



Outfoxing Fate (Virtue Shifters #11)

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Category: Fantasy

Description: Fate is for second chances

Fifty years ago, fox shifter Sam Todd defied his family's wealth and connections in favor of love but disaster struck, and Sam was never able to tell his beloved Lola that they were fated mates, meant to be together forever.

As a young woman who had lost everything, Lola left her home town of Virtue, vowing never to return to a place full of heartache and memory. She's never forgotten Sam, but she put that part of her life behind her, and would have kept it there—except the granddaughter who now lives in Virtue calls to say that Sam Todd is alive after all.

Returning to Virtue means facing her past, even the parts Lola has tried to put aside so she could live in the moment. But she can't pass up the chance to see Sam again, so Lola gathers her courage and goes back to a home town that's grown past her imagination.

Sam has never moved on: he's spent decades hoping he could find Lola again, but the last thing he expects is for her to just reappear in his life. Time hasn't changed a thing: he's as certain as ever that he and Lola are meant to be together, but he knows she's holding something back and when he learns her secret, it will change their lives completely in this sweet second-chance romance set in the small shifter town of Virtue, New York.

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CHAPTER 1

Lola Brown had left her home town over fifty years ago, and she had never once intended to come back. Now she stood at the corner of Virtue's tremendous town square, wrapped in a green wool stole against the last bites of winter wind, and thought how incredibly true it was that you couldn't go home again.

She knew every inch of this town by heart, and it hadn't changed at all—except in all the ways it had changed entirely. The huge town square, partially buried in rotting snow, still held an enormous gazebo at its center, and at one end of the square, an old, familiar church still stood. At the other, the town hall and city offices, with the beautiful old clock tower, matched the church in reaching for the sky.

In between, almost everything was new. The Jones' still had the B&B on the opposite corner, but there was a massage therapy clinic and a bright welcoming cafe in the long row of buildings across from the B&B. To her utter surprise, the old toy shop was still there, but next to it was a doughnut shop, with a sign up that said they'd be closing for the season at the end of March. There were hairdressers and historical societies and a dozen other businesses in spaces that Lola remembered as empty, or as fading storefronts for shops whose names she could no longer remember.

She had thought Virtue was dying, when she left. But she'd come back to a town that someone had breathed new life into.

A little pang shivered through her. The town wasn't the only thing that had had new life breathed into it.

Sam Todd was alive.

He had died—Lola had believed he had died—nearly fifty years ago, in a plane wreck that had taken the lives of a number of young military recruits. There had been a funeral, bleak and devastating, and Lola...

Lola couldn't face Virtue without him. Not the small-minded town, not his petulant parents who had never cared for her, not the pitying, judging future that was the only thing she would find there.

So she had left. God, she'd been so young, just barely out of high school. And it had been so long ago that it had been easy to become someone else. Charlotte Nelson of Virtue, New York had taken the last train out one night, and Lola Johnson had gotten off that train in another town. No one had questioned it, or asked for proof, not back then. And after a while she'd married and become Lola Brown.

Until the day her granddaughter called to say Sam was alive, Lola had almost forgotten she'd ever been anyone else.

She whispered, "Almost," into the cold March wind, and turned away from the town square to make her way down the street, to another old place that she knew intimately, and didn't know at all.

The Hold My Bear bar made her laugh, even if it wasn't at all the seedy joint she remembered. Someone had carved and painted a sign for the bar, a cheerful-looking thing with the bar's name in curved letters and a big fluffy cartoonish grizzly bear lifting a beer in greeting. Even from outside it smelled fantastic, but of course it did: this was where her granddaughter Charlee worked, and Charlee had been a wonderful cook since childhood.

Lola slipped inside, accepted a seat for one near the front, and watched for a little

while as she nibbled at a salad. The bar had a homey feeling, warm wood booths and visible rafters overhead—that, at least, hadn't changed since she'd been a girl—and a bustling environment that said it was doing well. She'd seen the young man who owned the place on her granddaughter's video phone app, but hadn't understood how large Steve Torben was: well over six feet, with broad shoulders and an even broader smile. He had thick sandy blond hair and a barkeep's apron over jeans and a t-shirt, and kept the place running with an enthusiastic efficiency. Lola liked to see that: he seemed like the kind of man who was good for Charlee, and she wanted them to be happy.

She had always wanted everyone to be happy. It was a simple wish, and yet maybe the most complicated one she could ever make. Her own happiest ending had disappeared with Sam, decades earlier, so all she could hope for was a different story for other people.

Her heart lurched again, fingers going cold as she let herself brush past the idea that maybe her story wasn't over yet, either. It was too much to bear, really: too much hope. That was why Lola had essentially snuck back into Virtue without even telling Charlee she was there yet. She wanted to reacquaint herself with the place, at least a little, before plunging into...

...into whatever happened when a lost love was rediscovered decades later.

She could not let herself hope nothing had changed. Everything had changed. Obviously. And yet the part of her that was still eighteen years old hoped, and that was so very frightening.

“Nana!” The word was filled with delighted accusation as Charlee barged out of the kitchen, throwing her chef's jacket straight at Steve. The big man caught it—with his face, admittedly—and laughed, pulling it down to see what his girlfriend, Lola's granddaughter, was so excited about.

Charlee descended on Lola with a hug, tearfully happy. “Nana, you didn’t say you’d be here today! It’s so good to see you! Don’t you dare think you’re paying for that—salad?” The last word was disbelieving, and Lola laughed quietly as Charlee said, “ You’re eating salad ? Do you feel all right?”

“Nervous,” Lola said more honestly than she meant to, and her granddaughter’s face softened as she slid into the seat across from her.

“Yeah, that’s fair. I didn’t tell him, you know? I mean, I don’t know him at all to tell him, but some of my friends do, but?—”

“It’s better that you didn’t,” Lola said firmly. “Let’s think about Sam later, my darling. Look at you. You look so happy!”

It was true: Charlee looked happier than Lola could ever remember seeing her. She was a pretty young woman, with soft curling brown hair that she almost always wore tied up in a bun at the top of her head. She was round, both in face and body, though Lola knew for a fact those soft-looking arms had a lot of muscle in them: she’d watched Charlee effortlessly haul moving boxes that Lola wouldn’t have been able to lift in her prime, never mind these days. She was also sweaty, face pink from working in the kitchen, and the t-shirt she wore beneath the discarded chef’s jacket said ‘Never Trust A Skinny Chef’ above the bar’s beer-carrying-bear logo. “I am happy,” Charlee said with a contented sigh. “Steve’s great. Virtue’s a really nice town. I landed on my feet here. And I’m so glad to see you! You’re staying in the apartment upstairs, right?”

“There are at least two hotels and a bed and breakfast I can stay in,” Lola protested gently. “I don’t need to inconvenience you.”

“Don’t be silly. For one thing, I basically live with Steve these days. For another, even if I didn’t, you’re never an inconvenience.” Charlee’s green eyes shone. “You’re

my nana, for heaven's sake. And I?—”

She bit down on whatever she was about to say so hard Lola thought it could be called a chomp, but it didn't take many decades of experience to figure out what she was trying to be discreet about. “You're just dying to know the whole story between me and Sam?”

“Weeeelllllll...” Charlee scrunched up her face, then offered a wide, silly smile. “Now that you mention it...?”

“I'm afraid I don't really know the whole story,” Lola admitted softly. “I know my side, Charlee. I can't imagine...I can't imagine what Sam's must be. I thought I knew. All these years, I thought I knew...”

Charlee's expression went soft again and she reached out to take Lola's hand, her fingers feeling strong and warm and certain around Lola's. She rarely thought of herself as old, but she could feel it in the difference in their hands: she was bonier, her hands cooler, more fragile-feeling. As if Charlee noticed it too, she squeezed, but only gently. “Of course, Nana. You've got a lot of figuring out to do. I can wait for all the details. I just want you to be happy, you know?”

“I'm not unhappy,” Lola promised. “My life hasn't been what I imagined it would be when I was eighteen, but I'm not unhappy, darling. I'm just...curious, right now. And confused. But I'm sure all the answers will be clear soon. You said...” She hesitated. “When we spoke on the phone, you said he had a reputation as a recluse?”

At Charlee's nod, Lola exhaled a relieved sigh. “That's almost good. That means I can take my time and get my feet under myself before I meet him again. Just running into him on the street—” She broke off, then laughed quietly again. “Well, for one thing, we're old. Assuming he would even recognize me, I wouldn't want to give the poor man a heart attack!”

Charlee examined her with a thoughtful smile. "I think he would," she said after a moment. "You look a lot like yourself, Nana. Like the picture you had on your bedside table."

The picture of herself and Sam, from their prom, just a few months before he'd gone missing, presumed dead. Lola had kept that photograph tucked away until her husband died, and one day found it again. No one had questioned the old photo on her bedside table: if they'd even thought about it at all, they'd all assumed it was the man she'd married, until Charlee had seen the same picture in a Virtue yearbook from decades earlier. Lola couldn't help a brief smile, remembering the night the photo had been taken, although she turned it to a more rueful smile at her granddaughter. "I've gotten old, Charlee."

"Well, so has he. He can't hold that against you. But you've still got amazing cheekbones and a great jaw. I think he'll know who you are."

"I suppose we'll find out eventually. Now, I'm keeping you from your work, aren't I? I don't want to be a bother."

Charlee cast an unconcerned glance toward the kitchen. "Everybody back there knows what they're doing. They can spare me for a little while. Let me at least take your suitcase up to the apartment." She eyed Lola. "You did bring luggage, didn't you?"

"Yes, dear," Lola said a little guiltily. "I also got a room at the Jones' B&B for the night, just in case you weren't sure about having me stay with you. So my suitcase is already there."

"Nana!" Charlee put her hands on her hips, trying her best to look scolding. "Okay, fine, but first thing tomorrow you're checking out of the B&B and into Chez Bear, okay?"

"If you insist, Charlee."

"I totally do. I insist on walking you back to your B&B when you're ready to go, too."

"It's up half a block and across the square," Lola said dryly. "I'm not going to get lost."

Charlee laughed. "No, I know that, but I haven't seen you in ages and I just want to spend some time with you. I'll try not to suffocate you."

"Isn't that supposed to be my line? Tell you what, I'm finished here anyway. If you can take a few minutes off work and show me what's new in Virtue, that would be wonderful. It's changed a lot since I was last..." Lola hesitated over the final word, and in the end, chose, "here," instead of home .

"I'd love to," Charlee said happily. "You can tell me how things used to be, too. There's a new library!"

"I saw the old one had closed." Lola smiled at her granddaughter, who hopped up with the ease of youth and went to talk to her boyfriend, then returned to the table and offered Lola her elbow.

"One tour of New Virtue, coming up. And I told you, your money's no good here," she added in a scolding tone as Lola reached for her purse.

"If you insist," Lola murmured again. They left arm in arm to breathe deeply of the crisp early evening air, and Lola admitted, "I might have had a little walk around the square already, to see what was different."

"Did you try Imelda's? The doughnut shop," Charlee clarified, and when Lola shook her head, tugged her that direction. "I know you said your stomach was nervous, but

she makes the best coffee in town and one of her apple fritters will do your soul a world of good. She's about your age," she added. "Did you used to know her?"

"I don't think so. I'd remember an Imelda. No, sweetie, I'm sure most of my generation have long since moved away from Virtue. There wasn't much to keep us here, fifty years ago."

"The new library's that way." Charlee pointed off the square as they approached it, but shook her head. "I've found out there's more to Virtue than I imagined, so I wouldn't be surprised if there are still plenty of people who remember you."

"I'd rather they didn't," Lola said flatly enough to slow her granddaughter, whose searching glance made Lola feel guilty. She didn't elaborate, though, and after a moment Charlee nodded, just accepting that, before she continued on with her plan to bring them to the doughnut shop. It smelled every bit as heavenly as the pub had, in an entirely different way, although even the scent of cinnamon and sugar didn't do much to restore her appetite. "It's fine," she promised Charlee over what was admittedly an excellent cup of coffee. "I don't need to eat as much as I used to, and I'm sure I'll be hungry again once I'm over being nervous."

"You're really brave, you know," Charlee said. "I'm already in awe of you coming at all."

"Hah! We'll see if I'm brave enough to stay," Lola said wryly. "I might just duck out the back and never return."

"No, you won't. You wouldn't have come at all if you were going to do that."

Charlee sounded absolutely confident, and Lola had to admit her granddaughter was probably right. Still, she had run away from this town once before, and she could by gum do it again.

But not until she'd at least seen Sam again. From a distance, maybe. Just to make sure he was...to make sure he was okay. To see that with her own eyes. Then, maybe, she could let the past go.

Page 2

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CHAPTER 2

There were fox cubs in the yard.

Not shifters, obviously, although it wasn't that obvious, Sam Todd supposed. On one hand, there weren't all that many fox shifters. On the other, he'd fostered a couple, and there was always Hazel, the old female fox shifter he sometimes encountered in the woods. But these were true cubs, fluffy and grey and somersaulting over their own feet and tails.

They were a little early. A month or so old by now, since they were leaving their den, but that meant they'd been born in February. Early enough that Sam wanted to keep an eye on them, to make sure their mother had food and the cubs were growing strong and safe. He'd spent most of a lifetime doing that kind of thing, watching over cubs, whether human or fox, trying to make sure they'd be okay.

It wasn't a bad way to spend a life. And even at pushing-seventy-years of age, it still had the advantage that his parents, now long dead, had absolutely hated the fact he'd chosen to do it.

A tap sounded on his office door, and Sam, chuckling at his own slightly petty soul, turned his office chair toward the door. "Yes?"

"Mr Todd." His adopted son, Chase, opened the door and poked his head in. He was one of the now-adult kids Sam had fostered, and was currently working as Sam's business secretary in order for Sam to maintain a polite legal fiction. Sam's parents had been petty people, angry that he hadn't fallen into line as the obedient son, and

had devised a life-long financial reprimand in the form of refusing to sign over the family trust to him unless he had 'a constant companion.'

They'd meant for him to get married, obviously. It wasn't Sam's fault they hadn't phrased it in such exact language. So while there was regular house staff, their presence specifically did not count toward the legal obligations of the trust's requirements. Dependent children, however, did fulfill the legal obligations, and even if his marital plans hadn't gone the way Sam had hoped, he'd always wanted kids. Fostering had been a solution for multiple needs, and Chase, the oldest of his kids, had come back home after the last of the others had outgrown a need for Sam's help.

Of course, fostering kids had been even less w hat his parents had meant than 'get married,' but as far as Sam was concerned, that was on them. They'd refused to embrace the fact that he'd found his fated mate decades earlier, when he and she were both just out of high school, and they'd reaped the consequences of their actions. There had never been anyone for Sam except Charlotte Nelson, and there never would be. It didn't matter that she'd left town after his own disappearance, and didn't matter that no one had been able to find her since. Sam had been lucky as hell to meet her, especially so young, and it wasn't fair to ask anybody else to live up to the memory of a lost dream.

"Mr Todd," Chase repeated patiently, in his very formal 'this is business-related so we're pretending you're not my dad' voice, "the investors are here."

"Oh, for God's sake. How many languages do they need to hear 'no' in?"

"Evidently all of them, sir."

Despite himself, Sam chuckled. "Then we're all out of luck, because I only know half a dozen, and that's if you count everyone who actually says 'no' as separate ones."

"Ei," Chase offered. "óchi. Bù. Hayir. La. That's Finnish, Greek, Mandarin, Turkish and Arabic."

"Why on earth do you know how to say 'no' in Finnish?" Sam stood, smoothing his slacks and shirt front, then slipping his coat from the back of the chair onto his shoulders. "Or Turkish? Or any of those languages? I was a splendid benefactor but I don't remember having five different language tutors in."

"It was a college challenge." Chase grinned at him. Somewhere along the line the young man—not so young anymore, at nearly fifty, but Sam had a hard time remembering that—Chase had grown up into an organized businessman determined to see Sam's family investments grow, even though Sam himself couldn't care much less. "One of my friends learned how to say 'I love you' in sixty-four different languages," Chase went on, "and another one learned a phrase that could get him slapped in any country in the world. I went with 'no.' It seemed easier. They will help bring the railroad back into Virtue, Dad," he added more quietly. "I know the town is divided on the topic, but I also know you support it and there have to be reasons to bring it back."

"Virtue itself is reason enough." Sam believed that, but also wanted the railroad back for sentimental reasons. Foolish ones, honestly. The last time anybody had seen Charlotte, she'd been walking toward the old train station. He had a dream that bringing it back would bring her back, too. "There's a town meeting about it in a few weeks. If they decide against it, there'll have been no point in even talking to these people."

He sounded a bit like a grumpy old man just then, and knew it. So did Chase, who quirked an opinionated eyebrow about it, but didn't actually say anything. Sam still felt sheepish enough to say, "Well, all right. For a few minutes, then. But they're not going to get anywhere," he added stubbornly. "I'm not selling any of the river front."

They both glanced out his office's huge bay windows as he insisted. The river was actually on the other side of the house, but the compulsion was strong, and made them exchange a brief, rueful smile. Centuries earlier, Sam's family had settled four miles of river front. The only development that had been done in the area since was building their family home and, under Sam's own supervision, adding a cycling trail that ran through the woods along it. A number of old Virtue families had similar arrangements, and for most of Sam's life, increasingly pushy developers had been trying to buy it out from under them to turn the quiet town's outskirts into a tourism resort area.

"There's already a hotel in town and one outside of it," he added. "We don't need more people than that coming into Virtue."

Chase shook his head as they walked through the old echoing house. Sam missed having the younger foster kids there, but he was too old to keep up with them anymore, so the old Colonial home felt emptier with every passing year. At least Chase was a through-line from the early years of fostering, and for the moment, his voice filled the halls and fended off some of the loneliness. "Most places are eager for some kind of modern development, you know. Small towns have such a hard time holding on to their population, and jobs."

"Virtue isn't most small towns. You know that, Chase."

"I do. We all do." The one thing Sam's foster kids had in common was the secret they, and Virtue, held close: they were all shifters, and Virtue itself had been founded as a sanctuary for shifter families. The town had survived for centuries as just that, and Sam, knowing about shifters himself, had provided an extra layer of safety for shifter kids who ended up in the foster system. Most of them who had come to live with him for a while had families of their own to return to, but a handful were his kids, and nothing anyone ever said could take that away from him, even as they grew up and moved on to their own lives.

And as they'd done that, from the safety of his own big-house sanctuary, Sam had watched Virtue move on, too, until it seemed like it had nearly faded away. He'd been afraid that it would lose its ability to provide shelter for shifters within his own lifetime, but something had changed recently, and it wasn't just that Chase had come home from working in the city to take over the Todd family estate finances.

Sam couldn't entirely place the town's resurgence at the librarian's feet, but it was a close thing. Sarah Ekstrom had grown up in Virtue, not a shifter, just a girl who loved the town. She'd gone away to college, and for most kids from small towns, that was it. But she'd come back, too, determined to bring life back to the little town, and over the past decade, Virtue had begun to bloom again. Sam knew—a sigh escaped him, though it was almost a laugh, too. He knew a lot, for a man who stayed tucked away on his own private property.

Hazel, the old Oneidan fox shifter who lived in the woods, told him some of it. So did Old Man Evans, a badger shifter who had been around as long as anyone could remember. They hadn't given him a lot of details, but he knew there'd been a passing of the baton lately. Sarah Ekstrom and her mate—a bear shifter from Argentina, Sam believed—had taken over protecting the town's charter. As far as Sam knew, it was the first time a true human had ever been part of that protection, and he thought it meant something. He wasn't sure what, but it meant something .

There was more, too. Something else had changed in the town's... vibe . That was what the kids these days would call it, Sam thought. The librarian's efforts had injected pure love into the little town, but in recent months there had been a new energy around Virtue. Businesses were opening all over the place—small, locally-owned businesses with real customer bases—and there were more new shifters arriving in town than Sam could remember in his entire life. It was as if the town had been sleeping, slipping away, for generations, and suddenly it had remembered its purpose for existing. Suddenly it wanted to survive, and thrive.

Sam hadn't wanted to get out of the house and spend time in the town for literal decades. For the first time since he could remember, though, the idea brought him joy. He'd been taking walks recently. Mostly just to his property's edge, or along the cycle path to where the town started building up, but that was more than he'd done since he'd had foster kids to bring to school and attend performances for. Whatever was calling new shifters to Virtue was calling old ones like him back, too.

Maybe this afternoon he'd actually go into town. Get a cup of coffee—decaf, or his doctor would scold him—and people-watch for a little while. That actually sounded pleasant.

As soon as he got rid of these investors.

"This way, Mr Todd."

As if Sam didn't know the way to his own library, although in all honesty, he hadn't been in the room in such a long time that he wouldn't have been surprised if he didn't remember the way. Well, the house wasn't that big. He said, "I know, Chase," a little acerbically, although Chase didn't look in the least apologetic as he pushed the library door open for him.

There were two men waiting for him: one was enormous, with long brown hair tied back in a very tidy ponytail, and the other, slender and no more than Sam's own height, which didn't make him short by anyone's standards. They both wore extremely expensive suits—Sam should know; he wore one himself—and both turned away from the river view with polite expressions that sharpened into intense interest in the same way Sam knew his own did.

These investors were shifters, and that changed everything.

"Garius Beren," the big man said as he stepped forward, offering a massive mitt of a

hand. "This is my associate, Conri Lyell."

"Sam Todd." Sam shook Garius's hand with the sensation that the huge shifter could do a 'puny god' scenario with him effortlessly. He wouldn't, obviously, but the image of being flung around like that struck him vividly anyway.

His fox, a quiet animal, lifted its head cautiously to eye the other shifter. The big one is a bear, not a god.

Sam chuckled silently. It's from a movie. He was rather fond of those films, but the fox immediately lost interest and went back to resting. "Gentlemen, would you care to sit? I can have drinks brought in." He gestured at Chase, who'd remained in the doorway until he made the oblique offer. He disappeared as the other shifters made appropriately polite noises as they took seats on the brown leather couches.

As soon as Chase was gone, Lyell spoke. "This is already more interesting than I expected. Mr Todd, I assume we can speak freely here?"

"There isn't really anyone to overhear, but for the sake of propriety we should probably wait for Chase to come back with the drinks and close the door behind him on the way out," Sam replied, and offered an easy small-talk topic: "I assume you found the place without difficulty?"

"It's a beautiful drive," the big man, Garius, said. "Remarkably isolated. I live in a similar estate."

Conri grunted with amusement. "You live in an architecturally-designed bunker on an Italian mountainside in a mountain range you own half of."

Garius looked rather tragically injured at the accusation, which was funny on a man his size. "That's what I said. And I don't own the Apennines. I just support the

government's park project that encompasses a considerable portion of them."

Conri gave another amused grunt, and Sam coughed on a laugh. Neither of these men were anything like what he expected. A moment later Chase came in with a tray that held water, whiskey, two kinds of soda, and a number of cups and glasses suitable to those things and the coffee that he said was now brewing. He did close the door behind him, and Garius Beren cut straight to the heart of the matter. "Are you familiar with the Gladiator Foundation, Mr Todd?"

"Vaguely. Why don't you tell me about it?" Sam poured drinks, the men indicating their preferences with brief gestures as Garius said, "On the surface we support the conservation of rare species and endangered environments. As you might guess, given what you yourself are, our definition of 'rare species' goes quite a lot farther than most. We're trying to keep the world safe for shifters, Mr Todd, and Virtue came to our attention recently."

"I hadn't known there were sanctuary towns," Conri said with surprising softness. "Our line of shifters doesn't have them."

"Your line?" Sam's fox lifted its head again, brightening with a curiosity he also felt.

"We can trace our ancestors back to the Roman arenas," Conri said. "But not all shifters can."

"Most of them can't," Garius put in dryly. "Or so I understand. We keep track of our own shifter line through a variety of means, and I knew there were others, but...like Conri, I didn't realize there were sanctuary towns. Our interest, Mr Todd, is in keeping this space safe. We're not investors looking for an annual thirty percent return. We're looking for a future for the world's shifter population."

A slow smile crossed Sam's face. "I want to see Virtue thrive, gentlemen. But I'm not

willing to see it destroyed. If there's a space in there to invest, then we have something to discuss."

"We drove through," Conri said. "But we were wondering if you'd be willing to show us around. If all our money is good for here is pouring it into the community so no one has to rely on more predatory investors, then I, for one, am comfortable with that." At Sam's curious look, he cleared his throat and added, "I'm the CEO of All-Arena Entertainment."

Sam blinked once, then a second time before his eyebrows rose. "The professional wrestling..." 'Company' didn't even begin to cover it. "Empire?"

"My family has run it and its predecessors for centuries," Conri agreed with a nod. "Money is, as they say, not an object."

"I'm rich," Sam said mildly. "Next to the AAE, though, I'm part of the 99%. And you?" he couldn't help asking Garius.

"In a similar position," the big man said with a shrug. "The Gladiator Foundation is only the charitable arm of a larger conglomerate. I can't spend money fast enough to make a dent. So if we can actually be of use to Virtue, and possibly other sanctuary towns—" The words came with a question attached, although he didn't actually ask it. Sam nodded, indicating that he did know of others, and Garius went on without missing a beat. "—then I'd be happier to offer real assistance than just make it difficult for other investors to get in here. But as Con says, if a quiet influx of cash is all Virtue needs, that's fine, too."

Sam had all but talked himself into going into town anyway, before he'd even met these two men. Now he stood and spread his hands. "Well, let's go take a look and see what we can do."

CHAPTER 3

Charlee had insisted on moving Lola's things into the apartment over the bar that morning, and Lola had to admit it was rather nice to be in a space she could think of as all her own, instead of the Jones' B she'd seen that from the corner of her eye, and now she got a good look at him. He was slim but strongly built, with white hair swept back from a widow's peak and a cascade of gentle wrinkles. He wore a beard, short and well-kept, and a suit that spoke of good taste and the money to support it.

Lola put a hand out, fumbling for something to hold on to, and planted her palm against the pristine glass display case. Imelda made a perfectly reasonable indignant sound at that, but it was all that kept Lola from falling, because as Sam Todd's sharp blue eyes met hers for the first time in fifty years, all she could think was, He hasn't changed a bit.

CHAPTER 4

Sam Todd hadn't heard that voice in five decades.

He was standing before he knew it, the men with him forgotten as he glimpsed the woman who'd just come into the store and gave Imelda a laughing response. The voice was older, of course, maybe a little deeper than it had been when he'd last heard it, but even if his fox hadn't come to full alert, Sam would have known Charlotte Nelson's soft tones anywhere in the world.

And it might have been less shocking anywhere but here, at home in Virtue.

The hair that peeked out from under a badly-knitted green hat was white now, soft curls curving around the brim. The shape of her cheekbone was much the same, though he couldn't really see anything else of her beyond the high collar of her winter coat. Still, it was his Charlotte, and if he'd had any doubts, they fled as she turned to smile at the table he was at.

God , she was lovely. As lovely as she'd been when they were eighteen, with a ready smile, gentle brown eyes, and a comforting presence he could sink into. Her cheeks were pink from the cold right now, and her lips, a little thinner than he remembered, were compressed even as she smiled. She was everything he remembered: sweet, wonderful perfection.

Right up until all the color drained from her face when she saw him. A horrible sick lurch shot through Sam's gut as he realized—remembered—that she thought he was dead. For all she knew, she was seeing a ghost, right now. She clutched at the display

case to keep her balance, and Sam opened his mouth to offer some kind of reassurance that came out as a helpless croak of sound.

Garius, closest to Charlotte, came to his feet and caught her weight to make certain she didn't fall. She made a sound not unlike the one Sam had just made, steadied herself, and gave the big shifter a weak smile. "Thank you." Her gaze flickered back to Sam instantly, though, and Garius, following it, got an expression of sudden understanding.

"You're welcome. May I invite you to our table?"

"Oh." Charlotte barely vocalized the word, then cast an uncertain glance between the store's proprietor and the men at the table. "I just...came in for...coffee and a doughnut..."

"Conri and I," Garius announced firmly, to Conri's strangled noise of protest, "were just about to take our coffee and doughnuts for a walk around the square. Why don't you take our places? And my bear claws."

Charlotte, rallying, said, "I don't think I can eat four," with audible amusement, but let Garius guide her to the table while Sam continued to stand there like a fool, gaping helplessly, hopelessly, adoringly, at the woman he'd lost decades earlier. Conri made another sound of protest that ended with Garius levering him up from his seat and bodily walking him out the door. Sam caught him muttering something about sparks flying as the door jangled shut again, and then for all he cared in the world, he was alone with Charlotte Nelson.

He only realized he was still standing when she said, "Well. Shall we sit?" in a wry tone. It jolted him into action, an abrupt step toward her, which would have worked better if the table hadn't been between them: he crashed into it with his thighs, yelped, and as the silverware clattered and coffee slopped, sat back down.

"Charlotte?" It was the first thing he'd said since he'd seen her, and his voice was faint with confusion and hope.

She smiled, the soft gentle smile he remembered so well, and sat in the chair Garius had been in. "It's Lola now."

"Lola." Sam cradled the name in his soul. "You always liked that nickname. I remember...you convinced the yearbook to use it, the last year, didn't you?"

"God, I don't remember. Are you all right?"

"I've never been better," he replied, stunned, then realized she meant whether he'd hurt himself walking into the table. "Yes, fine, but...no. Lola...? I looked for you," he said desperately. "I never stopped looking for you. But you disappeared, you..."

"Well," she said slowly, "you were dead."

Sam laughed, a cracked sound, and put his face in his hands before looking up again. "Yes. Obviously not, but...I'm sorry, Char...Lola. They had no right to do that. Did you..." So many questions swirled through him, he honestly had no idea where to begin, and he imagined she had at least as many to ask him in return. After a few struggling seconds, he said the one thing he knew absolutely to be true: "I have never been so happy to see anyone in my life as I am to see you right now."

To his relief, Lola's smile blossomed, bright and beautiful. "Me either. Oh, Sam."

He couldn't say which of them pushed the table out of the way (spilling more coffee, but he didn't care). He just knew that suddenly they were hugging, his nose buried in her soft white hair, and nothing else in the world mattered. She was alive. The only woman he had ever loved, the only one he'd ever wanted to love, was alive and in his arms and nothing, nothing, could be wrong in this moment.

When they finally released the embrace, Lola's brown eyes were bright with tears that she carefully daubed away. "I don't know how I imagined this would go," she whispered. "I didn't imagine spilled coffee and...what is a 'bear claw' doughnut?"

"Mostly a joke for Mr Beren," Sam said. "Because he's..."

A shifter, his fox prompted. A bear shifter.

Sam nodded, but the thing was...they'd been kids when they last knew each other. Madly in love, but kids. He had only been struck with the certainty that Lola was his fated mate a few days after their high school graduation. A few weeks before they disappeared from each other's lives for decades.

He had never had the chance to tell her that he was a shifter. And now, sitting in a doughnut shop, seeing each other for the first time since they'd been teens...was obviously not the time or place to tell her.

She'll understand, his fox promised. Mates always do.

Yes, but...

"Large?" Lola asked, amused. Sam blinked at her a few times, having totally lost his own train of thought before it came back to him in a crash of recollection.

"Right. Yes. Mr Beren is very large. Bear-sized, even. Yes." That was the most obvious explanation for the bear claw doughnuts being for Garius specifically. A hazy sense of disbelief rolled through Sam as he gave his mate a helpless smile. "I don't know what I'd imagined either," he told her. "I've imagined this day so often, Lola, so many times a day for so many years, and now...now I don't know what to do. What to say. How is that possible? How could I have been practicing this in my head for so long, and be at a loss when it happens?"

"Well," she said again with that same slow thoughtfulness, "you probably didn't imagine a doughnut shop and spilled coffee, either."

He glanced at the mess he'd made, then back at her with a rueful smile. "You're right. Not once. Not once in a million dreams was there spilled coffee or doughnuts. They're almond-filled, usually. Bear claws are."

Charlotte Nelson—Lola Nelson, or whatever her surname was now—gave him a very solemn look, and with the quick dry humor he remembered from their youth, said, "Don't be silly, Sam. Bear claws are full of keratin, just like human fingernails. Almonds. Hnf. Well I never."

Sam laughed, bright and joyful, and felt like it had been years since he'd heard himself laugh that way. "Smart aleck. You haven't changed much, Lola."

Her eyebrows, feathery and white now, rose as she first glanced, then gestured down at herself, indicating the years and their toll since they'd last seen each other. Sam shook his head, still with a smile. "You know what I mean."

"I do. I admit, when I saw you, all I could think was you hadn't changed at all."

Sam discovered it was impossible not to do that downward glance and gesture, the one that encompassed all the inevitable changes that age brought. Lola said, "You know what I mean," and of course, he did, although she added, "The beard is new, though. I'm going to have to think about that."

"I can shave it," Sam said promptly, although he also brushed his hand over it rather possessively. "One of my kids told me I looked like Santa Claus with it, though, so I kept it."

Shock filled Lola's brown eyes, although it was tempered a moment later with

understanding. "Of course you have children. How many?"

"Mostly foster kids," Sam admitted. "I never married or had any serious relationships after..." As her eyes widened again, he took a deep breath and tried to answer the questions she'd actually asked. "Quite a few. Most of them were relatively short-term, but I had a handful who stayed with me. You?" he asked a little hesitantly.

He thought she hesitated, too. "One daughter. I did get married, after a while. And my granddaughter... she ended up in Virtue, somehow. That's how I found out you were alive."

Sam felt his eyebrows fly upward. "You knew ?"

"Only for a few weeks now," Lola said hastily. "It's taken me that long to nerve myself up to visiting. Not because I didn't want to see you, although of course I didn't know how you might have changed, or if you'd want to see me , but..." She glanced out the window at the vast town square, and spoke quietly. "It wasn't a happy time, when I left Virtue. I wasn't sure I wanted to come back here . If you can understand the difference."

"I do, but..." Sam spread his hands. "I have so many questions, Lola."

Her laugh, high and fluting, sounded strained. "Oh, believe me, so do I. It just...this doesn't seem like the place."

"No. No, it doesn't, but...I'm so glad to see you." It was such an understatement Sam was almost embarrassed to say it, but the tender smile he received in response was everything he could hope for.

"Me too," Lola whispered. "Oh, me too, Sam. I hardly know what to do with myself, but I'm so glad to see you."

"Would you like to—" Sam bit off the impulsive question, then rushed ahead with it. "Would you like to come out to the house this evening? Or tomorrow? So we can talk?"

"The house." Lola's face went blank for a moment, as if she was repressing a memory. "Your parents' house. Of course that would be yours now. Oh, God, Sam, I don't know. The last time I was there was for your funeral, for heaven's sake, and it didn't go well."

"My funeral didn't go well?" he asked in astonishment. He'd known they had one for him, before he'd made his way back home months later. But he'd imagined it as a heartbroken, solemn affair that his parents, for obvious reasons, didn't like to talk about. The idea that it hadn't gone well was almost laughable, if it weren't for the old pain in Lola's eyes.

"No one told you," she said after a moment. "Oh, my. Well. You know your parents didn't like me."

Sam closed his eyes briefly, feeling his expression say everything that needed to be said, although as he opened his eyes he also spoke aloud. "I do know. We had a lot of fights about that."

His fox sniffed with disdain bordering on fury. They were stupid. Fate is the best mate.

"I know you did," Lola said with a sigh. "And so did I, with them. Oh, Sam. There's so much to explain and part of me wants to pretend none of it ever happened or matters, and in a way I suppose it doesn't. It's been so long. But at the same time..."

"It doesn't matter," Sam said firmly. "Because we have now, whatever we make of it, no matter what else." His voice gentled, and he put his hand out across the table,

hoping she would take it. "I don't know what you might want from this reunion, Lola, and I'm not going to push you about that, either. Not ever, but especially right now, when we've got so much to figure out about what happened. But please believe me. There's nothing I want more in the world than to hear your story."

To his relief, and with an electric sensation of joy, Lola gently fitted her hand into his. Her skin was cooler than he remembered, the bones more prominent in her fingers, knuckles larger than they'd been, but her touch was exactly as it had been so long ago: one part steady comfort and one part sparking connection, saying they belonged together in a way he never could with anyone else. Lola smiled at their joined hands, lifting her gaze to his. "My hand never did fit quite right in anyone else's."

"That's just what I was thinking."

Lola took a deep breath and shook her head. "I don't think I can face your house yet, honestly. Could we meet somewhere else? My granddaughter has an apartment over the new bar."

"Hold My Bear?" Sam asked. "I went in there once just after they opened. It was so nice I ran away again."

"Right?" Lola laughed aloud and squeezed his hand. "It was such a dive when we were kids. I couldn't believe it when Charlee told me she was working there, and I couldn't believe it even more when I saw the place!"

"Wait, wait. Oh, of course. Charlee must be short for Charlotte. Chef Charlee is your granddaughter? She's only been in Virtue a few months, but she has legions of passionate acolytes in town. Even an old recluse like me has heard people waxing eloquent. I gather she's an incredible cook!"

"I taught her to cook," Lola said with no false modesty, "but she took it to levels I never dreamed of. I'm sure she would bring something up for us if her apartment would be all right with you?"

"It would be perfect," Sam assured her. "And Charlee doesn't even have to feed us, if she doesn't want?—"

"She'll want to," Lola said dryly, and when he laughed, said, "No, I'm serious. I've been too nervous to eat and she's been fussing. She'll probably bring the whole menu up for us. Sam..." There was longing in his name. "It's so good to see you again."

Sam blurted, "We could go over to her apartment now?" and tried not to cringe at how eager-teen he sounded. "No, that's pushy, I don't mean to be?—"

The store's door bells rang, startling him: he had more or less forgotten the world existed around them anymore. He and Lola both glanced toward the door, and Sam met Garius Beren's apologetic gaze. "Oh, hell. I forgot I was doing business."

"We can arrange to meet again tomorrow," the big man offered. "I just thought I should stop back in and decide on our course of action before leaving you to yours." His smile for Lola was charming enough that she dimpled, although Sam could also almost see her thinking 'what a nice young man.'

"Don't let me interrupt your business," she said. "Sam and I are just old friends, catching up after a very long time."

He knew better, but that 'just' sent a pang through Sam's heart.

From Garius's expression, it showed, because his smile twisted gently. "I appreciate that, but I hate to break up a reunion. Unfortunately, Conri and I are scheduled to leave tomorrow afternoon, so..."

So, with a groan, Sam stood up to leave Lola Nelson behind.

CHAPTER 5

It was almost a relief that Sam had to leave for a little while. Not because she didn't want to see him—part of Lola wanted to grab his hand and never, ever let go—but because Lola felt like she needed a moment to breathe , to come to terms with Sam Todd really, truly being alive and back in her life. She felt wobbly even though she was sitting, and gazed at the spilled coffee with some dismay. She could have used that right now.

Instead she began sopping it up with napkins, because that gave her something to do besides tremble. Imelda called, "You don't have to do that," from behind the counter, and Lola nodded agreement: she knew she didn't have to, and if the little doughnut shop wasn't so busy, she knew the proprietress would have already come to clean up. In fact, Imelda did that now that Lola was tidying, saying, "Sorry I didn't get to this before."

"Not at all. You're busy and we were..." Mooning over each other, Lola thought with a happy little shiver.

Imelda flashed a broad, strong smile as she wiped up the table. "Old flame? I thought you were going to faint when you saw him."

"The love of my life," Lola murmured, and to her surprise, Imelda's gaze went so bright tears nearly fell.

"Oh, that's wonderful. I hope that's wonderful?"

"It is," Lola whispered. "Just overwhelming."

"You need coffee," Imelda announced sternly. "And to eat that bear claw."

Lola obediently took a bite, then widened her eyes and said, around a mouthful of pastry, "Oh. Oh, that's good!"

The doughnut shop owner looked pleased and went back behind the counter to throw away sopping paper towels away, then returned with a new cup of coffee. "On the house."

That was at least the second time she'd been offered free food in Virtue. If that kind of thing kept up, Lola thought, she would have to move back just to save on grocery bills. And then she jolted a little, accepting the cup, because she hadn't let herself even consider the idea of returning to Virtue. The thought hadn't been allowed to so much as cross her mind, until all of a sudden there it was, bold as brass. She sipped the coffee, not quite burning her tongue, and hummed with approval. "That's very good."

"Best coffee in town," Imelda said proudly. "So Sam Todd, hm? Picked yourself a quiet one, didn't you?"

"He wasn't so quiet, back when I knew him," Lola said with a little smile. "But it's been a long time."

Imelda put her hand on Lola's shoulder, a brief, friendly squeeze of support. "I hope it all works out for you."

Lola smiled again and nodded, but couldn't quite bring herself to say so do I out loud. It seemed like asking too much. Instead she turned to see if she could catch a glimpse of Sam and the two younger men out in the square.

She could, but they were distant: at the far end, near the new cafe, with Sam gesturing at something off to the right from there. The school was that direction, right behind the line of stores along the square's edge; beyond that, Lola vaguely remembered a hotel of some sort, and then the train station, of course. That had been closed down for decades, though; apparently since not long after she'd left, in fact. She thought that was a shame, but Virtue had managed a resurgence without it, so maybe she was wrong.

The men struck off in that direction, toward the old train station, and Lola turned back to her coffee and doughnut, lost in smiling thought.

Sam really had changed so very little. Still so handsome, so quietly assured. He'd never made a fuss, back when they were seeing each other. Not even when his parents made it clear they had much higher expectations of him than Charlotte Nelson, small-town nobody. He had just told them, over and over again, to get used to it, or get used to not having him in their lives once he reached eighteen. Lola had, a few times, tried to tell him she understood if he didn't want to challenge them, but Sam...

He hadn't even laughed, exactly. He'd smiled, shook his head, and said, "It's their decision, Char. If they don't get that I love you with everything I am, then they don't deserve to have either of us in their lives. I hope they'll come around, but if they don't?" He'd shrugged. "I've got you."

Lola, who came from no money, had moments of worrying that Sam, who came from a lot of it, didn't really understand what he was getting himself into, saying things like that. But at the same time, she'd never doubted him. Every once in a while, even now, she thought that his absolute confidence in her, in them, had been what gave her the strength to walk away from Virtue all those years ago. Charlotte Nelson, little miss nobody from the wrong side of the tracks, would have been terrified to go, but Charlotte Nelson, the woman Sam Todd loved? She could do anything, because Sam

believed in her. Even after he was gone, she could do anything, because he believed in her. She hadn't exactly lost that mindset along the way, but its ferocity had faded with age.

Somehow she'd drunk all her coffee, and finished one and a half of the really-quite-large bear claw doughnuts. Lola blinked at the scraps left on her plate, then chuckled at herself and got up to pay, even though Imelda had said it was on the house. The proprietress insisted she'd meant it, so Lola put her money in the tip jar instead. Imelda gave her a scolding-but-also-pleased-and-amused glance, and Lola was smiling as she pulled her lumpy hat on to go back outside.

Sunlight bounced off the old snow, throwing bright sparkles into the air. Or maybe that was just Lola's heart, soaring in a way she couldn't remember it having done in many years. She had nowhere in particular to go, but wasn't surprised when her feet took her the same direction Sam had gone. Not because she was following him, she told herself. Because she'd lived over that way, all those years ago. She doubted her old house was still there, but she was drawn there anyway, following familiar paths that hadn't changed much with time.

So much of Virtue seemed to be like that. Exactly the same, and still somehow so different. Just like she was, Lola supposed. Maybe just like Sam was.

The schoolyard rang out with young voices as she passed by, just as it had back then. The building was new, though. She recognized the corner store near it, though it had changed names, paint, and decor since she'd last seen it. A rusted lock was open on the train station gates, and a few footprints here and there in the patchy snow suggested Sam and the other men had perhaps gone in to take a look. Lola hesitated, but in the end she went ahead and walked past, literally crossing the tracks as she took the road toward her old house.

It almost surprised her, how close the house really was to town. She'd always felt like

she lived far away, but really, it wasn't more than a twenty minute walk, even at her slower pace these days. The distance, she now realized, had been in the wealth disparity between herself and Sam. Or maybe it had been in how his parents treated her because of that disparity, but back then she'd been very young, and had seen the distance as physical.

This was still by no means the wealthiest part of town, though the houses were prettier than she remembered, and the yards generally well-kept. Handsome trees separated the lots, though they were bare-branched now, thin fingers moving gently in a cold wind. The streets were paved, which they hadn't been when she was a kid. She couldn't quite remember if they had been by the time she'd left.

The street that led to her house was Stranger Lane. They'd thought it was funny when she was a kid—only strange people lived there!—but again with the wisdom of age and distance, she realized that the strangers it referred to were relative newcomers to Virtue. People like Sam's family had settled the town in the sixteen hundreds. Families like Lola's had only been there thirty or forty years, at the time: blow-ins, living and building on the land that was left, instead of the choice pickings the wealthy settlers had taken.

Her house was still there.

Lola's breath rushed out of her and she stopped, a hand on a nearby mailbox to steady herself, as she gazed at the old building. It was clear no one lived there now, although it was tidily kept up, for an empty house. The windows and doors were boarded, but neatly, like it had been a preventative measure rather than done after everything had been wrecked. Lola murmured, "I'll be damned," and went to test a step before walking up the stairs to the broad, wrap-around porch.

Everything was too well-boarded to peek inside, but the porch was still in good condition, as were the exterior walls. The paint wasn't new, but it wasn't peeling and

ugly, either. It gave Lola an unexpected sense of both satisfaction and sorrow: she would have liked to have seen it lived in, full of life. Ideally full of children, like it had been when she'd been young. Unable to stop herself, she gave the porch railing a pat before she went back down into the yard. She felt as if she was telling the house good job. Good job for still standing, good job for holding its place on the quiet road. Good job for giving her a memory to come back to, even if it wasn't her home anymore.

"Can I help you, ma'am?" A woman's voice called from a few houses down, and Lola glanced up to see a girl in her twenties coming out of what had been Marcy Shultz's house, back in the day. She had a baby on one hip and a cautious expression on a face that was as familiar as the house.

"Good Lord," Lola said. "Are you Marcy Shultz's granddaughter?"

The young woman's eyebrows shot up. "Marcy Keogh, yeah, but...who are you?"

"I grew up here," Lola said with a gesture at her house. "Marcy and I got on like a house on fire when we were kids. You look just like her," she said fondly. "I'm Lola—Charlotte—Nelson."

"Oh my gosh!" The girl's jaw dropped. "Holy shit, you came back! Grandma will be thrilled! Nana! Grandma!" The last two words were bellowed, and the baby in the girl's arm squalled with dismay. "Oh, dammit, she went into Syracuse for a doctor's appointment this morning, I forgot. You have to come back later and see her!"

"I'll be around a few days," Lola said, caught between caution and delight. "I'd love to see her again. Please tell her hello for me."

"Obviously, but holy crap, where have you been? She's going to want to know! Can I get your number so she can call you? Did you know Sam Todd is alive?"

Lola's heart lurched even as she couldn't stop a laugh. This was exactly why she didn't want to come back to Virtue: everybody knew everybody else's business. Even two generations removed, apparently. "I did, yes. My own granddaughter told me."

The girl's eyes went round. "You have a granddaughter here? In Virtue?"

"I do. Charlee, the chef over at?—"

"Oh my God! I work there! I know her! Holy shit! I didn't know she was, oh my God , Grandma's going to flip !"

Lola, remembering Marcy as a feet-firmly-on-the-ground kind of girl, had a momentary delightful image of that same girl, seventy years older, doing an actual flip. She ended up beaming at Marcy's granddaughter. "I'd like to see that. She can find me through Charlee, then, if that's all right?"

"That's perfect! That's amazing! That's, oh, hush, you're okay, aww, c'mon, sweetie..." The young mother brought her attention back to the theatrically crying infant, and Lola, smiling, left her to the hard job of parenting.

So far the return to Virtue had been much more positive than she'd imagined it would be, in all those years of wondering what if . Lola tucked her coat around herself a little more securely, walking into the wind now as she headed back toward town. Maybe she could handle going out to Sam's house, after all.

Maybe she could handle anything, after all.

Page 6

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CHAPTER 6

We're wasting time, Sam's fox told him impatiently. Our mate is back and we're here talking with these silly shifters.

Part of Sam thoroughly agreed. The other part of him—some decades older and wiser than he'd once been—knew the investments from these gentlemen could make or break Virtue's future as an independent shifter sanctuary town, not reliant on modern corporate development.

And the third part of him (you don't have three parts, his fox said, still impatiently) was also confident Garius Beren and Conri Lyell would help fund anything Virtue needed without Sam himself glad-handing them and showing them around town. But still, he told his fox. This is how business is done.

Does it have to be done while Lola is here? his fox demanded.

Sometimes, yes. They'd explored most of the old train station by then, admiring its old bones, investigating the state of the tracks that had gone unused for years now. It was still a beautiful space, though it made Sam's heart ache: most of the time he'd spent here had been in desperate hope that Charlotte would return, even though he'd known she wouldn't.

"I understand the town is voting on whether to bring the rail back," Conri called from down on the tracks. "If they vote in favor, I know just the architect to redevelop this space. It's got such promise."

"It isn't just here, though," Sam was forced to say. "There are another four sites south of here, and three north, that have to be redeveloped if there's going to be any point in bringing the line back. There are connection points north of the border, but we've got to reopen the whole line."

"We can help invest in that, if it's what the town votes for," Garius said. He'd climbed up to the old office and leaned through a broken window to call down to the other two men. "Right now the train goes north-east from Saratoga Springs, right? And the old line came up through Virtue to the north-west?"

"Up to Ottawa," Sam agreed. "Brought a lot of trade, at least at the time. Less tourism, but things have changed. Virtue's got more to offer, now."

"We'll make it work." Garius came down the long way, via the stairs—as if Sam had doubted he was a bear, and not a great cat. "The whole township is the sanctuary?"

Sam nodded. "Biggest township in New York. The charter was granted in the sixteen hundreds, and we've been working to keep it as wild as possible ever since, but it doesn't matter how wild it is if the town can't sustain itself. The ironic thing is that as the town has reinvented itself, we've gotten more and more outside interest in really developing the area, and we're trying to balance between keeping ourselves alive and keeping our secret. Your investments would be..." He shrugged, not wanting to exaggerate, but meaning it: "Life-changing."

Conri bounced up onto the train platform with the ease and enthusiasm of youth. Sam briefly considered kicking him, but he'd probably lose his balance, fall, and break his hip.

His fox sounded offended. We would not!

No, Sam said fondly. You'd save me. The animal hadn't talked to him this much in

years. He was surprised at how much he'd missed it, now that it was vocal again.

Conri, not knowing he'd been saved from a swift kick, grinned at Sam. "That's our goal. Life-changing without threatening the way of life. I think you've got somebody waiting for you," he said as his glance darted past Sam, "but your assistant has our contact information. Let us know as soon as you do about how the vote goes here. Or if you want any help in persuading the locals."

Garius said, "Conri," in a stern tone, and the wolf shifter looked a little guilty as Sam stared at him, genuinely shocked.

"No. They need to make their own decisions."

"Of course." Conri lifted his hands in apology. "Sorry. My family has a history of strong-arming people, and I've tried not to go that way, but sometimes what you grew up with rubs off." He glanced beyond Sam again, then smiled. "But we'll stay out of that aspect of it, and like I said, you've got someone waiting for you. It's been a pleasure, Mr Todd."

Sam made an agreeable sound, but turned to see what Conri was smiling at. Only as he turned and the wind gusted just the right way did he catch the scent Conri must have: Lola, somewhere nearby. He said, "Gentlemen," and left more abruptly than was polite, but he was suddenly desperate to see her again, as if he could make up for fifty years in one afternoon.

Lola was walking along Station Road, hands tucked into her pockets and chin tucked into her upturned collar so that she looked like a green cylinder in a bobbly hat, marching into the wind. With a few long loping steps, he caught up and fell into step beside her. He could almost hear her smile as she said, "There you are," as if he'd only been away a moment. As if they had last been walking together along this road a day, or an hour, ago.

"Here I am," he agreed. "If I'd known you were coming, I'd have brought flowers."

Lola laughed. "They would have frozen."

"Can't have that." Sam popped his elbow out, and although she didn't really appear to have looked at him, Lola slipped her hand through it, linking elbows, and walked step in step with him back toward town.

"How did your meeting go?"

"Very well, I think. Were you looking at the old house?" At Lola's nod, Sam took a breath, held it, and then, hesitantly, said, "It's still yours."

Lola stopped right there on the sidewalk, cold wind and all, and stared up at him with tiny curls blowing into her eyes despite her hat. "What?"

"When..." He shouldn't have started saying this, not this early in their reunion, but it was too late now. "When your mother became ill, she came to visit me and asked me to hold the property in escrow after her death, in case you ever came home. She didn't blame you for leaving," he said very gently to the sudden tears standing in Lola's eyes, "but she didn't ever stop hoping you might come back, either. So the property...well, there are legal things to fill out, but it's yours. Or Charlee's, if you want to pass it down to her."

"Good Lord." Lola blinked, tears spilling, though she brushed them away before Sam could. "Good Lord. I didn't see that coming. Good Lord," she said a third time. "Do you have any other terrible shocks for me, Sam?"

Sam, thinking of his fox, said, "I'm afraid so," rather guiltily.

To his surprise, Lola laughed. "After fifty years, I'd be more surprised if you didn't.

That was the worst part, you know," she said quietly as she fell into step with him again. "You were dead, so leaving you wasn't the worst part. Leaving Mom and Dad was, but I didn't want anyone to know where I was and I knew it would get out if I let them know. I knew they'd died," she added, even more quietly, then, obviously a little reluctantly, chuckled. "I mean, I'm nearly seventy. It would have been more surprising if they hadn't. But I did pay attention, so I knew when they'd died, is what I meant. Not coming to their funerals was hard."

So many what ifs spilled out from those not-so-small confessions. What if she'd told her parents where she was going? Sam might have found her again decades ago. What if she'd come to the funerals? Sam had gone; they would have seen each other. Everything might have been different.

But of course, she'd said she'd gone on to marry. If she'd come home then, if she'd seen him then... Sam didn't see any way for that to have been a happy reunion, either, truthfully. Not if she had a husband to go home to. Not if he had to somehow let her go. No: she had made her choices, and they'd been brave and strong at the time, and he respected that, without wanting to try to change it. He couldn't anyway. And it wasn't as if the years had been wasted. They'd only been ...different... from what he'd imagined, as a youth. "Would you like to visit their graves?"

Lola's eyebrows flew up, moving the brim of her knitted hat. "Oh. Do you know, I hadn't even thought of that? Yes, I think I would. Possibly tomorrow," she added. "My phone says it's supposed to warm up."

Sam laughed out loud, startling her. "I'm sorry," he said to her wide dark gaze. "It's just, can you imagine saying that, when we were kids? 'My phone says?'"

"Oh." Lola laughed, too, and shook her head. "No. No, sometimes I hear myself saying things like that and think, never mind the way slang changes so one generation can't understand the next. If teenage Lola heard old lady Lola?—"

Sam laughed again. "Hey!"

"We are old, Sam," Lola said fondly. "Just try to convince my knees otherwise."

"I do yoga," he confessed, and a giggle erupted from the woman at his side, just as she would have done in high school.

"I should , but I don't. Who knew that the most important thing you could tell your young self to do was stretch? Forget good investments: stretch ! But if young Lola could hear old Lola, she'd think I'd had a stroke, anyway. My phone says the weather will be better tomorrow, for heaven's sake. Use the phone to talk? Don't be silly, we use it to—oh, what did I read, how did they say it. 'Use it to send really fast tiny letters to each other.'"

"Although we've finally caught up to the Jetsons," Sam said happily. He hadn't been this happy in years, soul lighter and more complete with Lola at his side. "No flying cars, but we do have video phones."

"Vones," Lola said decisively. "That's what Charlee calls them. V ones." She pronounced the V carefully, making certain it sounded different from the ph it replaced.

"Oh, that's smart. Short for video phone, and then you don't have to remember if it's..." Sam waved a hand in the air, vaguely. "Snype or iScream or FaceCall or whatever 'app' it is these days. Remember when we called 'apps' 'programs?'"

"Okay, Boomer," Lola said peaceably, and Sam burst out laughing again.

"Is our generation even allowed to say that?"

"Well..." Lola glanced toward the sky, eyebrows lifted, then smiled at him. "I haven't

been struck down with a bolt of lightning or anything, so I'd say so. Sam..."

They had walked back into town by then, past the school and up to the corner of the town square. Lola drew to a stop, gazing up at him, and finally, a little helplessly, said, "What happened ?"

CHAPTER 7

It was a terrible time to ask, but the question burst out of Lola like she was an impatient child, unable to wait any longer. As soon as she did ask, she shook her head apologetically and gestured around them at their surroundings. "I know. I know, this is hardly the place to talk about it for either of us, but..."

Something pained happened in Sam's blue eyes, and she regretted asking even more. "No," he said, clearly seeing that regret in her face. "No, I want to explain. I have to, obviously. Just—the very simplest way to explain it is..." He faltered again and ended up chuckling, a faint sound. "There is no simple way. The plane went down, you know that. No one else survived. I only did because..." He exhaled again, looking momentarily lost. "Because I was very lucky, but for a long time after that I couldn't rely on anything or anyone but myself. I was trying to get home again, but..."

His smile went soft and tired as he looked down at her. "It would have been so much easier with today's tech. Being able to just call you from a phone I had on me. But back then, and where we were... it was weeks before I got anywhere near a phone."

"And by then we'd held your funeral," Lola said softly. "And I left Virtue the next day. It was too late."

"I'm so sorry, Charlotte. Lola. I would have done anything to get back to you. I've never really stopped looking."

Lola put her hand over Sam's heart, feeling its gentle thump even through his winter

coat. "I did a good job disappearing. I didn't want anyone to find me, Sam. It didn't occur to me there might be even the slightest hope you would come home to look. If I'd known..."

He gathered her into his arms, warm protection from the icy wind, with one hand nestled against her lumpy hat as he bent his head over hers. His scent was still familiar, even after all these years, and a knot of loneliness that she hadn't even known she carried unravelled with his hug. She was safe, safer than she had felt in a long, long time, and for all Lola cared, she could stay right there, arms wrapped around Sam Todd, for the rest of her life. "You couldn't possibly have known," he mumbled into her hat. "True love conquers all, but I was dead."

"That didn't stop Westley and Buttercup."

Sam released her, looked down into her eyes, and laughed. "Well, if either of us had had Miracle Max or Inigo and Fezzik to call on, things might have been different, but we had to make do without storybook heroes."

"And," Lola added, thinking of it for the first time herself, "Buttercup didn't go anywhere. Westley knew where to find her."

"You always were a bit more proactive than Buttercup," Sam said dryly, and Lola laughed.

"Well, yes. She was a bit of a drip, although she did all right for herself in the end. The problem is I don't really want to go back to Charlee's apartment to talk. I don't want to go somewhere public, but I also don't want to be in her space. Even though she says she's hardly there, really." Lola chewed the inside of her cheek indecisively.

"The world isn't going to come to an end if we don't get every answer to every question we've got in the next half hour," Sam said with obvious sympathy. "I'd offer

to buy you coffee, but you just had some, and I don't know if it's the same for you these days, but?—"

"Coffee after four will keep me up all night," Lola agreed. "This getting old thing is not for sissies."

"Or caffeine addicts. But we can't keep standing around out here in the wind." Sam was smiling at her like he'd actually be perfectly happy to do that, and Lola understood it to the bottom of her soul. As long as they were together, the rest of the details didn't matter that much. "Why don't we at least go see if Charlee is home? If she is, you can introduce me. If she's not, at least we'll thaw."

"No pressure," Lola murmured, feeling like she was echoing something he'd said, though he hadn't spoken the words out loud. Sam nodded agreement, and Lola gazed up at him, lost in thought for a moment. Lost in memorizing him, in seeing the crags and wrinkles that hadn't been present before, although they fell into the lines that she remembered seeing when he smiled. "You really haven't changed."

"Excuse me." A child's polite voice interrupted whatever Sam had been about to say in response, and they both turned to see a boy of about six, bundled against the cold, standing on the other side of the street. "Are you practicing to be some of those statue people? Because if you are, you have to stop talking. I can see your breath on the air. Otherwise you were doing a pretty good job."

Lola cast Sam a startled glance and laughed as he met her eyes with as much surprise as she felt. "No," she said to the child. "We were just being lovey-dovey old people, gazing into each other's eyes."

"Oh. Well, I bet you could get jobs being statues if you wanted to. That would be cool." The boy turned a critical gaze to the town square as a whole, as if envisioning it filled with statue people. "Maybe we could have a contest!"

"A...statue people contest?" Lola asked cautiously. The kid nodded enthusiastically, and she couldn't help a grin. "Why don't you see if you can set that up?"

The boy's gaze snapped back to hers like he'd heard a challenge that he was fully capable of meeting. "Okay, but you have to come be statues if I do."

"I don't even live here," Lola said, amused.

"Then you'll have to come back, " the kid said, exasperated, and Lola laughed, looking up at Sam.

"Apparently this will not be my only visit to Virtue."

Sam grinned and said, "Tell you what," to the kid. "Maybe we can run daily statue contests so she'll have to stay."

The little boy's eyebrows lifted and he gave Sam an up-and-down sweeping examination, then turned an absolutely charming smile on Lola. " I would take you out for ice cream, not daily statue contests."

Sam clutched his chest and staggered back with a shout of laughter. "I've just been outplayed by a six year old."

"You really have," Lola said through laughter. "That's a very nice offer, young man, but I'm afraid I'm a little old for you. I may have to stick with the statue contests."

"I'm Noah," the boy offered, and, with great certainty, added, "No one is too old for ice cream."

"Well, that's true. Is there a good place for ice cream around here?" Sam asked. "I'm Sam. This is Lola."

"There's an ice cream parlor next to the movie theatre," Noah said with great authority. "A jerk works there."

Lola had forgotten how random conversations with small children could be. Fighting down another laugh and trying to smooth the sound of it out of her voice, she said, "That's unfortunate. Perhaps your mother should complain to the management? Is he only a jerk to you?"

"No, not that kind of jerk. A Coke jerk? He makes ice cream sodas, oh a soda jerk!" The kid simultaneously lit up at remembering the right word, and cringed at himself for having forgotten it in the first place. He looked, Lola thought, like Calvin from the old cartoon strips, defined by his emotive ability.

Aside from that, though, was the astonishing news that Virtue had an ice cream parlor bold enough to employ a soda jerk. "I'll be da—rned," she said, becoming mindful of the small child halfway through the word. Noah looked at her like he knew perfectly well she'd been going to say damned, but he didn't call her on it, and Lola went on with, "I think the last soda fountain in Virtue closed when I was about nine. That's wonderful. Next to the movie theatre, you said?"

"Yeah, but..." The little boy eyed her suspiciously. "I thought you said you didn't live here."

Sam coughed on a laugh, and Lola tried to remain solemn. "I don't, but I did grow up here."

"Oh! Did you know Old Miss Brannigan? She was my great-great-aunt. I live at her house now. They said she was really old before she died. Like you, I guess."

"Doris Brannigan was at least twenty years older than I am," Lola said dryly. "It's not polite to comment on peoples' ages, Noah."

He squinted. "People comment on my age all the time."

Lola, flummoxed, looked at Sam, who was doing a terrible job of not laughing at the forthright little boy. "The older you get, the less polite it becomes. But you might be right and people just shouldn't comment at all."

Noah sighed deeply. "There are a lot of rules about life, aren't there?"

"There are," Sam agreed solemnly. "But there are some good things, too. Like the fact that I'm going to take Lola here over for an ice cream soda now, and I'm going to tell the soda jerk there that I'm paying for one in advance for one Noah—Brannigan?—whenever he wants to come by and have it, as thanks for letting us know the parlor is there."

The little boy's eyes went round and he managed to squeak, "Thank you!" before rushing down the sidewalk and tearing up toward the massage therapy clinic, bellowing, "MOOOOOM! MOOOOMMMM!!!! Mr. Sam is gonna buy me a SODA!!!!" as he went.

Lola threw her head back and laughed, nearly losing her hat in the process. "I think you've got a friend for life, now. You were wonderful with him. Your foster kids were very lucky."

"What a character," Sam said through his own smiles. "He must keep his parents on their toes. Well, may I buy you an ice cream soda? If I remember our teen years, canoodling and whispering secrets over a diner meal was actually a pretty good way to talk."

"That sounds so much less intimidating than going back to Charlee's to Talk," Lola agreed, imbuing the word with a capital T. "Honestly, Sam, I just want to be near you. The rest..."

"Almost doesn't matter?" he asked softly as she tucked her arm back into his and they made their way around the square, following the wide sidewalk. "That's what I thought when I saw you. We can catch each other up, but...it doesn't feel urgent. Except one thing that I really do need to tell you, and can't in public."

"My curiosity is piqued." Sudden alarm shot through Lola. "Wait. Sam. You're not ill, are you? It's nothing bad?"

"No! No, I'm healthy as a horse, if horses lived to be my age. No, it's just..." He paused. "Weird."

Relief swept Lola as quickly as the alarm had risen. She tilted her head against Sam's shoulder a moment, smiling. "Weirder than that mole on your hip?"

Sam sniffed, trying to sound injured. "It's not that weird!"

"The mole, or what you have to share with me?"

"The mole!"

"So it is weirder than the mole on your hip. I just needed a baseline." Lola smiled up at him, and Sam chortled as they made their way to the ice cream parlor, which had a chrome-plated sign across the top that said Silver Dollar Ice Cream Parlor, complete with a three-scoop ice cream outlined in silver. "This is a terrible idea," she said as they went in. "It's cold out."

"But it's great! Wow, look at this place! There's a Silver Dollar Diner out on the other side of town, and they have a soda fountain, now that I think about it. It opened...a while ago." He made a sudden face. "I'm sorry. I just realized that at my age, 'a while ago' could mean thirty years and I'm not sure I'd think it was more than five or ten. This getting old thing really isn't for sissies. Anyway, they must be doing well

enough to expand. I should keep up on what's going on in town better," Sam added, that last bit mostly to himself, as Lola, delighted, took in the parlor's decor.

It was unabashedly retro, 1950s style with chrome fittings, red plastic booths, and a checkerboard floor. Best of all there was a genuine soda fountain that clearly mixed not just the usual popular sodas, but could mix up a host of others, including ice cream sodas from the short but fascinating list of ice creams hand-written on a chalkboard. "I'm going to need a chocolate cherry bomb ice cream soda. Is the ice cream chocolate cherry, or is it chocolate with a cherry bomb soda, or...?"

She spoke to the young man behind the counter—presumably the, or at least a , soda jerk that Noah had mentioned—and the kid flashed a grin. "It can kinda be any combination of those, honestly. I got chocolate ice cream, cherry ice cream, chocolate cherry bomb ice cream?—"

"I don't know what that is, but I want it," Lola said as he went on.

"—cherry soda, chocolate soda, chocolate-cherry soda, whipped cream, cherries on top, the whole nine yards. I love working here," he added happily. "It's like getting to make delicious chemistry experiments."

"Please. Don't let me stop a master at work. One chocolate cherry bomb ice cream soda, made as you see fit."

The young man turned a hopeful look on Sam. "And you, sir?"

"I'll have a vanilla milkshake, please."

In a tone of crushing disappointment, the soda jerk said, "Not even a malt?"

Sam chuckled. "Not even a malt. Oh, but I do need to pay for something in advance.

Do you know Noah Brannigan? About this high, six or so?—"

The kid laughed. "I think everybody in Virtue knows Noah. He and his mom moved here a couple years ago, into to the Old Brannigan Place, and he's been charming everybody he meets ever since."

"Well, he worked his charm on us," Lola told the kid, who really needed a name tag. Although when she was young, she'd have known his name anyway; Virtue really wasn't that big a town. "So Sam decided he'd comp him an ice cream of his choice the next time he came in."

"Oh, he'll love that. Sure, I can do that. I'll make a note and let the manager know. Take a seat," he said with a wave at the largely-empty parlor. "I'll bring your drinks over to you."

Sam slid his hand down to Lola's and, with a quick, enquiring eyebrow to make sure it was all right, led her to one of the two-person booths, where they settled in across from each other with effortless intimacy. "I have to keep reminding myself it's been a whole lifetime," Lola whispered. "Being with you feels so much the same. I didn't hate Virtue until after you died, and now I feel like I could belong here again. Are you magic, Sam? Is this magic?"

"A little bit," he murmured. "It's fate. After all this time, finding each other again? It has to be. Tell me? Tell me something about your life, Lola. About who you are, how you've been. You're right. In some days it hardly seems to matter. But in others...I have a lifetime to catch up on, so if you want to...tell me?"

CHAPTER 8

They had said that the details didn't matter out loud at least half a dozen times already. Sam thought he'd probably told himself that a hundred times in the past couple of hours, and he meant it.

But God he was curious, and so, obviously, was Lola. He couldn't tell her everything about his narrow escape all those decades ago, not until they were somewhere private, and he'd prefer that to be his old family estate, rather than...well, anywhere else. Even his fox agreed, with a quiet sigh. Virtue might be a sanctuary town, but even here, shifters didn't just reveal themselves in public. So he'd just barely touched on his own survival, and for the moment, Lola had accepted that.

And for the moment, she fell silent, holding his hand across the table and studying their entwined fingers instead of speaking. Sam waited; he was in no hurry. Not after this long. If nothing else, he'd learned patience in all the years they'd been apart.

After a few minutes the young man from behind the counter brought their treats, and Lola broke her silence with a laugh as he slid her cherry chocolate bomb soda to a stop in front of her. It was in an old-fashioned soda glass, chocolate ice cream with chocolate-covered cherries and cherry ice cream swirled through it, and fizzing cherry soda bubbling up to lift the whipped cream and maraschino cherry over the lip of the glass. A long spoon and a longer straw were buried in the drink, and Sam could smell the actual cherry syrup that had been mixed into the soda water to make a real, honest-to-god cherry soda.

He looked at his own vanilla milkshake, also in a tall glass. "I may have made a

mistake."

"Shoulda gone with at least a malt, dude," the soda jerk said with a sad shake of his head. "Although that should be a pretty good milkshake."

Sam had to try it, at that point, and his eyebrows rose even as the roof of his mouth froze. "That's excellent, actually. I'm not sure I've ever had a better vanilla milkshake."

The kid leaned in a little. "Vanilla paste."

"Er, what?"

"Quarter teaspoon of vanilla paste, mixed into the ice cream, plus a teaspoon of real vanilla extract. And high-quality vanilla ice cream, obviously."

"Obviously," Sam said, amused. "It's very good. Thank you."

By then Lola had taken a sip of her soda, and let loose a delighted little giggle. "This is fabulous. The syrup's perfect." She tried the ice cream and groaned happily. "I should have ordered two."

The soda jerk looked thrilled. "If you still think so when you finish that one I'll make you another on the house."

"I'm already sure I can't eat two, but I may hold you to that anyway." Lola smiled at the young man, who left the table beaming with pride, and then turned her smile on Sam. "Well, this was a wonderful idea. Do you want to try mine?"

"I think I can't resist." They traded tastes, Sam's eyebrows lifting again as he tried Lola's soda. "I don't even like cherry all that much and that's terrific."

"I do like vanilla and that's amazing." Lola took another sip of her soda, then used her spoon to plunge the ice cream deeper into the soda. "The funeral was awful, Sam. Not just in the obvious ways. Your parents..."

Sam sighed. "I'd like to tell you they became less awful after I returned from the dead, but they really didn't. They were thrilled I was alive, obviously, but...I'm afraid they were equally thrilled you weren't in Virtue anymore. They really thought I'd move on."

His fox murmured, Never, and Sam nearly agreed with it out loud.

"Did you know..." Lola pressed her lips together, looking up at him. "In between graduation and you signing up for service, they tried buying me off. They offered me fifty thousand dollars to leave town and never contact you again."

"Jesus Christ." Sam sat back, heart contracting painfully. "No. No, I didn't know that. What...you didn't take it." That much was obvious. He could all but see his parents offering the money: his father's thin face pinched with disdain; his mother's cool eyes calculating, expecting to succeed. Neither of them had ever counted on him rejecting their money and choosing military service over being dependent on them; there was even less chance they could imagine Charlotte Nelson, a girl with no money to her name at all, standing on principle.

The corner of her mouth turned up and she stirred her soda, looking very like the teenager he'd left behind so long ago. "I told them they were cheap bastards and to come back with a dollar figure that meant something."

Sam choked on a laugh. "Fifty grand was a lot of money back then, Lola!"

"It still is." She gave him another thin smile. "They counter-offered at two-fifty."

"Holy shit. They offered you a quarter of a million dollars to leave me?"

"They did." Lola dropped her gaze to her soda again, then met his eyes. "And upped it to half a million when I said no."

"Good God. You must have been tempted."

"You know, I was more...disgusted with them, I think, than tempted. I mean, I certainly had some moments later where I thought, if I was going to end up without you anyway, it sure would have been a lot easier to do it with half a million dollars than without, but...they were so smug, Sam. They were so sure I would choose money over you."

"Because they would have," Sam said quietly. "Both of them. Either of them. If anyone had offered them that kind of money to walk away from their relationship, they'd have taken the money and run."

They were only married, his fox said with a sniff. Not fated mates.

Sam nodded agreement. His parents had regarded the stories of shifters and fated mates as old wives' tales; their marriage had been commercial, if anything. He thought they'd been fond of one another, but he was certain they were both far fonder of financial success. They'd seen his relationship with Lola as puppy love, and they'd simply refused to believe him when he'd come to them starry-eyed and happy just after his high school graduation, to say that fate had struck and he was going to propose to Lola.

They hadn't even believed it was possible. The idea that his bond with Lola was as deep and meaningful as Sam claimed sounded ludicrous to them, literally unbelievable. He had to assume that meant their own bond, despite twenty years of marriage, was simply not that profound. It was the only time in his life he'd felt sorry

for his parents.

Whatever sympathy he'd had for them back then evaporated now. Slowly, helplessly, he said, "I'm so sorry that you ended up without me and without any money. You deserved so much more, Lola."

"Don't get me wrong." She gave him a crooked smile. "I didn't intend to leave you for any amount of money, but the fact that they offered made me even more determined to stick it out. I was nothing if not stubborn."

"One of the many things I loved about you." Sam took a deep breath and stirred his own milkshake. "What happened at the funeral?"

"Oh, God. The whole town got to watch your mother scream how this was all my fault at me. If I hadn't 'seduced you with my wicked ways' you wouldn't have signed up, and you'd be alive and well and engaged to someone suitable and...it went on for a while. No one told you about it?"

"People mentioned the funeral was difficult." Sam heard the thread of anger in his own voice and worked to modulate it: his anger was at his long-dead parents, and the last thing he wanted was Lola worrying he was mad at her. "But no. No one told me that. I didn't leave the house much after I came home. I'd lost you. There didn't seem to be any point. So probably my own hermiting worked against me there. I'm so sorry, Lola. I never would have allowed them to treat you that way."

"I know. It's part of why they hated me. Even when we were sixteen, it was so obvious you were going to choose me over them, that you would have my back, not theirs... God, they hated that. But when the funeral was over, I just couldn't stay. I couldn't stay with their poison in my ears, and the truth is, they had money and influence here, Sam. I wasn't going to be able to hold a job, not if they didn't want me to. I wasn't going to be able to go anywhere or do anything without people

whispering about how sad it was, or..." She hesitated, shook her head, and finally said, "I had to leave. I knew I had to leave. So I did, before it got any harder."

"You are the bravest person I've ever known."

Lola laughed. "I don't know about that. But thank you."

"I mean it. That must have been terrifying. And infuriating." Sam made a face. "Knowing you could have had half a million dollars to make it easier."

"I couldn't have, though. I could live with who I was, this way. That way? No." Lola shook her head again, then made a face, too. "Which still didn't stop me from thinking, yeah, it would have been so much easier with the money, but I don't feel like that was inconsistent. Money always makes things easier. The only people who don't think so are rich."

"Where did you go?"

"Chicago. I thought it would be easier to disappear into a big city, although—" Lola broke off abruptly, color rising to her cheeks as she frowned into her soda. "Some things would probably have been better if I'd gone somewhere smaller. I was hospitalized for a while and I...I lost control of some things, then. Things I could never fix. The system was too big, too...unfriendly to people like me."

There's something she's not telling us, Sam's fox said, and he nodded internally.

I know. But she doesn't have to tell us everything. Obviously it's still hard for her to talk about, and I'm not going to push her. Aloud, he said, "Just tell me you're okay? Healthy? That you were okay?" He offered his hand again, palm up, and she carefully fitted hers against his.

"I was, after a while. I am, mostly. I mean, I'm healthy. I worked for a while. Nothing exciting, waitressing, mostly. And I got married," Lola said almost gently. "Peter Brown. He was a good man. We moved out of Chicago and had Jennifer, Charlee's mother. He died when Charlee was little, and I thought, that was enough. I'd had you, the love of my life, and a kind husband, and that was enough. Everything else that I might have wanted had been lost so long ago. I let it go, as best I could. Until the day Charlee called and told me you were alive."

"I'm...sorry for your loss," Sam said after a moment, feeling strange about it.

To his relief, Lola chuckled and squeezed his hand. "I understand. I am too, of course." Her gaze went distant, and her smile soft. "Peter really was a sweetheart. I was happy with him, and desperately sad when he died. It wasn't like losing you had been, but how could it be? I was so young then, and everything was a new experience. When Peter died...well, I'd been through something like that before, hadn't I. It was terrible, but it was something I knew I could live through. And frankly it would have been terribly awkward to find out you were still alive while he was," she said ruefully. "I simply don't know what I would have done."

"I wouldn't have expected you to change anything about your life at all."

Lola's gaze softened further. "I know. And that wouldn't have made it any easier. But it's not what happened, so at least I don't have to figure it out. Maybe this is the only timing that ever would have worked, given how things were."

"It's enough," Sam replied, simply. "But God," he added, remembering what she'd said earlier. "No wonder you didn't want to come to the house, if my mother lit into you like that. Would it help if I had an exorcism done?"

Surprise flashed across Lola's face, followed by a burst of laughter loud enough to make the soda jerk kid glance their way and smile. "No," she said, amused, and then,

even more amused, "Maybe!" She went back to her ice cream soda, taking sips between laughter. "No, I—oh, do you know what would help, maybe? Tell me about your foster kids. At least something. Tell me how they cleared all the bad air out of the house, or something."

"Well, if you've ever changed a diaper, you know they didn't clear all the bad air out..."

Lola gave a delicate shudder. "There are some things about parenthood I don't miss. Really, though. How did you get into fostering? I don't mean to be sexist or old-fashioned about it, but I'd think a single man would have a hard time becoming a foster parent?"

"A single rich man with a staff of five has less trouble clearing the paperwork than you might think," Sam said dryly, "but I was also able to take in kids with certain special needs, and that helped."

"Really? Special needs?"

"Yes, but not the kind you're thinking. I'd really like to explain it to you, but it would help a lot if we went back to the house. Or at least somewhere private."

"All right. Between the dirty diaper exorcisms and the ice cream soda, I feel more fortified than I expected. Let's do it." Lola smiled at him, and Sam felt hope bloom in his heart.

CHAPTER 9

This time yesterday, Lola had been certain she would never come back to Virtue for the long term. Reuniting with Sam, just for the afternoon, had thrown all of that—not into uncertainty, she thought. It was just that she now knew, with absolute confidence, that she could come back here and be with Sam and be happy for the rest of her life. It hadn't seemed possible, a day ago. Today, anything did.

Anything except walking the seven miles out to Sam's estate. She stood on the sidewalk outside the ice cream parlor, arms akimbo and astonishment in her voice. "What do you mean, you didn't drive into town today?"

"The investors," Sam said with helpless amusement. "They already had a vehicle, and I think I imagined we'd go back out to the house to talk about things this evening, so I drove in with them."

"Even if this was fifty years ago and not March, I wouldn't walk to your house, Sam!"

"No, no, I know." He took his phone out, laughing. Lines crinkled around his eyes when he did, and the beard that she was growing fonder of turned up at the corners of his mouth. "I'll call a taxi. I don't plan to walk that far in the cold, either. Not in this condition, anyway."

"What condition," Lola said, "being seventy?"

"I won't be seventy for weeks . Yes, hi!" he said into the phone. "I need a taxi at the Silver Dollar Ice Cream Parlor, please? Or we can walk up the block to the square."

He paused, nodded, and said, "See you in a minute."

Lola looked at his phone curiously as he hung up. "I didn't think anybody called actual taxis anymore. I thought you'd use one of the ride share services. And an app."

"The township banned rideshares," Sam said absently as he put the phone away. "There still aren't a lot of taxis, but putting them out of business for somebody else's side hustle seemed like a bad idea. When people said they couldn't make ends meet, the town council voted to raise the minimum wage in the township."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not. It was controversial, obviously, but strangely enough nobody went out of business." Sam squinted down the street, as if the taxi might somehow sneak up on them. "That's not true. A couple places did go out of business, but it turned out they were carrying unmanageable debt loads that would have driven them under within a few months anyway. They mostly just gave up when the minimum wages rose. I know one place refinanced and they're still going." He cast her a brief smile. "I try to pay attention, for a man who hides in his house on the edge of town."

"Virtue is so much more vibrant than I remember it, or expected it to be," Lola admitted, then cast a flirtatious smile at Sam. "And I don't think it's just that I'm happy to see you and it's casting a rosy glow over everything."

He laughed and opened the taxi door for her when it drove up. "No. It's doing well. Unexpectedly well."

She scooted over so he could climb in the same side she'd gotten in, and leaned against him as he tucked his arm around her shoulders, as if nothing had changed in fifty years. And in some ways, nothing important had. Her heart still soared when she saw Sam, and that was what mattered. She murmured, "Thank God Charlee called

me," and he turned his head to smile into her hair, breath stirring it because she'd put her hat in her coat pocket.

"I'm going to have to thank her," he said just as quietly. "I didn't expect my life to be completely different by dinnertime, today."

"Is it?" Lola asked happily.

Sam tilted back enough to be able to see her, his eyebrows lifted a little. "Isn't it?"

"It is." He was right there. Lola lifted her chin a bit and pressed her mouth to his.

Sam made the smallest possible sound against her mouth and slid his hand into her hair, warm and strong and confident, just as he'd always been. The spark that they'd always had flared to life again, shining through Lola and sending shivers over her body. They broke apart, both breathless and both aware the taxi driver was trying not to grin into the rear-view mirror, but Lola, blushing with happiness, didn't really care. Sam brushed his nose against hers. "And here I was trying to be a gentleman."

"You always were. And I, according to your mother, am a wanton gold-digging hussy with a heart of stone, so be warned."

"My mother must have been looking in a mirror when she said that." Sam tucked her close against his side again, and Lola closed her eyes, smiling as they drove out of town. It was only a few minutes out to his house, but she floated through them, quietly joyful, until the car pulled up to the house.

She took a breath, steeling herself to see it again, opened her eyes, and blurted, "You repainted the windows!" They'd been dark with black shutters, last she'd seen them, and she'd never thought the colors went well with the old red brick house. Now they were white, and the shutters a deep forest green that contrasted nicely.

Sam chuckled. "New roof, too. And the floors have been redone. It has been fifty years."

Lola sat straight up, horrified. "You didn't get rid of that old original hardwood, did you?"

"God, no. I should have said refinished, not re done ."

"Oh, thank goodness. Those floors were beautiful. There were always dog claw marks on them, though, so probably refinishing them was necessary."

"Not dog claws," Sam said half under his breath as he helped her out of the car in an unnecessary but chivalrous offer. "But you're right, they were scratched up. Mother hated that."

"Was there anything she did like?"

"Money," Sam replied ruefully. Lola snorted and he laughed. "I forgot you did that. You snorted like that at a teacher in about sixth grade and it was the first time I noticed a girl in my whole life. I mean, noticed a girl."

"I did not!" Lola was almost certain she had, but it was such an indelicate way to be noticed.

"Oh, you did. He'd said something incredibly stupid, like women should be seen and not heard, and you snorted. Half the class laughed, he turned red, and you sat there glaring at him with the most scathing look I'd ever seen on a girl's face. It was love at first sight." Sam pushed the door open, and Lola forgot to be embarrassed at the story as his house unfolded for her.

It had always been a spectacular old building, three stories high with a blocky central

house and what Sam's mother had insisted on calling 'wings,' although Lola had always privately thought of them as extensions. Still, they were symmetrically added, each of them two floors high, so she supposed 'wings' wasn't wrong. A well-finished hardwood-floored foyer spread out in front of her, with a broad staircase going upstairs; she knew there was a library and a living room to the left and right, a second living area straight ahead, and a tremendous kitchen that led into a dining area behind the first living room. Lola had always thought the house was suitable for holding state dinners in, although the most formal thing she'd ever attended there had been Sam's funeral, and...well, she'd been right. It was perfect for that kind of large, solemn affair.

She really only had the faintest idea what the wings contained: offices, bedrooms, and bathrooms, presumably. The second floor was mostly bedrooms, and the third on the main floor had once been, and probably still were, servant's quarters. She guessed the second floors of the wings might house more servant's quarters, although there weren't that many people working for the house anymore.

But the last time she'd been there, even overlooking the fact it had been a funeral, the house had been...stiff, Lola thought. Stiff, stuffy, rigid, formal. It had looked like a museum more than a home, with period furniture and portraits that told the family's story in a way that made it clear the past was at least as important as the present, and probably more important than the future.

Now, although Sam said it had been a long time since he'd had foster kids there, it felt like a home. There was a shoe rack, for heaven's sake. And an umbrella stand next to it, the kind that came from Ikea, not...not Benjamin Franklin's personal woodworker, or something. A comfortable bench also had shoes under it, and was obviously for sitting down to put them on at. There were paintings, some bad, some fantastic, on the walls, but they all had personality and the really terrible ones looked like they'd probably been done by happy children, which made them wonderful in a different way.

"Well," Lola breathed. "If you'd told me it was like this now, I would have come home with you right away. This feels like a home, Sam. It's not how I remember it at all."

"A mostly-empty home these days," he agreed with a melancholy smile. "But a home. Can I get you a drink?"

"I'm still full of ice cream soda," Lola promised. "Will you show me around? And how on earth did you get foster children past your parents? And all of the changes you've made? Or did you wait until—" She broke off, not wanting to be indelicate, but Sam gave a low chuckle.

"I did wait until they died, in a manner of speaking, but it wasn't...they died quite young. A stupid accident, really, only a few years after I came home. The toxicology report said Father had been drinking."

Lola put her hand on his arm. "Oh, God, Sam. I'm sorry."

He exhaled and, with a questioning glance to make sure it was all right, folded her into his arms. She held on to the hug, willing him to be comforted, and after a moment he murmured, "Thank you. It was a long time ago now, and I've long since come to terms with it. It's difficult, though, when you lose someone close to you, even if you don't particularly get along with them. I spent about a year just...numb. Confused. And then a social worker from town approached me about possibly becoming a foster parent."

"For children with special needs?" Lola asked, genuinely surprised. "When you were still in mourning?"

"Ahhh..." Sam released her and stepped back, brushing a hand over his white hair. "They were special needs I was specifically well-suited for. I will show you around,

Lola, if you still want me to in a few minutes, but first I need to tell—show—you something. Something I should have told you after graduation, and had every intention of doing, but..."

"It was a difficult time," Lola said with an easy shrug. "We both knew it then, and know it now. It just doesn't hurt quite as much now as it did back then."

Not quite as much, she thought, but the old memories did still carry a powerful sting, at times. Sam hadn't actually proposed, not yet, but it was a given for both of them that they would get married soon. Lola had still held out hope, at the time, that his parents might come around, and hadn't wanted to elope because she'd been afraid it would set them against her forever. "The last thing I wanted was to be the reason you were estranged from them," she said now, as she had all those years ago, then sighed. "Although your mother insisted on interpreting that as I didn't want to risk losing your fortune. She told me they'd disinherit you if we got married. That was after I refused their money, so you'd have thought she would have figured out that I wasn't a gold digger by then."

"I remember. Or what I remember," Sam said gently, "was how upset you were. You didn't want me to lose my family, or my fortune. Not on your account. And I remember telling you it didn't matter. That fate meant us to be together. There was something else I should have told you then, too. Would you mind sitting down? This might be a bit of a shock."

"What'll be a shock? You were too mad at them to tell me much of anything," Lola said, the distance of years making it easier to see the humor in it all. She let Sam lead her to the central living area and settled onto a couch, watching him pace nervously. "You were too mad to think of much of anything. You spent about a week spluttering, if I recall."

"I thought of joining the military so I wouldn't have to rely on their money," Sam said

wryly. "Look how well that worked out. But I meant it when I said we were fated to be together, Lola. I—God, I'm nearly seventy and I don't have any more idea how to do this than I did when I was nineteen!"

Lola gave him a sly look, though she kept her voice prim as she said, "I also recall you having a pretty good idea of how to do 'this' when you were nineteen."

Ruddy bars showed in Sam's cheeks, and Lola clapped her hands with delight. "I can still make you blush. That's wonderful. Sam, whatever it is, just go ahead and tell me. We're too old to keep secrets from each other."

"You know my family had plans for me to marry someone," he said in a rush of words. "Somebody they considered appropriate."

"Another wealthy blueblood," Lola said dryly. "I do remember. She was quite pretty. Valerie something?"

"De Vos."

She gave him a look. "You didn't have to remember it quite that easily."

Sam had the grace to squirm with embarrassment. "Well, it's relevant to the conversation. She wasn't exactly a blueblood, but she did fit certain expectations my parents had for me. We were—she was—oh, for God's sake. She could do this, too."

With that, right there in the middle of his living room, Sam Todd turned into a fox.

CHAPTER 10

Lola's jaw fell open, and Sam was fairly certain she stopped breathing. Her cheeks went pale, her eyes went round, and she sat there otherwise unmoving for so long that he was afraid he might have sent her into actual shock. He shifted back to human, and Lola finally twitched. Squeaked. And otherwise gaped, still barely moving, even to breathe.

This was going even worse than Sam imagined. "I'm a shifter," he said as quickly as he could. "There are a lot of us in Virtue, and Valerie was also one. That's the only reason my parents wanted me to marry her. Because it generally breeds true, and I was supposed to have—well—litters of fox cubs. Or at least a few children to carry on the line. Because there are a lot of us in Virtue but also fewer than there used to be. Although there seem to be a lot more now, people are moving to town—but then—and also she was rich. They liked that at least as much as the fact that she was also a fox shifter."

He was babbling. He was almost seventy, and babbling like a nervous teen. He could not possibly have done this any more badly when he'd been a nervous teen. He'd spent weeks back then trying to figure out how to break his heritage to Lola, and lost the chance, and now, decades later, given the chance again, he was still making a hash of it.

And Lola was still barely breathing. "Please inhale," he said. "I'm getting worried."

She took a sharp breath and color came back to her cheeks, although not as much as he would have liked. On that inhalation, she said, "I can't do that."

"No. Yes. I know. You're not a shifter. But—you are my mate, my... I always told you that you were the love of my life," Sam said, suddenly even more nervous than he'd been. "And you were, Lola. From the moment I noticed you in sixth grade. But when we graduated, something changed."

Her eyes widened in alarm and Sam squawked. "No! Not in a bad way! In a way that made me absolutely certain I was right! Shifters—we know when we've met the person we're supposed to be with," he said almost helplessly. "I'd always known it was you, but when we grew up, became adults, then I knew . My fox told me?—"

"Your fox told you?" Lola's voice rose in confused astonishment. "You—fox? Told you?"

"My fox is like—it's part of me, but also a voice in my head. And after graduation when you and I saw each other that night, it said fate, and I knew , Lola, I—I can't believe how badly I'm doing this." He took a tentative step toward her, wanting to sit beside her and also concerned she wouldn't want him to.

Of course she wants you to, his fox said with all the calm Sam himself didn't feel. You've been waiting for each other for fifty years.

It might not be that simple, Sam replied helplessly, and the fox gave him a look very like the one Lola had given him for remembering Valerie de Vos's name.

It's always that simple, with mates.

Lola, audibly stunned, said, "I'm not sure there's a good way to do it. For heaven's sake, Sam, sit down, you're making me nervous." She patted the couch next to her, and a surge of relief nearly took Sam out at the knees.

His fox looked smug. Told you.

Sam wobbled over and sat beside Lola. She scooted around, not moving away, but making enough room to face him, her eyes still huge with astonishment. "Well. I can see why you were having a hard time telling me, back then. Does this happen a lot?"

"Usually only once in a lifetime," Sam whispered hoarsely.

Lola ducked her head, smiling, and glanced up at him through eyelashes shorter and grayer than he remembered, but still framing the same dark eyes that always pierced his soul. "I meant, do all...shifters? Is that what you called yourself? Do all shifters have this much trouble explaining themselves to their...mates?"

"Oh." Sam closed his eyes, faintly mortified at both the misunderstanding and his general ineptitude at explaining all of this. Then he lifted his eyebrows and met Lola's eyes again. "I have the impression that the answer is yes. Most of us find our mates in true humans, and most true humans don't have any idea shifters exist, and..." He inhaled deeply, then exhaled explosively. "And it's nearly impossible to explain without sounding like a lunatic."

"Well," Lola murmured so reassuringly it took him a moment to realize what she was actually saying, "you did sound like one. I...could I see the...fox...again?"

Yes! His fox sounded delighted. She'll think I'm very handsome.

She'll think you're a vain beast, Sam said dryly, but he shifted, right there on the couch beside her.

Lola said, "Oh!" in a small, thrilled voice, and tentatively put the palm of her hand out to him, beneath his chin, like she might do to an unfamiliar dog. Sam poked his nose into her palm and licked, making her laugh before she cautiously scratched his chin. "What a handsome creature you are."

I told you!

"I want to say, is it really you, Sam? But I just watched you...shift...twice, so..." Lola brushed her palm over the top of his furry head, then—again very much as she might do with a dog—almost absently offered an ear-scratch that the fox leaned into eagerly. "This is extraordinary, Sam. You're extraordinary."

"Literally," Sam said as he shifted back. Lola gave a startled yelp, pulling her hand toward herself, then dissolving into laughter.

"That felt very strange. Like an electric shock, not quite close enough to feel. Only furry. Sam..." She fell silent, gazing at him, and spread her hands. "I don't even know what to say."

"As long as it's not 'I never want to see you again,' I can handle anything."

"Oh! No, don't be silly. But—I wouldn't have been upset, you know. If you'd told me then."

Sam groaned and rubbed a hand over his face. "I know that now. I think I even knew it then. It's just so awkward, and I thought we had time. I would have told you before I proposed," he added quietly. "I did plan to, Charlotte."

"I know." Lola caught his hand in her cool fingers and squeezed gently. "I thought you would after basic. Once you knew where you were going to be stationed. No one imagined you'd die on the way to basic. Or be lost, at least." Her eyes widened. "Sam, is this how you survived? Because you're a shifter? That's why you couldn't explain it all, earlier?"

Sam drew another deep breath and nodded. "Shifters heal fast, as long as we can make the shift. Even from bad injuries, although they take much longer than minor

ones, just like they do for true humans. I shifted when the plane went down. Foxes can take a lot of damage, and they're smaller?—"

"You're a pretty big fox."

"Shifter animals are usually bigger than true animals, but I'm still not nearly as big a fox as I am a man. So I bounced a lot, and broke a lot, but not like the people around me did. I crawled into the brush and spent...days," he said, eyes closed as he remembered. "Maybe weeks, just healing. Shifting back and forth when I was strong enough. Eating small things that came near me. Foxes don't need as much food as humans, either. I wasn't thinking very clearly at the time. People must have come to the crash site, and if I'd had any presence of mind I'd have stayed nearby so I could be found in human form by any rescue team that came. But..."

Foxes don't go to humans when they're hurt, his fox said almost defensively. They hide, and heal.

Sam nodded. You did the right things. You saved us. Aloud, he said, "If I'd tried staying there, staying human more, I probably would have died of exposure before a rescue team arrived. Being a fox saved me."

"Then thank God you were one," Lola said fiercely. "I wish I'd known. I wish I'd known to stay, to have hope, but..." She fell silent, then finally shook her head. "But really, that crash was so bad. So many of the bodies were so badly burned, and...your parents said you had no dental records on file. More than one of the dead didn't match any records."

"Shifters don't use mainstream doctors, if they can avoid it. Not of any kind. And we make sure the records aren't saved, if we do. And it was a long time ago," Sam said with a sigh. "The military would have eventually kept records on all of us, but they didn't check our teeth when we signed up. I didn't mean to disappear as thoroughly as

I did for the months I was gone, but...it's water under the bridge now, anyway. We can't undo it."

"No. We're lucky to have a second chance." Lola squeezed his hands again, studying his face with the dark gaze he loved so much. "You said that your parents wanted you to marry Valerie because shifters tend to breed true? Is that only with other shifters?"

"I think we'd have gone extinct a long time ago if it was only with other shifters. No, and actually, that's why I was suited to foster those kids with 'special needs.' Some were shifters who had lost their parents, and some were kids whose true-human families had thrown them out when they realized they were shifters, or... a lot of different paths brought them to me, but that was what I did: I fostered shifter children. They became my family after my parents died."

Lola closed her eyes, color burning through her cheeks. "Oh, no. Sam..."

Worry filled his chest and he pulled her closer. "It's all right. It'll be fine, whatever it is. What's wrong, love?"

"I told you I was hospitalized," Lola whispered. "That I was ill for a long time, that... Sam, I was pregnant when you died."

The world froze around him, his heart thundering in his chest and blood rushing in his ears. Even his fox was stunned into silence, and it felt like hours before he croaked, "Lola?"

"I was so sick." She met his eyes, her own filled with helpless tears. "It was half of why I left Virtue. Not because I was sick, but because I was eighteen and single and pregnant and it was fifty years ago and I couldn't bear living with the pitying looks, or your parents trying to control my life—or worse, ignoring us—and—" She shivered so hard the tears spilled from her eyes.

Sam lifted a hand to brush them away, his fingers trembling. All he could say was, "Lola?" again. No other words came to mind. Nothing except her story mattered at all, right then.

"I told them my husband had died in the military," Lola whispered. "They didn't really believe me. I didn't have a marriage certificate, a wedding ring, anything. I didn't think of it. I could have bought a ring before I went to the doctor, but..." She shook her head, helpless again, apologetic as she said, "I just didn't think of it. I was so sick, Sam. They took the baby when he was born. For my own good, they said. For his. Until I was well again. Foster parents. But they lost him in the system. I don't know how," she cried, desperate. "I searched for years , but he was gone."

Sickness swam through Sam's belly and he shook his head heavily. "You'd be shocked at how often that kind of thing happened, especially back then," he said thickly. "Even when the system is at its best, it's underfunded and overworked. Paperwork gets lost. Someone moves away, or gets married and changes their name, or there's a death that didn't get reported until a day too late, and the tracking vanishes. Or there's a new tracking system being put in, and some people just slip through the cracks. It isn't your fault, Lola."

The last words were fierce, and he pulled her close, hugging her hard. "We'll look for him," he promised. "But it isn't your fault. The truth is, it's probably not really anyone's fault. It was a long time ago and things were even more chaotic than they are now. My God, sweetheart. What a terrible thing to have to carry alone for so long."

She was sobbing in his arms, her whole body shaking, and all he wanted to do in all the world was protect her from the pain welling up inside her. Sorrow poured through him, as well, for all the things they'd lost, but the one thing he could promise was, "We're together again, now, Lola. We'll make it through, and we'll never, ever be apart again. We'll find him. If it's at all possible, we'll find him."

His mind leaped ahead as he made the promise. There were obviously people within the true human system who knew about, worked for, and protected shifter children who ended up in it. He knew a lot of them. If anyone had the resources to find Lola's lost child—his own son—it was Sam himself. "It's going to be okay. I promise. I promise."

CHAPTER 11

Lola had carried that secret for decades, telling no one. Not even her husband, not even her daughter or granddaughter. Admitting it aloud now was one of the hardest things she had ever done, and it was so much, so much worse than even she had thought. If their child had been a shifter like Sam, then he'd been lost in a system that knew nothing about his true potential. She had let herself believe that he'd found a family, that he'd grown up safe and loved, because she couldn't live with anything else. Now, though...oh, she was so afraid of what might have happened.

"Do you remember anything about when they took him?" Sam asked gently. "Any questions they asked, anything they said? It's all right if you don't. It was a long time ago, and you were unwell."

"I remember everything." She pressed her face into his chest, shivering. "They asked me what I wanted to name him. Samuel Charles, that was his name. But I—Todd isn't that common a surname, and I didn't want your parents to find me," she said desperately. "I had to use the one I was using then. Johnson. I'd had a c-section. I was so weak. I had HG, hyperemesis gravidarum, it took me such a long time to even learn those words, I was so tired and sick. It's what Princess Kate had," she said with a shaky laugh. "She was the first person I ever even heard of someone else being that sick all the way through their pregnancy. I was just as sick with Jennifer, Charlee's mom."

"Oh, you poor thing," Sam said with such sympathy she nearly started to cry again. "That must have been awful. Everything else aside. It's all right, Lola. You didn't do anything wrong."

"I wanted to be able to take care of him," she whispered. "But...oh, Sam. Everything was against me. I was so young and too obviously single and you know how people were about single mothers back then. It's so different now. They asked...someone asked if his father or I had any conditions they should know about. They kept asking, in all kinds of different ways, over and over. Of course I said no. We were both so young and healthy."

Realization crashed through her as she spoke, though, and she lifted her head, staring at the man she still loved so very, very much. "Oh my God. I thought I was imagining how insistent they were about it, because I was so tired and weak and I couldn't understand why they would ask so many times, but they could have been trying to ask if I knew my baby, our baby, was a shifter. If I knew his father had been a shifter."

"Oh, dear God," Sam half-echoed. "They might have been. And they might have lost him into the system on purpose, if they thought their choices were finding a shifter family to adopt him, or letting him go home with a fragile true human who might—I'm sorry, I know you wouldn't have, Lola, but there are parents who do turn on their shifter children when they discover them. If they're sports, turning up in a family that hasn't had shifters for a long time. Lola—do you remember what hospital it was?"

"Yes, of course I remember, although I called it the Ladies of Uncharitable Thoughts Hospital," Lola said darkly. "They were such judgmental bitches."

Sam laughed, obviously startled, and despite her emotional turmoil, Lola managed a wet smile of her own. "I didn't like them very much even before I lost Samuel to them. They made it very clear they thought my sickness was punishment for being an unwed mother and that I deserved every minute of my suffering."

Sam's humor bled away as quickly as it had come. "I wish I could undo that for you, too. But it's a place to start, Lola. I have the resources. We might be able to track

Samuel through shifter inquiries instead of the true human system. Someone at that hospital was a shifter, and recognized him as one. I might be able to find out who." He smiled again, a faltering sweet expression, and whispered, "'Samuel.'"

Lola lifted her fingers to trace his jaw, beneath the short white beard. "Who else was I going to name him after? Although I did name him after me, too. Charles, not Charlotte, obviously, but...I thought he should have those names from both of us, since his last name wasn't really from either of us."

"Thank you," Sam said hoarsely. "Thank you for that. Even though everything went wrong...thank you, Lola. My brave, beautiful girl. Will you marry me?"

"What?" Lola sat up, blurting the word in a laugh. "Really?"

"Yes, really. Tomorrow. In the damn town square, whether it's raining or snowing or shining. I love you more than life, Lola Nelson?—"

"Brown," she said, smiling.

"Charlotte Elizabeth Nelson, Lola Brown, whatever name you want to use, will you marry me? We've spent enough time apart, and I don't want to spend another minute without you." Sam's blue eyes widened suddenly. "Unless I'm being too forward, in which case I'm very sorry and wi?—"

She silenced him with a kiss, hands knotting in his short white hair, and whispered, "Of course I'll marry you, Samuel Theodore Todd. Tomorrow sounds perfect." Tears filled her eyes again, and she dashed them away as Sam made a face.

"Theodore. There's a part of my name I don't hear often. Or want to hear often."

Lola, sniffing, nestled up to him. "I know. That's why I always called you Ted Todd

when we were little. I thought you were very handsome and..." She trailed off, thinking about her own youthful motivations and finally finishing with, "...and wanted to annoy you so you'd notice me, I suppose, which in retrospect seems really stupid."

Sam laughed and hugged her closer. "Every time you did it reminded me of why I absolutely never used my middle name. Sam Todd was an all right name, but Ted Todd sounded like I should be a toad shifter. Are you sure?" he asked more quietly. "About getting married, I mean. We only re-met about five hours ago."

"And we should have gotten married three and a half hours ago," Lola said decisively. "I've had a good life, Sam, and I don't have any regrets, but the one thing I've wanted as long as I can remember was to be your wife. That got taken away from me before we even had a chance to really start, and I don't want to miss out a second time. Can we get married tomorrow? Is there a waiting period?"

Sam untangled his arm from around her enough to look at his watch. "If we haul ass to the car and drive into town like the devil's on our tail, we can get into city hall just before it closes and get a marriage license, and then get married at six o'clock tomorrow evening."

Lola stood up, smiling through tears. "Then what are we waiting for?"

Sam also rose, a huge grin on his face. "Chase! Chase, I'm going back into town, can you arrange a wedding for tomorrow evening?"

"What?" Another man's voice rose from somewhere in the house, and Lola blinked at Sam, baffled, as footsteps echoed down a hall. "Mr Todd, what did you say?"

"I said I'm getting married tomorrow," Sam said happily. "Chase, this is Lola Brown, the love of my life. Lola, this is Chase, one of my oldest foster kids and my current

secretary. Chase, can you call City Hall and ask them to stay open until we get there?"

Chase, a good-looking young man of around forty-five or fifty—well, maybe not that young, but he looked young enough from where Lola was standing—stared between them with his jaw long. "Um."

"Don't worry," Sam said. "I haven't lost my mind."

"It's nice to meet you, Chase. Thank you for taking such good care of Sam. If you'd call City Hall, and then call Chef Charlee at Hold My Bear, she'll explain. Oh! I'd better call her myself, hadn't it?" Lola took her phone out, waved at Chase, and left the house with Sam, calling Charlee as she went.

"Nana?" Charlee sounded worried as she picked up. "Why are you calling me at work? Are you all right?"

"Everything is okay," Lola told her. "I was just wondering if you'd be available to walk me down the aisle tomorrow evening?"

There was a beat of silence before her granddaughter shrieked loudly enough that Lola pulled the phone away from her ear. Just in time, too, because a terrible banging clatter and a half dozen voices cried out in alarm in the background. Charlee shouted, " NANA ! You found Sam? You're getting married? For real? Tomorrow ? Is Mom coming? Can Steve and I host the reception? OH MY GOD!"

Lola, beaming, said, "Does that mean yes?"

" Yes of course it does oh my god I've got so much to do I love you congratulations bye! GUYS! GUYS! MY NANA IS GETTING MARR— " The phone went dead and Lola, climbing into Sam's car, shook with laughter.

"I take it your granddaughter approves," Sam said, and Lola leaned over to kiss him before buckling in.

"She seems to, yes. I think your poor secretary may bring you in for a mental examination, though. No, he won't," she decided happily. "Not once he's talked to Charlee and heard the whole story. Do we need paperwork?"

"We were both born here," Sam pointed out. "The county council office is going to have copies of most of our paperwork already. If there's anything else we need, I'll throw money at them until they decide it's not that important."

"Sam!"

"There has to be some advantage to being rich," Sam said. "Or, some advantage to being from a small town. Everybody knows your business here. One or the other, rich or everybody in your business, will do the trick."

"Everyone is going to know our business by tomorrow afternoon," Lola admitted. "After living a life so I wouldn't draw attention, that sounds kind of wonderful."

They pulled up to the city hall a few minutes later, spilling out of the car like they were much younger than their actual years. Sam caught her hand and kissed her knuckles as he opened the city hall door for her. "Voila. They stayed open for us."

'They' had, in fact, gathered at the main desk of the stately old city hall building: two town clerks, a grey-haired woman in judges' robes who had come down from the courthouse on one side of the city hall, and the sheriff and a deputy who had come in from the sheriff's department on the other side. All five of them were waiting curiously as Sam strode up to the desk. "Thank you for staying open. We'd like to apply for a marriage license, please."

"At 6:03 in the evening?" one of the clerks asked. "I was on my way home ."

"Patricia," the judge said sharply, and the woman looked sullen.

"Fine. Names?" Patricia's eyes widened as Sam gave his, and she shot a look first at the judge, then the sheriff, both of whom were doing a terrible job of hiding smiles. Lola didn't know why: they were both around ten years younger than she and Sam were, and she didn't suppose their names would mean anything to them.

Except they obviously did, and as they filled out the paperwork, it occurred to Lola that they'd been kids when Sam 'died' and she left town. In a place the size of Virtue, both of those things had probably made an impact. As the clerk looked over what they'd filled out, the judge said, "When's the wedding?"

"Tomorrow at..." Sam looked at his watch again. "Six thirteen p.m."

Amusement creased the judge's eyes. "Would you like it to be at a more convenient time tomorrow?"

"Yes," Lola said, amused, too. "It would probably make catering easier for Charlee. Or maybe not. But the law says twenty-four hours."

"The law says twenty-four hours unless a judge or magistrate tells you that you can get married earlier. I could marry you right now, if you wanted me to."

Hope leaped in Lola's heart. She and Sam turned to one another, enthralled with the idea until Lola laughed. "I just asked Charlee if she could walk me down the aisle, and she's not here, so we might have to wait until tomorrow after all."

"I'm available all day," the judge promised, and Lola, feeling like she was floating on air, walked back out into her home town with the man she loved.

CHAPTER 12

"Where to?" Sam murmured into Lola's hair. "Shopping for a wedding dress? Out to dinner? Off on a honeymoon and to hell with actually getting married?" Any of those things sounded good to him, although at the moment, skipping across the town square like six-year-old Noah sounded good, too. He didn't think he could actually do that, and the half-frozen, half soggy ground would ruin his shoes if he did, but that wasn't the point. It was a clear, crisp evening, and for once, absolutely nothing was wrong with the world.

Lola's smile bubbled up. "I'm still full from that ice cream soda, and unless things have really changed in Virtue, I don't think there's anywhere to buy a wedding dress at all, never mind at six-fifteen in the evening."

"Some of the stores are still open," Sam said with a wave at the square. Not many of them were, actually: Kate's Cafe did lunch and lunch alone, the massage therapy clinic closed at six, as did the toy shop, and of course, none of those were places you could get a wedding dress, anyway. His gaze came to light on a storefront that still blazed with light, although it did so from behind curtains that blocked any hope of seeing inside. "Somebody did say something about there being a fashion designer in town. Arthur Lowell's son. Maybe we could talk to him."

"Arthur Lowell's son is a fashion designer?" Lola's eyebrows arched high. "That must be difficult for him. Artie was a..." She wet her lips, cleared her throat, and didn't finish that sentence.

"Dick," Sam offered, and Lola let go one single bray of laughter before getting

herself back under control.

"Yes," she said, voice restrained. "Only a girl from the wrong side of the tracks wouldn't dare say that in public. Even fifty years later, apparently."

Something tightened in Sam's chest, and without thinking about it, he stopped where they were—on the sidewalk, heading nowhere in particular—and tucked Lola into his arms. His own voice was strained as he whispered, "I don't think I understood until right now." Breathing hurt, like he had swallowed Lola's pain and had to ingest it before he could move on.

Lola stood quietly in his arms for a long time, fingers curled in his coat lapels, before eventually nodding. "I knew you didn't. You couldn't. You were Sam Todd, part of the...part of Artie's class. Virtue's so small, you wouldn't think it would have such class divisions, but you and Artie, the Whelans.... You were Virtue's old families, the old money, and I was literally from the wrong side of the tracks. I didn't think it ever bothered you, but I also knew you didn't... understand. "

"No. I didn't. I'm sorry." He'd been too protected by his wealth, and by his family's standing in Virtue, to really understand what it must have been like for Lola, pretty but poor, trying to fit into his world. He'd known she didn't have money, but from his side of things, it had been easy to treat her as if they were social equals. He hadn't really recognized how unequal she had felt until this moment, when, even decades later, she'd been reluctant to say something unkind about one of the old Virtue families. Even if it was true, saying things like that was a risk for somebody without the advantages he'd grown up accepting as natural.

Sam didn't think it had taken him a whole lifetime to realize the wealth disparity in his home town was a problem. He liked to think he had more empathy than that, and that he'd done better with his money and his social standing than people like his parents had. He had known it had been difficult for her, but age and a greater breadth

of experience had finally given him the background to really understand . "You really are the bravest person I've ever known."

"Is it bravery if you have to do it?" Lola shrugged, and Sam tightened his arms around her momentarily before releasing the hug to take her hand.

"I think so, yes. People choose not to do things they think they have to do all the time, because they're afraid. I think you're incredible."

She smiled almost shyly, and leaned into him as they walked up the sidewalk. "I like the idea of being brave, so I'll accept it. We're heading that way anyway, so why don't we go over to Hold My Bear? I'll introduce you to Charlee."

"There's nothing I would like better. And after that we might need to go back out to the house so I can reassure Chase that I haven't lost my mind. Or at least, I need to."

"All right," Lola said primly, "but if he decides I'm a gold-digger, I'm going to kick his shins."

Sam laughed. "Fortunately for you he's not technically in charge of the trust. I am. I just have a lot of caveats about how I can access it. Oh!" Surprise surged through him. "Except those will all disappear if I get married. Good Lord. After all these years, my parents finally get their way."

Lola gave that little snort he found so endearing. "The last thing they wanted was for you to marry me . If there are stipulations, I'm surprised they don't say 'Sam gets his money as soon as he marries Victoria Vanderpoots.'"

The impulse to correct the name leaped to Sam's lips, but if he'd learned anything in his sixty-odd years, it was that sometimes he could manage to keep his mouth shut at the right moment. "They actually say I need a 'constant companion' and I got around

it with the foster kids and eventually a series of secretaries, although at this point Chase has been in that position long enough that I should probably stop thinking of it as 'a series.' But I believe there's an entirely different set of specifications as to how I can access it all if I'm married. I never looked into it," he said with a shrug. "It didn't matter."

"Never?" Lola asked softly. They were nearly at the bar, but she slowed, looking up at him. "I wouldn't have asked you, or wanted you, to spend your life alone, Sam."

He sighed and kissed her forehead. "I know. And possibly if I'd put myself out there, I'd have found somebody else?—"

His fox snorted, not unlike Lola had.

"—but I not only never tried, I never wanted to. If I'd thought you were dead, like you thought I was, things might have been different. But I never really gave up hope that I might find you someday."

"People dream of that kind of romance, you know," Lola murmured, and stood on her toes to kiss him. His whole world came down to that kiss, to her nearness and warmth, to the scent of her, and to hopes for the future that he hadn't cared about for such a long time. "Now," she added, still in a murmur, "it's cold out, and Charlee is going to explode when we go in to see her, so why don't we do that?"

Sam laughed. "I'm not sure exploding grandchildren is really ideal, Lola, but if you say so." He took her hand again, and then went into the sudden bright loud warmth of the gastropub, where individual voices were lost in the babble and Sam's fox complained about the change in temperature.

Lola, smiling, led him to the bar, where she leaned over, said, "Excuse me, I—" to a large bartender—he was obviously a shifter, although Sam doubted Lola knew

that—who very nearly vaulted the bar to sweep Lola, and in fact Sam himself, up in a hug.

"Congratulations! Charlee told me the news! That's absolutely fantastic! What do you want for your reception dinner? Steve Torben," he said as he put them down again and offered Sam a big hand. "I'm Chef Charlee's boyfriend. It's nice to finally put a face to the name."

"I had no idea I was notorious," Sam said a bit faintly. He wasn't a tall man, and had slightened somewhat with age, but he certainly wasn't accustomed to being picked up and hugged, nor would he have been if he was less of a hermit. At least Garius Beren, who was even bigger than Steve Torben, hadn't felt the need to...well...bear hug him.

"Oh, you are," Steve told him cheerfully. He was big and bearded, with sandy blond hair and a welcoming air that suited a pub owner. "At least in these parts. Charlee and I have been wondering about you for months. She's in the kitchen, let me go get her for you."

As he spoke, the kitchen doors swept open and a sweaty young woman with Lola's brown eyes and sweet smile burst out, throwing her chef's coat aside as she came in to first hug Lola, then, beaming, offer Sam a hand. "I'm Charlee. It's great to finally meet you. Let's talk about your reception dinner."

Lola's smile was so bright it looked like it verged on tears. "We really don't need a fuss, sweetheart. Have you called your mother yet?"

"I wasn't sure if I should or if you wanted to." Charlee's eyes widened and fixed a look on Sam. "Who is this guy who called me, though? Chase Todd? Your son? He sounded like he was in a full-on panic."

"My secretary," Sam said apologetically. "He probably thinks I've lost my mind."

"Well, he certainly did! I told him to go look up your yearbooks and he'd understand everything. I mean, obviously I told him the whole story—" Charlee ushered them through the pub and to an office that was unexpectedly quiet after the din in the main rooms. "—and he thought it was very romantic but obviously also insane and I'm not sure he really believed me—" She got them seated and took her own chair on the other side of the desk, whipping out a pad of paper and a pen. "—but he will when he sees the yearbook pictures. So! Reception dinner? What time? I can't be in the wedding and cooking at the same time," she said in a tone somewhere between scolding and apologetic, "but my crew is really good and they won't disappoint me. Or you."

"Charlee!" Lola said with a laugh. "We really don't need a fuss!"

"Are you kidding? We're deep in 'true love conquers all' territory here. You definitely need a fuss."

"Judge Owens said we don't have to wait the full twenty-four hours," Sam offered. "We could get married at, say, four? And come over here—or out to the house—at five?"

"Five o'clock," Charlee said, writing that down. "Here would be easier. I'm sure you've got a very nice house and everything, but I've got a professional kitchen and everybody knows where everything is."

"I would hardly argue with the chef," Sam murmured, and she gave him a grinning glance of approval.

"Good man. Do you want dinner or just finger food?"

"Which is easier?" Lola asked a little nervously.

"Finger food. Fussier, maybe, but easier than plating for however many people show up, and it's going to be half the town, so..."

"What?" Sam and Lola exchanged glances before he looked back at Charlee, shaking his head. "We aren't even inviting anybody except you and—well, Chase, probably."

Charlee gazed at him with a sort of ironic sympathy. "Do you really think that's going to stop everybody from coming to see? This is top tier romance novel stuff, guys. This is the stuff small towns survive on. You are getting married in the gazebo, right?"

"In March?" Lola asked, dismayed. "It could be snowing tomorrow! And the ground is soggy where it isn't frozen!"

"So that's a yes," Charlee said, making more notes. "I'll see if Jake can lay some plywood so people don't sink into the muck. His son's got something planned anyway, you wouldn't believe that kid. He could organize a fire in a windstorm."

She went on, taking notes and talking to herself as Sam leaned toward Lola, whispering, "Have we lost control of this already?"

She whispered, "I think we should have eloped," back, then, wide-eyed, asked, "Do you mind?"

"Eloping? No, we can go talk to the judge right now if you want to."

Lola shook her head. "A fuss."

Sam went soft all of a sudden and leaned closer to steal a kiss. "We've waited fifty years, Lola. We deserve a fuss."

CHAPTER 13

At ten the next morning, now seated nervously across the breakfast table from one politely skeptical not-so-young personal secretary, also known as Chase, also known as Sam's son , Lola thought maybe eloping would have been a good idea after all.

"It's not that I'm not happy for you," Chase said. He was a nice-looking man, Lola thought: dark hair going grey, light eyes that wavered toward green when the light was right, and a clean jawline that was currently clenching and unclenching. "It's just...rather sudden from my perspective. I didn't even know Dad had a lost love."

The Dad was important there, and Lola knew it. Last night, Chase had called Sam Mr Todd , keeping their relationship professional. This morning it was Dad , because his concern was for the man who'd raised him, not the one who'd later hired him to keep the family trust and money in line. She nodded, about to speak, when Chase went on.

"I mean, I knew there was some kind of reason you hadn't gotten married." This was to Sam, who sat at her side and looked both embarrassed and apologetic as Chase said, "I even remember the foster agency being worried about that, because they weren't sure a single man was going to offer the kind of nurturing household they thought kids needed. I was about seven when Sam fostered me," he added to Lola, almost defensively. "I remember it pretty well."

"I'm sure you would." She meant it, and must have sounded like she did, because Chase relaxed a little, turning his attention back to Sam.

"But I didn't know you'd..."

"Lost the love of my life?" Sam asked with a sigh. "I didn't like to talk about it. And even if I had... Well, 'lost' does imply 'died,' so this probably would have come as a shock to you anyway."

"Do any of the others know? Tony? Stephanie? Ellen? Are they coming to the wedding, for God's sake?"

"I called them all last night. Tony is picking Stephanie up on the way and Ellen is going to try to catch a morning flight from DC. She said she'd text." Sam made a motion to check his phone, but didn't, and Chase sighed explosively.

"Well, that's something. They're my foster siblings," he told Lola. "The ones who didn't have families to go back to. Dad adopted us all when I turned sixteen."

"Heh." Sam cleared his throat. "What Chase means is, they all discussed it amongst themselves and presented me with the paperwork on his birthday, asking to be adopted. I cried for the rest of the day. It was one of the best days of my life, that and the one when the adoptions were finalized."

Lola swallowed hard herself, through a throat clogged with happy tears. "I'm so glad you all had each other. I'm so glad you made a family. My own daughter is driving out," she added a little hopefully. "So you can meet my family, just like I'll be able to meet yours. Chase...I know this must seem completely insane to you. If it helps I'll be happy to sign a prenup of some kind that denies me any access to Sam's money."

Sam squawked with protest, but Lola elbowed him. "If I wanted money I would have taken what your parents offered and left. So it's not a problem for me. I just don't want you or your siblings to feel like I've swept in to take advantage of your father," she said to Chase.

He studied her a long moment, then made a face. "On one hand, Dad's not easy to

take advantage of. On the other, I don't know. Ellen's actually a lawyer and she might insist."

"Well, we have several hours before we're supposed to get married. If she decides that's what's necessary, I'll sign the papers on the way to the altar."

"Lola!" Sam protested again, but she smiled at him.

"I really don't mind, Sam. What I would mind is your children thinking I'm after your money."

"I'm outnumbered on this, aren't I," he muttered.

"Not necessarily," Chase mumbled in return. "Depends on Ellen. I think I believe her. Lola, I mean. I mean, I do believe you, Mrs Brown?—"

"Lola is fine."

"—it's just that this is a lot."

"Imagine how I feel," Sam said almost indignantly. "This time yesterday I didn't even know Lola was still alive!"

"Well, and that's the point, Dad! She's come out of nowhere and the story is romantic and everything, but?—"

"It's not just romantic. She's my mate, Chase. I told you that. I've known since I was eighteen."

Chase's jaw dropped open and he blinked at his father. "Your mate?"

Lola's own jaw had dropped, although she felt a little silly. Sam had mentioned he'd taken in shifter children. Somehow she hadn't quite put it together that that meant Chase must therefore be a shifter.

"Didn't I tell you that last night?" Sam asked incredulously. "I mentioned it to the others. Oh." He groaned. "No, I told so many people yesterday, including Lola, that I just assumed I'd told you, too."

Chase hadn't yet collected his jaw, though his gaze bounced to Lola, then back to Sam. "No, you didn't tell me that! Well, jeez. Ellen's not going to need a prenup, then. Jeez, Dad!"

Sam looked genuinely sheepish, shoulders hunched and his face scrunched up. "I thought I'd mentioned it! I couldn't figure out why you were being so stubborn!"

"Well, I couldn't figure out why you were being so crazy! Sorry," Chase added to Lola, who widened her eyes and waved a hand.

"No, no, that's fine, I get it. I—sorry. Everybody knows about fated mates? All shifters, I mean?"

"Ellen and Tony both found theirs years ago, so I knew it was real, even if Dad and me and Steph never found anybody like that." Chase slid down in his chair like a considerably younger man. "Or me and Steph, I guess. Jeez, Dad!"

"You said that," Sam said fondly. "Can we have breakfast without causing anybody indigestion, now?"

Chase made a spluttering sound of agreement, and Sam, chuckling, raised his voice a bit to call out to the kitchen. A moment later, a young man with a restaurant-style platter came out to dish food out to everyone, leaving Lola to eye the kitchen and

shake her head.

She'd known Sam's house had a breakfast bar and that he employed a chef and house staff, but she'd never eaten there before. Having someone standing around waiting for tension to fade so they could bring breakfast out would take some getting used to, Lola thought. Around the first meltingly-good bite of omelette, she said, "For what it's worth, my daughter had more or less the same reaction, except I couldn't tell her about fate and mates and shifters. Parents probably really shouldn't spring revived teenage romances on their unsuspecting kids."

"No!" Chase said emphatically. "No, they should not! But I am happy for you," he added more quietly. "It still might take some time to get my head around it, but I'm very happy for you." He took a deep breath, held it, then let it out. "Do either of you know Zane Bellamy?"

Lola hesitated. "The fashion designer? I know of him. He's very popular in Hollywood, isn't he?"

"That's right. Somehow he got wind of the crash wedding and called me this morning to offer to make you a dress, Lola."

Lola stared at him. "I don't care how good he is, he can't possibly make a wedding dress in under six hours. Not even a not-very-fancy one, which I don't need. I mean, I don't need a fancy one."

"He apparently thinks he can. You have an eleven a.m. appointment, if you want to keep it."

"I feel like I'd be a fool to say no, but..." Lola turned to Sam. "But in that case, what are you going to wear? Because I can't have a dress and be all fussed up and you show up in jeans!"

Sam looked profoundly offended. "I never wear jeans."

"It's true," Chase chimed in. "Not even when we were wrestling outside when we were kids."

"You used to wear jeans!"

"I'll start again," Sam offered. "Just for you. But not for the wedding. I do own a tux or two, Lola."

"Oh. Of course you do." Lola eyed him to make sure he knew most people didn't own tuxedos, and from his chuckle, assumed she'd gotten her point across. "Well, all right, then."

"Eleven," Sam said, tone worried. "That means we have to eat fast, Lola. We haven't gone ring shopping yet."

"Ring shopping?" Lola's voice spiraled upward. "I hadn't thought about rings!"

"Oh. Do you not like them?" Sam's gaze dropped to her hands, where she wore no rings at all.

Lola glanced at her own bare hands. "I used to wear one. When I got married, obviously. And for a while after Peter died, but eventually..." She sighed, touching her earlobes, where she wore two small diamond earrings, and then her throat, where another small diamond solitaire pendant settled. "These were from my engagement ring. I wanted to keep them with me, but I didn't want to wear the rings anymore. I wanted..." She frowned at her hands again. "I wanted to feel like my own person. I didn't want to be defined by having lost a husband. And I couldn't do that, with the rings. People would ask about him, or express sympathy, and..." She shook herself and looked up at Sam. "I would love a ring."

"Then we need to go shopping." Sam shoved a piece of toast in his mouth and stood, offering her a hand. Lola looked in dismay at her omelette, then shrugged and took the whole plate with her as she also stood. She ate on the way out to the car, with Chase calling, "So I'll have your tuxedo pressed, Mr Todd" behind them with a familiar tone of filial exasperation. Sam yelled, "Thank you, Chase!" over his shoulder, and then they were in the car, driving into town while Lola balanced a plate on her lap.

"It was much too good to leave behind," she said as Sam grinned at her. "And you're going back home later where you can eat. If I know anything about weddings, it's that dress fittings and food don't go together very well."

"I hadn't thought of that. You're wise as well as beautiful."

Lola snorted. "If you say so."

His voice softened, and Lola's heart melted as he said, "I do. But those are words for later, aren't they? Right now I'd better ask you what kind of rings you like."

"Oh. Pretty ones?" He gave her a look she deserved, and Lola grinned. "Rose gold. I'm not actually that fond of diamonds. They're fine, but they don't thrill me. Do you want a ring?"

His hands tightened on the wheel, and his voice was choked. "Very much, if you don't mind."

"Why on earth would I mind?" Lola put her hand on his thigh a moment, then looked thoughtfully at his hands. "Where do your clothes go?"

"In a heap beside the bed, much to the housekeeper's dismay."

"No!" Lola laughed. "When you shift! Where do your clothes go?"

"Oh. With me. Anything touching my skin that isn't organic goes with me, so clothes, glasses, shoes, rings. Or anything that isn't alive, I suppose. Cotton clothes are organic but they go with me."

"I knew what you meant. So you wouldn't lose a ring when you shifted?"

"I would not."

"Then rings for both of us sounds perfect. Nothing fancy, Sam. I don't need anything fancy."

He nodded, although his eyes sparkled as he glanced at her. "I hear you and agree because we're short on time, but just you wait for our first anniversary."

"For heaven's sake, Sam." There was no time to argue about it, anyway, because they were back in Virtue, though not on the town square. Up the next street over from the movie theatre, instead, where three jewelry shops in a row had staked out their territory. She and Sam spilled out of the car after Lola put her plate in the back seat, and they spent a few minutes window-shopping and laughing like they were teens before going into the 'vintage' shop, which had things from Lola's childhood in the window. "That's not vintage, " she hissed, and Sam gave a mock sigh.

"And yet."

It only took a few minutes to select a simple ring in rose gold, with a matching man's ring. They were plain, but that was all Lola needed, despite Sam's insistence of future glory. "Do we have a ring bearer?" he asked as they left the jewelry shop. "Do we need one?"

"You should ask Chase. And have your other children be your attendants. Charlee and Jennifer can be mine."

"Then we'll be lopsided! No," Sam added as Lola turned to walk toward the tailor's shop, "I know it's only down the street and across the square, but I'll drive you. Can't have you arriving sweaty to a haute couture fitting."

"I don't think it's possible to get a haute couture dress in five hours," Lola repeated. "At best, it'll be something off the rack and gussied up. But all right. If you insist."

"I absolutely do." Sam opened her car door for her, gallantly, and drove Lola to get gussied up.

CHAPTER 14

If this was what Zane Bellamy could do in five hours, Sam thought at four o'clock that afternoon, the man must be a magician when he had time to spare.

All of his kids had made it: a bemused Chase had just walked up the 'aisle'—plywood laid down over the mucky ground, as Charlee had promised—bearing a cushion with the rings on it. Sam's daughters Ellen and Stephanie walked together on their brother Tony's arms, and Charlee's mother Jennifer, whom he'd met minutes before, walked after them with an expression of bewildered happiness and a huge bouquet of winter flowers as she came up to take her place across from his kids. All of the youngsters looked nice—dresses and suits and quickly done-up hair for the women who wore it long—and all of them, thankfully, also looked warm, because somebody had set up a remarkable number of space heaters around the gazebo, blowing hot air at the wedding party.

Judge Owens had arrived early enough to go over the ceremony with Sam, not that he or Lola had any clear idea on what it should be other than "do you, do you, now kiss," which was how Stephanie had usually conducted weddings with her dolls. She—the judge—looked pleasantly resplendent in her robes, and also warm enough.

No one else looked warm enough, but a truly astonishing number of people had shown up to stand on the plywood platforms, bundled in winter coats against the snow that had started falling. There were no extravagant dresses, no tuxedos besides the one Sam was in, no high heels or fancy hats. Instead there were shining, happy faces that tilted toward one another, murmuring as people pointed, laughed quietly, and took in the whole setup. Sam had no idea how so many people had heard about

the wedding, and even less why they would care, but it filled him with joy to see them coming together for himself and Lola.

Especially Lola.

She'd come out of the tailor's shop, escorted by Charlee, followed by two men he didn't know, and wrapped in a large, fluffy...blanket, apparently. Sam assumed that wasn't her wedding dress, but then again, he knew nothing about haute couture.

But no: as they reached the plywood 'aisle', the men behind her accepted the blanket when Lola lifted it off, and an admiring gasp that turned to cheers ran through the crowd. Sam's vision blurred so badly he could barely see as Charlee walked Lola the first few steps toward the gazebo, and he dashed the tears away, his heart breaking with joy.

His bride wore a tea-length dress in ice blue, off the shoulder with a wide, dimpled boat neckline that zigged, then zagged back the other way down the bodice with ice-white statement buttons before falling into thick, satiny pleats in a full skirt. Her tiny diamond jewelry glittered at her throat and ears, and she wore a dinky veiled hat in the same heavy pale satin on her white hair. Sam wiped his eyes again, all but speechless, though he managed to whisper, "You're so beautiful," as a beaming Chef Charlee transferred her grandmother's hand from her own arm to Sam's.

Lola's eyes shone. "Not bad for an old lady, huh? You look wonderful, too." Her eyes widened. "Foxy, one might say."

Sam choked with laughter and pulled her into a hug, mumbling nonsense into her hair. "God, I love you."

"I love you too," Lola whispered. "But we're supposed to do this part after the judge has done her part."

"Oh, take your time," Judge Owens said with a suspicious sniffle of her own, before lifting her voice to welcome the unexpected audience to their wedding.

The ceremony itself was brief, beautiful, and completely outshone by Lola. Sam could only gaze at her, stunned and overjoyed, and obediently repeat what he was told to say, until the moment came when he was able to put the ring on her finger with shaking hands, and then kiss his bride. Another cheer went up as they embraced, and Sam was vaguely aware that everyone around them was crying, just like he was, just like Lola was. His kids and hers hugged, first each other, then them, until even the space heaters weren't enough to keep the cold at bay and the snow was starting to pile up on the plywood walkways.

"All right!" Charlee called. "Everybody back to Hold My Bear! Nana, make sure you don't fall."

"I'm pretty sure I can fly right now," Lola said happily, but she clung to Sam's arm, and he swore he would never, ever let her fall.

"Where...that dress... how ?" Because even Sam could tell the gown was not one that had been thrown together in a few hours. "You're the most beautiful woman in the world, Charlotte 'Lola' Nelson Brown."

"He's making one for some young woman here in town," Lola whispered. "This was an early direction they decided not to go with, but it was nearly finished anyway. He made some adjustments and..." She gestured at herself, obviously astonished. "Todd."

Sam mock-groaned. "Oh no. Not Ted Todd again."

"Lola Todd," she said, and Sam's knees nearly stopped working.

"Really?"

"I've been waiting a very long time to be Lola Todd, Sam. Yes, of course, really."

He made an incoherent noise and crushed her into his arms again, not caring that they were supposed to be making their way to the pub, not caring that half the town was standing around beaming at them. "Mrs Todd?"

"Mrs Todd," she agreed gleefully. "It's about time, don't you think?"

"I wouldn't have presumed," he whispered helplessly. "I love you so much, Lola."

"Me too." Lola glowed as she looked up at him. "A whole lifetime. Nothing could be better, Sam. I'm so happy. I love you so much."

"I love you so—" He realized they were repeating each other, and laughed, but couldn't stop himself. "I do, though."

"Oh good," a child's authoritative voice said. "Everybody's here for the statue contest."

"Oh, God, " a woman said immediately. "No, Noah. It's too cold and this is someone's wedding ."

"I know," Noah said cheerfully. "I met them yesterday. They're good statues. And everybody's here! It'll be fast! It's not that cold!"

"You're six, " the woman—presumably his mother—said. "Your idea of cold is different from an adult's."

Sam, Lola, and almost everyone else had turned to look at the pair by then. A purple-

haired woman managed to look at the little boy with both exasperation and fondness, while Noah stood arms akimbo, an expression of hopeful, slightly confused defiance on his face. "How can my idea of cold be different from a grown-ups? Isn't cold... cold ?"

Lola laughed, drawing his attention as she shook her head. "Older people feel the cold more. But..." She glanced at Sam with a smile. "I bet not very many people have statue contests at their wedding."

"Yessss!" Noah leaped up and punched the air, then tried to arrange himself with an air of dignity as his mother gave him a sharp look. "I mean, that would be very nice!"

"Ten minutes," Lola warned him. "The world's shortest statue contest. Or all of us old people will freeze."

Noah giggled. "I'll be the world's shortest statue in this contest! Okay! The rules are, everybody hold as still as you can and I'll judge your stillness!"

His mother groaned. "Noah..."

"It'll be fun !"

His mother mouthed I'm so sorry at Sam, who shook his head and smiled. "Lola's right. How many people have a statue contest at their wedding? How about we do statues by family, Noah? That way people will be grouped together and you can judge them as a whole more quickly?"

Noah beamed. "That's good! You stand with your son and daughter and I'll stand with Mom—" A frown appeared between his eyebrows as he realized that wouldn't work, but people started grouping up anyway as Sam chuckled and said, "These are all my sons and daughters. Well, not Jennifer," he added with a nod toward Lola's daughter,

a pretty woman in her forties who looked a great deal like her mother.

"Oh. Well, you look like her and he looks like you." Noah waved his hand at both Lola and Jennifer, and, to Sam's surprise, at himself and Chase, then went on, "So you all stand together with your families and be statues, and Mom, you and Dad can stand together, and Judge Owens you can go stand with Robin and—" He marched off, giving orders that people obligingly followed, while Sam's heart knocked around in his chest so hard he felt dizzy with it.

His daughter Ellen was smirking with amusement at her brother Chase and Sam himself. "You two do look alike. More now that Chase is getting oooooold than you used to, and I wouldn't have noticed it, but the kid's not wrong."

"You're only two years younger than me," Chase said, offended.

"Yeah, but I dye my hair." Ellen tossed her hair, which did not, Sam admitted, have a single streak of grey in it. Chase made as if to ruffle it and Ellen shrieked obligingly, while Tony snickered and Stephanie rolled her eyes, just like they were all kids again.

But Sam's eyes were mostly for Chase in that moment, trying to see if Noah was right. His hand found Lola's, and then his gaze did. Her eyes were as huge and wide as his were, and she shook her head a little, as if denying the possibility they both suddenly saw. Sam, almost voiceless, said, "He is a fox shifter. The first one I ever fostered."

Lola's knees cut out and Sam caught her weight, holding her close as they both studied the man goofing around with his siblings. Lola's daughter Jennifer was grinning hugely as she watched them, her arm tucked around her own daughter Charlee's waist. Sam could so very easily see the family resemblance between the three of them: the large brown eyes, the sweetness of their smiles, the shape of their jaws and noses. Charlee had a heavier bone structure than her mother or grandmother,

and carried more weight, but they looked very much like a family.

And Sam, heart beating so hard his whole body shook with it, thought maybe there was some of that same family resemblance between Chase and Jennifer. Mostly in the shape of their smiles, and maybe through the cheekbones, which reflected the apples of Lola's own cheeks. She whispered, "He can't really be...?" and Sam, shivering, shook his head.

"I don't know. What would the odds be, Lola? I know there aren't that many people who foster shifters, but..."

"Lola and Sam are already winning !" Noah yelled from the plywood surrounding the gazebo. Snow was falling faster, thick white flakes that landed in the little boy's hair and eyelashes only to be wiped away impatiently. "Look at them! They're FROZEN! And you guys are all wiggly!"

His purple-haired mother, glancing upward at the rapidly-falling snow, said, "And you know what? I think that means they win! Congratulations, Sam and Lola! You win the statue contest! Now everybody needs to get inside before they freeze to death!"

Noah's jaw flapped a couple of times as the reins of the contest were taken away from him, but at a warning look from his mother he relented, yelling, "Yay Sam and Lola! The next statue contest will be at the fair and everybody can practice until then!"

Someone nearby laughed. "There's never been a 'statue contest' at the fair, Noah. You have to get in touch with the people who run the fair to organize something like that."

Noah said, "Okay," with casual confidence, and bounced off with his mother, leaving the original speaker to mumble, "I bet we'll have a statue contest at the fair," to the general agreement and laughter of those around them as the crowd began to break up.

A number of people came up to congratulate Lola and Sam, both on their wedding and winning Noah's impromptu contest, and then they were on the way to the gastropub, with no time to discuss the idea that had left them reeling.

It wasn't impossible, Sam thought. Just unlikely...

The world is made of unlikely things, his fox said easily. Shifters, for example.

I know, but... It was too much to hope for. Still, as they shuffled into the warm pub, breathless and smiling, Sam did hope, and from the shine in Lola's eyes, he knew she did too.

Still, for a while, they couldn't help but be distracted, both by the reception party and by each other. Sam remembered the last time he'd danced with Lola so vividly. The idea that he could again took his breath away. He called a glowingly excited Charlee over, murmured to her, and let out a startled grunt when she hugged him enthusiastically and scurried off to behind the bar. A moment later she was on a stool or something behind it, getting above the crowd so she could call, "We need a dance floor, folks, let's clear a space for the bride and groom!"

Lola gave him a startled look as the floor did clear—completely with several people moving tables and chairs out of the way—and then laughed, a shy sweet sound as he offered his hand. She stepped out onto the impromptu dance floor with him as the first strains of Nat King Cole's 'Unforgettable' began to play, and though tears filled her eyes, her smile was the brightest thing Sam had ever seen. Those tears spilled over as Natalie Cole's voice joined her father's in the famous duet, and through a tight throat, she whispered, "You couldn't have chosen a better song. You always were, Sam. Unforgettable."

He whispered, "In every way," and tucked her close to sway to the music, finally together, as they'd always been meant to be.

CHAPTER 15

It wasn't until the next morning that Lola said—or even thought —"This is bonkers."

She was comfortably nestled in Sam's big bed, buried under fluffy comforters and quilts: warm, content, sleepily amused as it struck her that this was—well—bonkers. "All my stuff is in Detroit!"

"Detroit?" Sam lifted his head, white hair sticking up every which way. "You live in Detroit?"

"I did until yesterday!"

Sam rolled over, propping his head on his hand and smiling down at her. "Do you want to live in Detroit? I'll move to Detroit if you want to live there."

"You would hate Detroit." Lola rocked her head back and forth. "Well, maybe not hate it, but it's certainly not as quiet as Virtue, and it would be much riskier for you to be a fox there. No, I just hadn't thought about the logistics of all this. I got swept up in the moment." She smiled up at him. "I intend to stay swept up in the moment for the rest of my life."

He grinned. "With the occasional touch-down in reality to realize this is bonkers."

"Only long enough to figure out how to get my things packed and moved back to Virtue," she promised. Then she sighed and scooted closer. Sam dropped onto his back and slid his arm around her shoulders, warm and comforting. Very quietly, she

said, "It's not really possible, is it? That Chase...?"

Her husband took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. "I have what I thought was his original birth certificate. His name is Charles Richard Smith on it, which is only one right name out of three..."

"What's the birth date?"

"February seventeenth. The year is right," Sam said softly.

Lola pressed her mouth against his shoulder. "Our Samuel was born on the fifteenth, but...if the name was changed, changing the birth date...no wonder I couldn't find him, Sam. If your Chase really is our Samuel, if they changed all of that, no wonder I couldn't find him. Why would they do that?"

She shook her head even as she asked: the answer was obvious. It was so she couldn't find him. A single mother with no job or prospects and no idea her child was a shifter? Even she could see how a shifter working for the system might think it was safer to change the baby's information so he couldn't be found. "But you said he didn't come to you until he was almost seven?"

"Just a little past seven." Sam tightened his arm around her shoulders. "He'd bounced around the system before then, not out of anybody's maliciousness. It's just how it worked. Works, often, even now. And I didn't start fostering until that year. My parents died the year before, and like I said, I was a little directionless until I was approached about fostering shifter kids. Then I had to spend a while getting set up for it, legally, emotionally, physically with the house... I knew I would be getting Chase a few weeks before he arrived, but there wasn't any information about his birth family, except that his mother had had to give him up."

Lola growled deep in her throat, and Sam kissed her hair. "I know. If he's really our

son...I'm sorry, Lola."

"How are we supposed to approach this with him?" she asked as the growl faded away. "I assume there's not a safe database for shifters to test DNA with, and he didn't have a convenient fox-shaped birthmark to identify him by."

Sam sat up again, dislodging her as he blinked with astonishment. Lola sat up, too, blinking at him in turn. "What? What are you thinking?"

"That I might actually know someone who could provide that safe DNA test. Except dammit, they were leaving town yesterday! Where's my phone!" Sam hopped out of bed, snagging a pair of shorts and pulling them on as he marched out of the bedroom calling, "Chase? Chase, do you have the number for those investors yesterday? Garius and Conri?"

Lola flopped back into the soft bed, snickering, and said, "This is bonkers," to the ceiling. Imagining her future with Sam a lifetime ago had never included live-in staff, or a secretary who kept track of things like peoples' phone numbers. Still amused, she got out of bed, found a dressing gown, and followed Sam through the house.

Chase appeared, fully dressed in a button-down shirt and slacks, carrying a phone and looking embarrassed at running into Lola in her dressing gown, although Sam and his shorts didn't seem to bother the younger man at all. "Here you go, Mr Todd."

Sam said, "For heaven's sake," a bit absently, and Chase ducked a grin toward the floor, giving Lola the sense that he called Sam 'Mr Todd' for just that reaction. Sam also said, "Thank you," and Chase looked up again with a nod and a smile.

"Of course. Is everything all right?"

"It's fine," Lola assured him, then cast a glance at Sam, who lifted a finger, asking her

to hold off. Instead of bringing up the awkward topic of Chase's possible parentage, she asked, "Is everyone else still here?"

"Ellen had a deposition this morning, so she had to fly back late last night, but Tony and Steph are here, and your daughter was going to stay at Chef Charlee's last night, I think. She thinks you're crazy."

Lola's eyebrows flew up. "Jennifer or Charlee? Oh, well, Jenny's always thought I was a bit mad. She had some reason, honestly. I didn't like talking about my youth and I think she built it up as this big mysterious story in her head, and...well, I've sort of proved her right, haven't I."

Chase crooked a smile at her. "Don't take this wrong, but yes, you have. By the way, breakfast will be on the table in half an hour. If you want to eat, I'd recommend getting there promptly. Tony still takes the lion's share, even though he's forty and no longer growing."

"...is that because he's a lion?" Lola asked cautiously. "Or is it rude to ask?"

"Hah! It's a little rude to ask, but you're actually family now, so it's fine. He's a tiger, actually, which earned him no end of grief when we were kids."

"I—oh, no." Lola clapped a hand over her mouth, trying not to laugh out loud. "I don't suppose he's especially fond of a particular kind of sweetened breakfast cereal?"

"Tragically for him, he loves it. I'm amazed he didn't insist we call him Anthony, though."

"I hate being called Anthony even more than I hate being Tony the Tiger," Tony said, coming through a door from the east wing and toweling his sandy red hair. He was blue-eyed, taller than Chase, and looked as if he'd spent a lot of time working on a

sunburn over his lifetime: he had that ruddy, never-quite-tan color that redheads sometimes got, and a sprinkling of gold scruff along his jaw. "I didn't really get to meet you yesterday, Lola. I'm Tony. I hope you and Dad live happily ever after."

"Thank you. So do I, and it's nice to meet you properly, too. This has all been very sudden, I know."

"Well, fated mates." Tony waved a hand through the air. "Why waste time, when you know? Especially when you're old."

"Tony!"

"What? They are old! That can't be news to them!" Tony made an aggrieved face at his older brother, who sighed as if he'd given up hope of teaching Tony any manners.

"I had noticed age was creeping up on me," Lola said, amused. "Is your partner here, Tony? Chase said you had one."

"No, she stayed in Pittsburgh with the kids. I got Steph in Buffalo and we have to drive back after breakfast because if I'm not home for Sammy's choir performance tonight, I'll be Tony the Tortured For The Rest Of My Life."

"Sammy?" Lola's heart lifted at the name, and she found herself smiling at the younger Todd brother.

"Our daughter. She's seven and the gravitational center of my universe. Named after Dad, obviously."

"That's wonderful. I hope I get to meet her someday."

"Probably this summer. We usually come out here for a few weeks. Did I hear you

say something about breakfast, Chase?" Tony looked hopeful.

"Not for half an hour!"

"Uh-huh. Maybe I'll just go down to the kitchen..." Tony sidled by and followed the admittedly-tantalizing scent of bacon coming from the back of the house.

"Stephanie," Chase told Lola, "won't be at the breakfast table until thirty seconds before the plates get cleared, because she eats like a—" He broke off, looking pained, then, dryly, said, "Bird. And yes, she is one."

"There are bird shifters?" Lola's eyes widened. "Somehow I'd sort of decided you must all be mammals."

"That would make sense, wouldn't it? But no. Steph's a kestrel. She turns this big," he said, making a space of about ten vertical inches between his hands, "and is furious about it."

Lola blinked in the general direction of the bedrooms. "She's quite tall, though, isn't she? How does she shift that small?" Stephanie was tall, closer to six feet than not, and model-slender from what Lola had seen of her.

Chase shrugged. "Magic. She can get bigger, too, but her natural shift size is small and it annoys her endlessly."

"But I thought Sam said shifters tended to be bigger than their true animal counterparts?"

"They tend to," Chase agreed. "But Stephanie's small for a female kestrel. You'll probably see, eventually." He grinned suddenly. "She and Tony used to chase each other all over the house when we were kids. They wrecked everything."

"It sounds like a really wonderful family," Lola murmured. "I'm so happy for all of you."

"Garius can help." Sam returned in triumph, waving his phone. "He'd said something about his line of shifters, which made me think he knew more about the lines than he was letting on, and he'll send someone over to do a private DNA test."

Chase's eyebrows shot up. "Why do you need a DNA test? You two aren't going to have kids, are you? You're seventy years old, for God's sake!"

Sam looked as though he thought he should have watched his mouth, or at least the company he was in, and cast Lola a guilty glance before trying for a reassuring smile at Chase. "No, we're not. But it's, ah." He glanced at Lola again, and at her small nod, tried again. "It's possible we already did. Or. I mean. It's. Um."

"We did have a child," Lola interrupted gently. "Fifty years ago, give or take. We think that the hospital I was at had a nurse who was a shifter, and when it was clear I didn't know that my son's father was a shifter...we think they may have taken the child for what they believed was probably his own safety."

"Holy shit." Chase took a few steps backward and sat hard on a couch, staring up at Sam. "You mean we might have another...brother? Out there? A biological one? I mean, to you?"

"Not out there," Sam said cautiously. "There aren't that many fox shifters, Chase."

"Oh my God. You don't think he's dead ?" Sheer horror wrote itself large over Chase's features before collapsing into wide-eyed understanding. "Oh. What. No. No way? You don't think he's— me ? What would the odds be?"

"There were only half a dozen people who fostered shifter kids on the whole East

coast when I started," Sam said carefully. "You were—well, Lola's son was—born in Chicago. It's a long way, but we know you worked your way east through your first few years. And you were born in Aurora."

"Aurora's not Chicago," Chase said feebly. "When...what?" His hazel gaze went to Lola, who sat across from him, heart in her throat.

"My son was born on February fifteenth in a small Chicago charity hospital run by nuns. His name was Samuel Charles Johnson. Sam says your birth certificate says you were born in Aurora two days later, and that you're Charles Richard Smith." She felt her smile falter. "I chose Johnson as my new last name back then because it was so common, and Smith is even more common, so it...it almost adds up. And you are a fox shifter."

"And Noah Brannigan thought I looked like you," Chase said to Sam, blankly.

"You also look something like Lola's daughter Jennifer," Sam said, as cautiously as Lola had spoken. "It's a lot, Chase, I know. It might be impossible. We might be chasing a dream. But...Garius Beren's foundation can offer a DNA test that won't be exposed to true human laboratories, so if you wanted to find out..."

"I—yes. I mean, yes, but—but Dad, if I am, I don't want that to kill the others. None of us ever wanted anything more than to really be your kids?—"

"You are my kids," Sam said fiercely.

Chase made a choked sound, stood up, and hugged Sam hard. Lola wiped her first tears away, then didn't bother with the rest; there were too many to catch, anyway. Finally, Chase mumbled, "But you know what I mean," into Sam's shoulder, and the older man nodded.

"We can't not tell them, though."

"Oh, God, no," Chase croaked. "I'm just going to get a ration of shit about 'we always knew you were his favorite' and things like that."

Sam, indignant enough to make Lola laugh through her tears, said, "You were not!"

Chase put Sam back a bit, grinning at him a little wetly. "No, I know. You always liked Stephanie best."

"I did not!" Sam paused. "I liked Ellen best. She always made my coffee right."

Chase managed another wet coughing laugh and hugged Sam again. "No, you didn't. Although yes, she did. She still makes a mean cup of coffee."

"No, I didn't," Sam agreed, muffled in his son's shoulder. "I love all of you kids with all of my heart. I would have wasted away to nothing without you."

"And then there wouldn't be a happily ever after with Lola," Chase said hoarsely. He stepped back, wiping his eyes and smiling lopsidedly at Lola. "Sorry. I'm a little overwhelmed."

"Sam and I have been welling up constantly the past few days," she assured him. "You're more than entitled to a few tears of your own."

"God." Chase wiped his eyes again. "So when is this DNA technician coming over?"

Sam shrugged. "I don't expect them to be here this afternoon, although who knows? Garius said he'd send someone as soon as he could."

"Great. Okay, good. Enough time for me to pull myself together." Chase glanced

toward the dining room. "And tell the others. Dad, is it all right if I go talk to them myself? I feel like this is a sibling thing."

"Yes, of course. Lola and I will get dressed and meet you in the dining room in a while."

Chase nodded, gave Lola another crooked smile, and maneuvered around the couches as he headed toward the back of the house, although he stopped as he reached the huge fireplace that made up the great room's back 'wall.' "You know it wouldn't really change anything?" he asked carefully.

"Of course," Lola said gently. "You're already a family, Chase. That's obvious. I'll still be a new person in your life. But it would do my heart so much good to know that my baby found his way to a family that loved him as much as your father and siblings love you."

Chase said, "Thank you," with a smile that made him look about half his age, and disappeared toward the kitchen.

Sam came to sit next to Lola on the couch, arm around her shoulders so he could kiss her hair. "That was very brave. I told you, you're the bravest person I've ever known."

"It was what he needed to hear," Lola whispered. "And it was true. All of it. I want our baby to have found a family who loved him. If that family happens to have a biological connection nobody expected, that's wonderful. But what really matters is that he grew up safe and happy and loved. I want that more than anything else, Sam. I really do."

"I know." He kissed her hair again, and despite his promise to Chase, instead of leading her upstairs, he sank back into the couch with her and held on. "It's all going to turn out okay."

CHAPTER 16

Two afternoons later, a crisply-dressed woman of around forty appeared on the doorstep with a briefcase that proved to house a small, ultra-modern DNA testing kit. "Doctor Jacinda Reynolds," she said with a firm handshake, first for Sam, then Lola, and finally for an unusually tongue-tied Chase. "The Gladiator Foundation sent me. Is there somewhere we can set up?"

When Chase failed to answer, Sam said, "The library, I think. Let me show you the way," and tucked his arm into Lola's, leading them all to the library. Chase trailed along behind, evidently too nervous to talk, and sat on the least comfortable couch in there, watching Dr Reynolds with wide eyes. She was, Sam thought, a striking woman: tightly curled black hair worn in a short crop, deep brown eyes, and cheekbones that would still be fabulous when she was ninety. She wore a skirted business suit in royal purple, with a cream blouse and gold jewelry, and Sam rather thought Chase wasn't just stricken with nerves, but appreciation. That was good: Chase spent far too much time taking care of Sam, and not enough taking care of himself.

"How long will it take to get the results, Dr Reynolds?" Sam asked curiously as she set up her kit. It was much smaller and more elegant than he'd expected, although truthfully he didn't know what he had expected. A portable laboratory, maybe. Something with beakers and swirling glass tubes. Very pulp horror, now that he was actually thinking about it.

The corner of Dr Reynolds' mouth turned up. "About ninety minutes."

" Really ?" That was the first word Chase had managed since she arrived, and it was spoken in tandem with Sam and Lola.

"I assumed it would take days, or weeks," Lola said, astonished. "And also, I have to admit I was expecting something...larger." She gestured at the tidy setup, and this time Dr Reynolds smiled a little more.

"The Gladiator Foundation has some very advanced technology. But even a run of the mill laboratory can turn results around in a couple of hours, assuming they don't have a backlog and do have the right equipment. If you'll open your mouth?" she said to Sam, who did. She swabbed the inside of his cheek, then did the same to Chase. "Give me a few minutes," she suggested. "Let me get the program running, and then I'd be delighted to accept that cup of coffee you were about to offer me."

That was directed at Chase, who blinked as if thunderstruck, then hastily said, "Yes, coffee, of course, would you like—yes, you just said you would. Let me...I'll..." He cast a nervous look at Sam, who smiled as beatifically as he could and offered Lola a hand up from the couch.

"My dear, I think that thing needs attending. I'm sure we can leave the young people alone for a while?"

Both of the 'young people' stared at him flatly enough to make Sam laugh. Lola hid her own laughter much more successfully as she took his hand and rose, murmuring, "Oh yes, that thing . We definitely need to attend that thing. I'll put the coffee on," she offered, and the two of them left the library, closed the door, and leaned against each other, trying to muffle their giggles.

"Did you see him?" Sam whispered. "Instantly twitterpated."

"Sparks," Lola agreed, beaming. "There were definitely sparks. I don't even know

where the coffee maker is . People keep bringing me cups instead of me going to make one for myself."

"I'm sure we can figure it out," Sam said gallantly. He did know where the various coffee makers were—he still liked an old-fashioned drip coffee, whether made a pot or a cup at a time—and there was also a machine which he understood made some kind of fancy thing Chase and a couple of the staff liked. But admitting that wasn't as much fun as going hand in hand to the kitchen with Lola and searching through cupboards in hopes of finding grounds, cups, filters, or—and he still thought this was odd— pods .

By the time Chase and Dr Reynolds joined them, they had made nine cups of coffee, ranging from a disastrously milky latte to a plain cup, and were trying to clean up the mess they made while Cook stood at the other end of the kitchen, arms crossed over her chest and a thunderous look on her face. Neither Sam nor Lola dared look at her, because every time one of them did, it set off another round of laughter. Lola had already knocked one cup over from clutching at the counter to lean on it and giggle at the cook's expression. Apparently the master of the house and his new wife were really not supposed to be helpful around the house.

"Do you live like this?" Lola asked accusingly. She'd been asking the same question for most of the past few days, disbelieving of the casual luxury Sam was so accustomed to that he hardly knew how else he could be living. She was obviously delighted with it. Just...flabbergasted.

Chase, stopping in the kitchen door, looked absolutely pained as he turned to Dr Reynolds. "I'd say they're not usually like this, but they've only been married three days and I've only known Lola four, so in my experience, they're actually like this all the time."

"You're going to have to tell me that entire story," Dr Reynolds said to him. "Over a

cup of coffee. Since it appears we have several to choose from."

"We didn't know what you'd like," Lola said with an obvious attempt to control her laughter. "So we thought we'd make some of everything. Now we're going to be banished from the kitchen for the rest of our lives." She sent an apologetic look toward Cook, who was an imposing woman despite being less than five and a half feet tall. It was something about the hot pink flush in her pale cheeks and the slightly beady glare, Sam thought. No one wanted to mess with that expression. Lola, still apologetic, said, "I can cook," and Wanda—which was Cook's actual name—rolled her eyes.

"If they've made undrinkable coffee," she said to Dr Reynolds, "please don't blame it on me, and please come ask me for something decent ." The last word was delivered with a threatening glare at Sam and Lola, who burst out laughing again and slunk off to the great room with their illicit cups of coffee.

" Perfectly decent coffee," Lola whispered defiantly as they settled into the couch. "And I really can cook!"

"Believe it or not, so can I. I learned to annoy my parents, and I usually make dinner on Monday nights. Wanda even deigns to eat it, sometimes." Sam tested his coffee, which was, in fact, perfectly decent, and lowered his voice. "I'm not sure I've ever been as nervous about anything as I am about this DNA test."

"It's probably why we're giggling like sugared-up six year olds," Lola agreed. "It'll be fine either way. It'll be..."

" Fine ," Sam echoed reassuringly. Every few minutes they told each other the same thing all over again, as if they'd forgotten. Mostly as if they were trying to soothe their nerves, which clearly wasn't working.

Still, the opportunity to curl up on the couch together and mumble reassurances wasn't something Sam had ever imagined having. He could fall into each moment, living in it, awe-stricken and happy. "It's amazing," he eventually murmured. "I know we've said it before, but...everything's changed, but nothing has. This is the life I wanted, Lola."

Lola tipped her head up to steal a kiss, her mouth soft and warm against his. "They do say good things come to those who wait."

Sam laughed, startled. "I'm not sure you're supposed to have to wait fifty years!"

"I don't think there's a time limit on truisms. Oh!" She jolted as her phone buzzed, and took it out to check a message. "It's Jenny, asking if she has a new brother yet. They're taking this very well. Better than I hoped."

Sam nodded. He knew Lola had been afraid to tell her daughter about the child she'd lost into the system, but a clarity had come into Jennifer's eyes as her mother explained. She'd eventually said, "That's why you looked so sad sometimes," very quietly, and gathered Lola into a gentle hug. "I'm sorry, Mom. I wish you felt like you could have told me, but I understand why you didn't. I don't think I would have understood when I was younger, and... I suppose at some point it got too awkward or weird to bring up."

Lola had wiped her eyes and nodded. "It seemed better left in the past. But having found Sam again..."

"Well, and then realizing Chase might actually be your son," Jenny had said briskly. "Long odds on that, but stranger things have happened. You couldn't exactly not try to find out, and tell me, at that point."

"You've grown up into a very reasonable person," Lola had told her daughter fondly.

"Where was that reasonableness when you were about fifteen?"

Jenny had laughed. "Buried under being fifteen. I'd say I'm sorry, but you know I got as good as I gave, with Charlee."

"The circle of life," Sam had said rather sanctimoniously, and they'd left it at that. At least until now, with Jennifer texting to ask whether she had a half-brother.

Chase and Dr Reynolds appeared in the passageway between the great room and the breakfast nook at the back of the house. "Jacinda says the results should be ready now."

Sam tried to catch Lola's eye at that 'Jacinda,' decided he was being too obvious about it, and caught her sparkling glance anyway, rendering them both close to another giggle. He hadn't imagined giggling would be such a part of his life at this age. Maybe he could think of it as cackling, which seemed more age-appropriate. "How are we doing this?" he asked, suddenly nervous again. "Are we sending Dr Reynolds in to read the results and come out to tell us, or are we all going to go breathe down her neck?"

Dr Reynolds pursed her lips. "Perhaps somewhere in between. You could come into the library with me and not breathe down my neck while I check the results."

"Yes, that sounds less...invasive," Sam agreed. Somehow he'd found Lola's hand with his own and was holding on hard all of a sudden. They stood up, and Lola put her other hand out to Chase, who took it long enough to squeeze her fingers, then led them all into the library. Dr Reynolds took up a place behind the desk, examining the results on her computer, while Sam sat on the couch, Lola and Chase to either side of him. Chase slid his hand into Sam's, holding on just about as hard as Sam and Lola were clutching each other's hands, and for what felt like forever, they hardly breathed, gazes fixed on Jacinda Reynolds.

She glanced up once, just briefly, then brought her attention back down to the data, before finally lifting her eyes and smiling broadly. "Congratulations. You're a family."

Sam's heart crashed into thunder, blocking out almost everything except Lola's shocked, happy gasp and the way Chase's face paled, then flushed hot red as he turned to Sam in stunned astonishment. Then they were hugging, all three of them, and Sam couldn't tell whose tears were whose. It hardly mattered, as Chase scraped out, "Dad," incredulously, and Sam whispered, "Son," in return.

"I'm so glad. I'm so happy," Lola said through tears. "All I wanted was for you to be safe and happy. That's all that mattered."

Chase made a rough sound and hugged her a little harder through the tangled embrace. "I am. I have been." His voice was awfully shaky as he added, "Mom," carefully, and Lola flooded with fresh tears.

"What an incredibly lucky family we are," Sam said hoarsely. "Thank you, Dr Reynolds. We owe you so much."

She looked startled to be remembered, and passed it off with a smile. "It's a privilege to witness this kind of reunion. I should be thanking you. That said..." She lifted her eyebrows, tilted her head toward the library door, and took her leave, although she didn't bring her things with her, so Sam assumed she was only giving them privacy, not leaving the estate. Then for a time he didn't think of her at all, caught up in hugs, in phone calls—vone calls, he reminded himself with amusement—to the rest of the family, and finally in collapsing into the couch, exhausted from emotion.

Chase, looking as shaky as Sam felt, finally said, "I'd like to talk to Jacinda again," and with a final hug, got up to leave Sam and Lola alone. They both smiled at him, and Sam pulled Lola close, waiting until their son had left to murmur, "Are you all

right?"

"I'm wonderful," Lola whispered. "So tired right now, but I also feel like I could fly. I never imagined a happy ending like this, Sam. Not ever. Even in my dreams, it wasn't this perfect. You've done such a good job raising your children," she said hazily. "It's a miracle one of them was ours. I can't believe how lucky I am. How lucky we all are."

"Me either." Sam closed his eyes, reveling in the sensation of having his beloved in his arms, then smiled into her hair. "Of course, I'm a shifter, you know. We didn't stand a chance of outfoxing fate."

Lola breathed an amused sound, then, as she really heard what he'd said, lifted her head to give him an indignant look. "Samuel Todd! You did not!"

He—cackled, he reminded himself. So much more dignified than giggling. He cackled and said, "I'm afraid I did."

"Hmph." Lola put her head back down. "Good thing I love you, or saying things like that might fox it up."

"Lola!" Sam shouted with laughter. "Language, young lady!"

"Why, are you going to vulpine away if I curse a little bit? I'm just thinking outside the fox, Sam, I don't know what you're complaining about. Oh, come on, you can keep up with me if you just fox-us a little bit. And after that wedding dress I wore, I don't want to hear about you thinking I make any fashion fox-paws, either. Furthermore?—"

"No! No! Stop! I concede! I didn't know what I was letting myself in for! When did you become a punster? I don't remember that about you!"

"Isn't it fox-tastic?" Lola grinned up at him as he groaned from the bottom of his soul. "I can keep going, if you want."

"There are so many other ways I'd like you to keep going, though." He stole a kiss, then pressed his forehead against hers, eyes closed as he smiled. "Actually, as long as you stick with me forever, you can make all the terrible fox puns you want."

"For the rest of our lives," Lola murmured contentedly. "Just like we were always meant to be. I love you, Sam. Nothing could ever be more perfect."

One Year Later

It wasn't hard to live up to a promise of nothing could ever be more perfect in a year of love and adoration, of story-telling and sharing the lives they'd lived apart as they settled into the life they were now living together. But Sam had made another promise, one he was fairly certain Lola had forgotten, and he intended to live up to that one, too.

It started with breakfast in bed on their anniversary, a special treat that both Cook and the housekeeper firmly told him he'd better not get used to: breakfast was served in the breakfast nook, not in bed, where crumbs got into the sheets. Just this once, they both agreed, but never again. Sam swore he wouldn't push his luck a second time, and both the women exchanged a look that said they knew perfectly well he'd do the same thing next year.

Although in his defense, he really didn't intend to. This was a special occasion. French toast, which was Lola's favorite, and fresh orange juice, and most importantly, a ring box settled behind the juice glass, which she didn't pick up for an agitatingly long time. For a seventy year old man, Sam was impressed with how squirming and impatient he could be, and relief swept him when Lola finally did reach for the juice.

Her fine feathery eyebrows rose as she saw the box, and just to torment him—Sam was pretty sure of that—she took a nice long sip of the juice before putting the glass aside and murmuring, "Now what on earth could this be?" as she picked up the box. Sam jittered, and Lola glanced at him with a quiet laugh. "Really, Sam, what is it? I don't need anniversary gifts. Thank you, though."

She opened the box as she spoke, and the last words faded into astonished silence before she whispered, " Sam ."

"I told you," he said, surprisingly nervously. "I told you I'd get you a better ring for our anniversary."

The ring in the box was both delicate and intricate. Rose gold, with a rose-shaped setting for a pale pink stone with golden under-hues, and diamonds set around the band, which was in turn surrounded with two other bands that made up a leaf-like setting for the central rose. Lola, ever so softly, said, " Sam ," again, and lifted her gaze to him in astonishment. "It's incredibly beautiful."

He reached out to not quite touch the central band, whispering, "Engagement ring," and then touching first the bottom ring, then the upper. "Wedding ring. And fiftieth anniversary ring. I know it doesn't quite count?—"

"Oh!" Lola threw herself into his arms, knocking over the entire breakfast tray as she did so and thus proving both Cook and the housekeeper right: breakfast in bed was a terrible plan. But as Sam gathered his wife and mate in his arms, he thought they would probably forgive him, just this once. "It counts," Lola promised, her voice muffled in his shoulder. "It counts. Oh, Sam, how perfect. How beautiful. Thank you so much." She untangled enough to remove the ring and offer it to him so he could put it on her finger, then beamed joyfully as it glittered there. "But I didn't get you one."

"Well." Sam snaked an arm across the bed and pulled another ring box out from his bedside table. "I thought you might worry about that, so I got you one to get me."

"Of course you did. Oh, my , what good taste I have." The ring in his box was heavier, but also of rose gold with a central stone of morganite, with an etched roses-and-leaves motif around the small diamonds that spanned out from the larger stone. Lola, beaming, put it on his finger, then lifted his hand to kiss his knuckles. "I assume

you admire my excellent taste."

"I must, since you had the good taste to marry me." He leaned in to kiss her, then, apologetically, mumbled, "I'd better clean up the sheets before the orange juice sets and stains. I'll never hear the end of it."

"I'll help." Lola got up, still admiring her ring, and they stripped the bed with efficiency, although a piece of french toast did go flying. "So we're going downstairs for second breakfast?"

"I think we'd better," Sam admitted sheepishly. "After I've put all of this in the wash so Mrs O'Connor doesn't murder me."

"That would spoil my whole day, yes, so let's avoid that." Lola smiled at him as they bundled the sheets and comforters up, and together went downstairs with Sam muttering about how he needed to install a laundry chute. "And a dumbwaiter for laundry coming back up again," Lola suggested. "So no one has to carry it up the stairs, either."

"Genius. I should have thought of this decades ago." They got the laundry going, and had just about finished a second attempt at breakfast when Sam's phone rang. He picked it up, sliding the bar to answer a video call, and nearly dropped it again. "Lola. Lola!"

"What? What?! Oh! " She leaped up and ran around the table to see what he was looking at, then sat down hard next to him as Chase, utterly beaming in frame with an absolutely exhausted-looking Jacinda, tilted the phone a little to show them the tiny bundle of wrinkly, red-faced baby in Jacinda's arms.

"Congratulations, Grandma, Grandpa," Chase said in a voice so full of love and pride that he could hardly get the words out. "I'd like you to meet Regina Charlotte Todd."

Lola said, " Chase, " and burst into tears as Sam, every bit as overwhelmed, put his arm around her shoulders.

"Congratulations," he whispered. "I thought you weren't due for another couple of weeks, Jaci."

"Apparently this little one was in a hurry to arrive," Jacinda said with weary pride. "I suppose she wanted to be an anniversary present."

"I was wrong last year," Lola said, wiping her eyes. " This is the most perfect day of all. When can we come visit?"

"I intend to sleep as soon as we're done calling our families," Jacinda said firmly. "Tomorrow is good."

"Tomorrow is perfect," Sam promised.

And it, and every day after, was.

* * *