing—and laughed. “Stepbrother, technically. Our parents got married when we were kids.”

“You said that!” Zane said to Vicki, almost accusingly. “But you didn’t say your brother was Benton Sinclair!”

“My *brother* is Chris Sinclair,” she said dryly. “‘Benton ‘my friends call me Ben’ Sinclair’ is a big shot Hollywood movie star, and I absolutely never would have begged him to come rescue me except in this exact situation, where having an A-lister sibling was the only thing that was going to distract the press from the *complete humiliation* of my sort-of-boyfriend—”

“Definitely boyfriend,” Zane said, and Vicki beamed, but continued without stopping.

“—having hooked up with a starlet ten years younger than me.”

“I had no idea Nora had it in her,” Chris admitted. “She always seemed so sweet, on set.”

“Sure.” Marguerite sat beside Chris in a froth of skirts. “You were potentially useful to her. She’d never be nasty to you.”

“But brother!” Zane said. “Tell me! How?!”

“Mom and I kept her name when she and Dad got married,” Vicki said. “We’re Hawthornes. They’re Sinclairs.”

“And I was advised to change my name because there are so many Hollywood Chrises,” Chris said with a shrug. “So I chose Benton, after Dr. Benton in ER. He was my favorite character, and I thought ‘Benton Sinclair’ sounded really posh. Basically anybody who met me after I turned, what, twenty, Vic? Calls me Benton. Or Ben.”

“I think you were nineteen. You’d done those commercials, but when you got the part in EastEnders they told you to change your name. ‘Ben.’”

“That’s why you thought ‘my friends call me Ben’ was funny!” Zane said to Vicki, semi-accusingly. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Because Chris loves attention and I don’t! I’ve spent my whole life *not* drawing attention to the fact that my big brother is a world-famous movie star! That’s actually part of why I came back to the States,” Vicki admitted. “All our friends back in London knew, obviously, and there were a bunch of skeezy types who kept trying to cozy up to me so they could get to Chris. Coming back here, though, I was just Vicki Hawthorne with no obvious connection to Star Captain.”

“I wasn’t Star Captain then,” Chris objected, but Vicki brushed it away, and he grinned in acknowledgement.

“And you—helicopter?!?”

Vicki actually felt a little sheepish, but Chris gave a belly laugh. “Look, when Star Captain’s little sister calls him in tears asking to be rescued, you go all out, okay? The whole point was to be so flashy it would distract from you and Nora, so I hired a private helicopter and flew up. I only wish I actually had a pilot’s license so I could have Harrison-Forded it, but I’m not quite that cool.”

“He did, however, sign up for flying lessons on the flight,” Marguerite said with a grin. “So he’ll *be* that cool, eventually.”

“Nobody is that cool,” Chris disagreed. “But I’ll do my best. Anyway, so the plan was to bring Vicki to the ball and

blow your little scandal out of the water, but, uh, look, not that I was eavesdropping or anything, but did you say you shouldn't have doubted your *wolf*?"

A look of pure panic came over Zane's face, and Vicki, without missing a beat, said, "He's a furry."

Both Chris and Madge blinked at that, neither of them able to find words until Marguerite eventually said, "You must have a *fantastic* fursuit."

Vicki, straight-faced, said, "You have no idea," and struggled not to laugh as Zane threw her a look that was equal parts grateful and dismayed. He obviously realized he was going to have to make a fursuit now, and Vicki honestly couldn't wait to see it.

"Look, though." Chris had a thoughtful expression as he frowned at the two of them. "Your lives are seriously incompatible. Is this thing, like, real? I mean, that apology sounded real."

Vicki snuck her hand into Zane's and nodded. "It's real. And...I don't know what we're going to do," she admitted with an ache in her chest. "You're right. Our lives *are* incompatible. But we'll have to figure something out."

"Right, so." Chris leaned forward, suddenly movie-star-intense.

Vicki snorted. "Cut that out. You don't get to go being charismatic and intense around me. I remember when you nearly lobotomized yourself by sticking pencils up your nose and then tripping."

Marguerite burst out laughing. "Did he really?"

"He did. He was twelve and trying to impress a girl, which, spoiler alert, sticking pencils up his nose *did not do*, and actually it was terrifying, I think Mom almost had a heart attack from the stress of it all. Anyway, stop it, Chris."

Her brother hmphed. "What good is being a movie star if I can't turn on the charisma at home? But no, listen, look, I was thinking. Sanjay, my costar, the kid? He always had an on-set tutor, because he's got to get an education, right? If you

wanted to keep teaching but also be working out of LA, you could do that, Vic. Between Zane and me, we've got all the connections you'd need, and it would give you a more flexible schedule than the traditional school year."

Zane's hand tightened around Vicki's and he cast her a brief, hopeful look that she returned with an anticipatory smile. "Oh. Oh, that might be great. I'm going to have to think about it—I've got this year's contract to finish, at least, and I don't know if I can, or should, get out of next year's, but... Chris, that could be *wonderful*."

"Yes, well. I'm Benton Sinclair, you know. I *am* wonderful."

Marguerite elbowed him. He *oofed* obligingly, pleased with himself, then looked at the two women in their dresses. "So, ah, shall we get you two changed back into your own gowns, and get this show on the road?"



IT WAS MUCH MORE difficult to climb out of a limo gracefully with millions of people watching than Vicki had *ever* imagined.

Chris and Zane, who were used to this kind of thing, went first, ducking out of the door with quick waves and smiles, then turning back to help the women in their complicated dresses exit without falling on their faces. Marguerite, who had also done this before, murmured, "Just keep your hem up so you don't step on it, and you'll be fine," just before she took Chris's hand and stepped out with a wave and a smile of her own.

Vicki seriously considered hiding under the seat and never coming out at all, but Zane's encouraging smile appeared, and she put her hand into his trustingly.

Somehow, almost magically, it worked. She stepped clear without tripping over her hem, and the gorgeous, glimmering skirt swished around her as an actual roar of excitement went up. Camera flashes exploded light everywhere, blinding her, and in a near-panic, she remembered how Zane had said not to

blink too much, and Chris's advice to look slightly above the crowd, which he said helped a little with the bright lights.

Vicki had watched footage of her brother getting out of a limo and having millions of cameras on him dozens of times in her life. She had never imagined experiencing it for herself, and she had never one realized there was a *line* to stand on the red carpet and have pictures taken. They were moved to the front of it, mostly because Vicki wasn't very important in the whole Hollywood hierarchy thing, but she was also an It Girl for tonight.

If she hadn't felt so absolutely beautiful and completely happy, she would have decided she never, ever wanted to be an It Girl again, but for one night, it was rather wonderful. She and Marguerite had spent part of the afternoon practicing how to stand in the most flattering angles, which was not something Vicki had ever considered before but was suddenly glad of as people called her name and had her turn this way and that to show off her gown.

She also hadn't anticipated that there would be screens everywhere that she could *see* herself on. *That* was a combination of terrifying and wonderful, too, because really, she would have been happy to stand in front of a mirror gawping at herself all night instead of actually going to the ball. It did help her have somewhere else to look other than the flashing lights, and she felt vain and self-centered watching herself on the cameras, but also...

...she looked beautiful. She really did, with her hair swept up like Cinderella, tendrils of curls at her nape and temples, and a pale blue diamond collar necklace that glittered like fire at her throat. That had been a gift—temporary, he emphasized—from Chris, who'd borrowed it from a huge name jeweler that Vicki would have never dreamed of wearing. It had matching earrings that dripped from her lobes, and a shining tiara that sat lightly in her hair.

In the end, the gown had no traditional neckline at all. Instead, transparent blue gauze clung to her chest and upper arms, providing a bit of structure to a beaded bodice that created a neckline like water on the shore. The beads spilled

downward to another waves-on-the-shore dropped waistline that met the shimmering, pleated sea-colored fabric of the skirt, which swirled and spun and shifted against her skin with incredible sensation. She was bare-legged beneath it, *not* wearing stockings, because the skirt had a thigh-high split and the idea of one of her students catching a glimpse of their teacher in stockings was way more than Vicki could handle, but the slit skirt did mean that with each step, her wonderful ‘glass’ slippers could be seen.

For tonight—just for tonight—she was a genuine fairy tale princess, and it filled her with joy.

“Ms. Hawthorne—Vicki—can I call you Vicki?” Grace Chen stepped out of the crowd, a welcoming smile on her face blossoming even wider as Vicki chuckled and nodded. “Vicki, then. First, may I say: *wow*.”

Vicki laughed. “You may!” She gathered the skirt and spun, feeling the light, flowing fabric whirl beautifully around her legs and then settle, while the reporter beamed at her.

“How does it feel to be on the red carpet for the first time? And in such prestigious company?” Grace nodded toward Chris, and Vicki threw a careless glance his way to see him striking a pose for other cameras. “Am I right in understanding Benton Sinclair is your *brother*? And you’ve been hiding away as an elementary school teacher all this time, instead of wowing us all on the red carpet?”

“Ben likes the spotlight. I can do without it. But this is fun,” Vicki admitted. “I don’t know if it’s ‘I could get used to this’ fun, but it’s fun.”

“You and designer Zane Bellamy seem to be hitting it off. Can I ask what the story is there, especially after yesterday’s PDA between Mr. Bellamy and Nora Brusch?”

“Well, it’s early days yet, but I think Zane and I may have found kindred spirits in each other,” Vicki said happily. She was sure of it, but the entire entertainment industry didn’t need to know that right now. “As for yesterday, I guess if I was Ms. Brusch, I would have taken my shot at Zane, too, if I thought my chances were slipping away. But, you know, we all do

stupid things when we're twenty-four, and I'm not going to lose any sleep over it, personally."

"Wonderful." Grace really sounded like she meant it. "Now, can you tell me about the dress? What was it like, being an almost-ordinary person working closely with a top designer?"

"I *am* ordinary. I can't help it if my brother is famous, but *I'm* ordinary. And it was really exciting," Vicki admitted. "I can sew small felt animals for first graders, but that's about it. Watching Zane at work was like watching magic happening. He saw things I didn't even know how to suggest. I feel incredibly lucky. This was the chance of a lifetime for me, and I'm so grateful to have won."

"Especially since it seems you may have won at love, too. Tell me, will you be wearing this dress when you get married, or will you have Zane design you another one?"

"Oh my God!" Vicki burst out laughing. "Talk about putting the cart in front of the horse!"

"Besides." Zane swooped in to save her, a smile on his face, too. "I'm already booked for an entire wedding trousseau, so I can't possibly commit to another one right now."

"Oh really!" Grace almost physically pounced, as if she was being given the scoop of a lifetime. "Whose trousseau are you designing?"

"Mine." Dion, managing to be both subtle and flamboyant at the same time in a deep purple, almost black, tux with the palest orange silk shirt, stepped up beside them with Aaron Jones in a much more ordinary tuxedo lumbering behind him like a protective wall. "Although we haven't actually set a date yet. Or proposed, for that matter."

"I can fix that," Aaron said in his deep rumble, and knelt.

Vicki thought Dion might actually faint, and Grace stifled a squeal as she bodily pushed past Zane and Vicki to make sure her cameraman got this on film. Aaron drew a ring box from his pocket while Dion swayed in disbelief, and opened it

to reveal a golden band set with fiery orange and purple gemstones. “I wasn’t actually planning to do this right now,” Aaron admitted, “but since the opportunity arose...will you marry me, Dion Allen Newman?”

“Well, *obviously!*” Dion threw himself into Aaron’s arms as the bigger man stood up, and more quietly said, “Yes, of course I’ll marry you,” against his neck as the entire red carpet came to a stop and burst into applause and cheers. Vicki found herself wiping tears away and leaning on Zane to sniffle happily. The newly-engaged men became the center of attention, reporters and cameramen crowding around them, edging Vicki and Zane out of the spotlight.

Which was honestly how Vicki preferred it, so she smiled up at Zane. “Did you do that on purpose?”

“Not even a little bit, but all’s well that ends well, isn’t it? Tell me, Ms. Hawthorne. After all of this, there’s something I forgot to ask you. We’re going to a ball, but...do you dance?”

“Incredibly badly,” Vicki admitted. “I can just about waltz if I have a very strong lead. Otherwise I’m pretty much of the teenage ‘hang on around his neck and try not to step on his toes’ school of dancing. You?”

“Sarah forced me to learn a wide variety of dances in high school,” Zane said. “I won’t subject you to any of them, except maybe the waltz. Would you like to go in and dance with me?” He offered his elbow, and Vicki smiled.

“I would. For the rest of my life, in fact.”

“That sounds just about right.”

Because sometimes, Vicki thought as she stepped onto the dance floor, sometimes fairy tales really *did* come true.

EPILOGUE



EIGHTEEN MONTHS LATER

Zane made Vicki another dress for Dion and Aaron's wedding, mostly because their colors were orange and navy, and Vicki's sea-colored dress just didn't match the palette. She would have worn it otherwise; as far as she was concerned, she never needed another haute couture dress in her life. She did, in fact, have every intention of wearing it at her own wedding, although Zane protested that the wife of a designer really should have a completely new, unique wedding gown.

"It is unique," she told him cheerfully. "Just not unworn."

The wedding was still a moving target, discussed as a given without any actual proposals having been made. For the time being, Vicki didn't need one: they were settling into a new life, getting used to being with each other all the time after only visiting on school breaks for over a year. Vicki had felt an obligation to stick with the job she'd taken before meeting Zane, and besides, getting the qualifications to be an on-set tutor hadn't been an overnight process.

It turned out being in Los Angeles was great for getting to see her brother more, too, so although she'd only been there a few weeks now, Vicki was pretty sure returning to her home state was the right idea. Better, certainly, than Zane returning to *his* home town: Virtue had, thank goodness, stopped being a celebrity-sighting-style tourist attraction more or less as soon as Zane packed up his temporary studio there. Of course, the world-famous Star Captain *had* found himself obliged to drop by Vicki's classroom in full costume and character before she finished her year there, because apparently first grade teachers weren't allowed to be siblings to movie stars without showing them off a little. Chris hadn't actually minded at all, and had bought a vacation home in the town where his sister had found love.

"Very useful," Zane had said solemnly. "Now we won't have to stay with my father if we go back to visit."

Vicki had laughed out loud, trying to imagine that, and chortled again now, thinking about it. She *was* kind of inclined to get married in Virtue, but that was for later. Today she had to get to set early for orientation and to meet her first student.

"It could be a winter wedding," Zane called from the kitchen, apparently thinking about the same kinds of things she was. "You would be very ice-queen in that dress, especially with a few white accessories. Are you busy this coming December?"

Her heart leaped with sudden nervous excitement as she finished getting dressed and followed his voice into the kitchen, where any hope of conversation was briefly squashed by the enthusiastic roar of a juicer as he made fresh orange juice. When it died down, Vicki said, "Well, I'm not exactly busy, but I don't think this December will work out for us. The dress isn't going to fit."

Zane's eyebrows rose. "What, are you planning to eat your way through the holidays to the degree that y—" He broke off, taking in Vicki's nervous, hopeful expression, and whispered, "Oh my God, really?"

Vicki whispered, “Pretty sure I’m going to have a belly out to here,” as she rounded her hand over her stomach.

Zane took a couple of quick steps and fell to his knees in front of her, face buried gently against her tummy. She threaded her fingers into his hair, and he looked up, grey eyes shining silver with tears. “Really?”

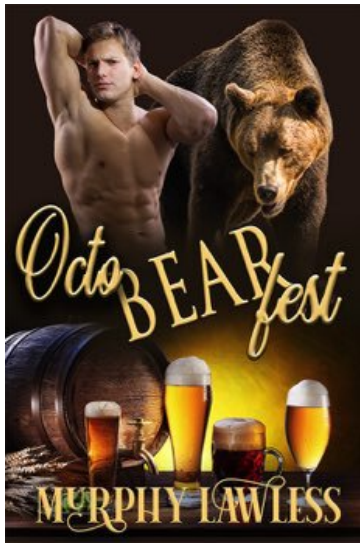
“Really,” Vicki whispered. “We’re going to have a baby.”

He closed his arms around her and hid his face against her stomach again, finally whispering, “I love you, Victoria Hawthorne. Thank you. Thank you for giving me a family.”

She laughed, soft and sweet, and bent to kiss him. “I love you too. Welcome to our happily ever after.”



Please turn the page to see what’s coming next
from Virtue Shifters author Murphy Lawless!



Welcome to Renaissance, Colorado, a new shifter town by the author of (and set in the same world as!) the best-selling Virtue Shifters books, with a special preorder price available now!

Grizzly shifter Bill Torben has spent his life working for his family's brewery and has loved every minute of it, although he's a liiiittle bit envious of his younger brother leaving town and almost immediately finding his fated mate.

But the brewery has been on shaky ground for the past few years, and Bill's sense of responsibility won't let him step away to look for a new future of his own.

And it's just as well, because Gwen Booker is about to rock his world. Hired to be the musical talent at the brewery's annual Oktoberfest, Gwen bursts onto the scene with beauty, enthusiasm, talent...

...and the wrong kind of music. There was a mixup somewhere along the way, and they hired rock musician Gwen *Booker* instead of jazz musician Gwendolyn *Brooker*...

Bill has never been so grateful for a mistake in his life. Now if they can navigate a path through love, music, and homebrew beer, together they might just get the festival back on its feet!

OctoBEARfest is a charming, steamy standalone with a guaranteed happily ever after and no cliffhangers. If you're looking for funny, fast-paced paranormal shifter romance, preorder now and fall in love with the Renaissance Shifters!

COMING SOON TO THE VIRTUE SHIFTERS WORLD!

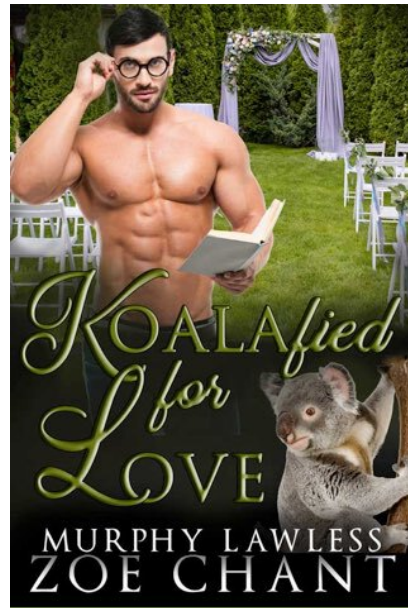
Koala shifter Oliver Campbell has spent most of his life working hard at embracing calm, because koalas are anything but: his koala would fight an armchair, given the chance...or a gorilla, for that matter.

But there will be *no fighting* for this mild-mannered Australian accountant at his cousin Steve's wedding (reception to be held in *Hold My Bear*, Steve's new gastropub!), who plans to make the most of his visit to the States. Still, the last thing Oliver expects is to meet his fated mate before the wedding even starts...and now he has to convince her that just because he's not rough-and-tumble on the surface, he's still just the man she needs....

Tiffany Wright has carved out a career as a construction electrician despite it being a boys' club. She's tough as nails on the job and a K-pop-loving girl's girl off it—but whether on or off the job, she has no time for anybody's nonsense, and wants a man who can hold his own and be a real partner for her. But most men are intimidated by her confidence, and until she meets Ollie, she's all but given up on her own happily ever after.

The sweet, gentle Aussie doesn't *seem* like the kind of man Tiffany is looking for—but his koala knows she's Oliver's perfect mate, with the no-nonsense, take-no-prisoners attitude that Ollie might need to find a balance with his bear, and finally be *himself*.

Keep an eye out for this next delightful installment in the Virtue Shifters, coming soon to an e-reader near you, and please turn the page for an excerpt from *Gladiator Bear*, a Murphy Lawless shifter novel!



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.

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