

The Ball

Clarine wasn't going to go to the ball, originally. Hobnobbing with nobles and royalty and the assorted upper crust wasn't her idea of a good Friday night. Her day had gone so badly wrong, though, that she agreed to go simply to have something to distract her. She found herself, waiting for her ride, trying to pick out a dress. It was not looking good. She hadn't updated her wardrobe in some time, and it seemed that she'd gain a bit of weight. She stood in front of her full-length mirror, a cow in lacy black underthings, and examined the two dresses that still fit her. With a sigh, she decided on the black one.

It worked, she thought, once she had squeezed into it. Her cloven hooves were nicely polished, and gleamed faintly in the late afternoon light. Muscular calves were not quite covered by the dress's hem. The dress strained faintly around her hips, and she thought her stomach was putting more pressure on the middle than she preferred, but examining her reflection, she didn't think anyone would notice. The dress's neckline was far, far lower than she would have normally worn. Honestly, calling it a neckline at all seemed overly optimistic. Her breasts were barely contained by the lacy fabric, and she was afraid any sudden movement would release them. She tugged the dress up as best as she could. Careful not to breathe too deeply, she stepped back to admire herself.

Her muzzle was long, blunt, and ended in a velvety pink nose, which matched the tongue she stuck out at herself. She had piercingly blue eyes, framed by long lashes, and highlighted by just the faintest bit of eyeshadow. Running her hands through her long hair, Clarine noted that her dirty-blond roots were beginning to show through the light pink dye-job she had recently had. Two long, round ears poked up out that hair, two silver hoops dangling in each, next to a pair of tiny, almost invisible horns. After considering for a moment, Clarine tied up her hair in a messy bun.

Her tan-colored fur was brushed silky, and her long, tufted tail dangled through the hole in the back of her dress. She adjusted her clothes and took a deep breath, which necessitated adjusting her clothes again, and headed to her front step to wait.

It had been Sara's idea to go, and had even bought the tickets and rented a cab, and it was on Sara that Clarine was waiting. Thankfully, Clarine didn't have to wait too long, compared to how late her friend could be, before an honest-to-god palfrey-drawn carriage pulled up outside her little townhouse. Sara, the showboating pony that she was, leaned her dark-brown muzzle out of the window and whistled.

The palfreys blew and snorted, their feathery, emerald-green hides straining against the harness while the carriage driver, a young and bored looking rat in cheap livery, held them steady so Clarine could climb into the carriage. Sara, a long-limbed horse wearing a seafoam dress that managed to show less and reveal more than Clarine's, was lounging in the plush seats. Her mane had been elegantly braided with thin ribbon and what looked like real, glittering gems that caught the light of the streetlamps that were just turning on.

“Really?” Clarine asked, gesturing at the carriage, as she sat on the bench opposite her friend.

Sara grinned. “Really, really, Cici.” She lounged on the cushion. “We’re going to hob knob, so we’re gonna do it right, sister. Besides, haven’t you always wanted to ride in one of these things?”

One of the wheels hit a bump, nearly sending Clarine sprawling. “No, not really,” she grouched as she tried to arrange herself more securely. Sara reached over to pat her on the knee.

“Relax, Cici. This is going to be a fun night.”

Clarine didn’t argue, and they rode the rest of the way to the castle in silence, aside from the occasional yip of pain and surprise when the carriage hit a pothole.

The castle, ancestral home of the royal family, was impressive the first time one saw it. The huge walls were painted white and so clean that they shone, while the decorative battlements and crenulated parapets were gilded. The center keep rose high above the walls, and its roof, decorated with alabaster roses – the symbol of the queen’s house – was subdued but complex. A newcomer might spend hours just staring at the intertwined roses, taking in each new detail.

Clarine had lived in the city around the castle for well over a decade and was, by that time, completely used to it. It no longer looked like a masterpiece of centuries old architecture, just that big white thing that kept the sun from seeing her yard until the afternoon. She barely noticed the subtle, abstract designed worked into the walls, visible only in shadow, or the row of ancient statues that lined the walk to the castle door.

Instead, she watched the guests. The ball was open to anyone – provided they purchased a not-inexpensive ticket – and many people counted it the social event of the year. There were hundreds of people waiting in the security line, doing a great deal of pre-party mingling, and among the varied faces she saw neighbors and coworkers and the guy who sold ice cream down by the beach chatting up a famous movie star. Politicians were taking the opportunity to shake hands and get their pictures taken standing next to business leaders and community leaders and the local high school marching band. Bored people who had come on a lark, resigned people who had been dragged along by family, excited people who had saved every penny to afford the ticket, and bemused people who had won a raffle all chatted with one another. The air was one of anticipation.

“Isn’t it exciting, Cici?” Sara whispered into her ear as they joined the back of the line. The horse threaded her arm into Clarine’s, leaning gently against her. “Look, there’s—”

“Yes, I know who she is,” Clarine said, though with a smile. The mood was starting to creep into her. “What’s your plan, anyway?”

“Oh, Violet’s coming in a couple hours – she had to work late, you know – and then we’re going to try and corner as many celebrities as we can for autographs.” She tugged the corner of a bright yellow notebook out of her handbag and winked. “Want to join us?”

Clarine shook her head. “You know that plan’s going to work for all of ten minutes until you two find a closet or something to make out in.”

“I would *never*,” Sara sniffed. “But I do suppose even castle closets are too small for three-way make-outs. Or, ah, other things. Although, if you *are* interested...” She trailed off hopefully.

Clarine laughed. “Not even a little. But don’t let me spoil your fun. I’ll just find my way to the cake.”

Sara affected a small pout, which was ruined slightly by her wink. She didn’t respond, though, as they were shuffled through the security line’s metal detectors, and then into the grand entrance of the castle. It was too crowded and loud for them to talk in the midst of all the people waiting for friends and family to make it through security. Motioning towards the massive double-doors at the end of the foyer, Sara grabbed Clarine by the wrist and pulled her through the crowd and into the castle proper.

They passed ballrooms and galleries and long, open hallways, all filled to the brim. There must have been hundreds of people, chatting, eating, dancing. Clarine felt dizzy with the sheer number of them all.

“Where are we going, Sara?” Clarine asked her friend as they picked up speed. They weren’t quite running through the halls, but a few people were staring after them.

They burst into a larger-than-usual ballroom – which was, Clarine realized, saying something – and skidded to a halt. The people here were better dressed, and their demeanor suggested to Clarine that they’d found where all the nobles were closeted. Still, any area off-limits to guests would be marked with a velvet rope and a guard, so they weren’t forbidden from being there.

It was less crowded here, but still packed, and Clarine still felt a little out of place under the haughty stares of the noblesse. “Maybe we should go back,” she murmured to Sara, but the horse wasn’t paying her any attention. Her gaze was on a dais at the far end of the ballroom, atop which was an older woman, a deer whose fur had gone almost completely white, wearing the most magnificent gown of pale blue silk. A golden circlet sat atop her head.

“That’s the queen,” Clarine whispered, her voice suddenly dry. Sara flashed her a grin. The queen was older than Clarine’s parents, but she was still beautiful, practically the image of grace and power. With a start, Clarine realized she wasn’t alone on the dais. On her left was a stag a few years older than Clarine, wearing the most expensive suit she’d ever seen, his magnificent rack of antlers covered in gold leaf. The eldest prince, Clarine realized, which made the rail-thin deer on his arm his fiancée, the princess of some far-off land. And on the queen’s right was the youngest prince, a few years Clarine’s junior, wearing a pristine, powder-blue naval uniform. Seated next to him was his husband, a shy-looking fox in a matching uniform. That left only the middle prince missing.

“What’re you grinning at?” Sara asked.

Clarine jumped and quickly wiped the smile off her face. She certainly hadn't been reflecting that Prince Adrian was the only one of his brothers still single, according to the gossip magazines. "Nothing. Oh, look, cake." She pointed to a side room.

Sara tsked. "Fine. You go get your cake. I think I see an actor." She swooped in and smooched Clarine's cheek before the cow could escape. "For luck, Cici." With a wink, Sara vanished into the crowd.

Clarine sidled out of the ballroom and into line for cake. It was much quieter in the little parlor where massive sheet cakes were laid out, each sporting a local landmark drawn in red frosting on top, while little placards described the flavor. Staff in livery waited to serve slices and, with most people occupied with hobnobbing elsewhere, Clarine was able to zip through the line, scoring thin slices of chocolate, vanilla, and, her favorite, red velvet cake. She helped herself to a miniature plastic fork, practically drooling, when she walked right into what felt like a brick wall, her plate upending and sending cake flying. It splattered all over the wall.

The wall, she realized, was wearing a silver-and-white air force uniform. The uniform itself was wearing, most unfortunately, a great deal of frosting and cake. Clarine's gaze travelled up over the handful of medals pinned to the uniform's breast, the wing commander rank insignia on the lapel, and settled on the muzzle of a stag, a mixture of confusion and alarm splashed across his muzzle. Emerald green eyes stared down at her, half-hidden in the long, wavy hair that cascaded from between his ears. A massive set of antlers curved upwards, covered in silver foil that shimmered in the light.

"Are you alright, miss?"

"Oh my god," Clarine whispered, covering her mouth with her hand. "You're Prince Adrian."

He grinned shyly. "I'm afraid so."

Clarine squeaked aloud, staring up at the prince. He was a good head taller than she, even without the antlers. Abruptly, she realized she was staring, and she dropped into a low, not-entirely-awkward curtsy. "Your highness," she squeaked, "I'm so sorry."

"That's quite alright, miss," said Prince Adrian, his voice sounding vaguely strangled. Clarine hazarded a glance upward and saw that the prince was staring fixedly at the ceiling, his ears flushed with embarrassment. It was then that she noticed her curtsy had overbalanced her bosom, which was in serious danger of escaping her dress. She straightened, feeling a flush creep up her own cheeks.

"I, um, I'm sorry for your uniform, your highness."

He waved a hand, trying to appear airy. "It's nothing a little club soda won't fix, uh. I'm sorry, what's your name?"

The flush crept a little higher. “Clarine, your highness. Clarine Collins. My, um, friends call me Cici.” Now why had she told him that? She looked fixedly down at her hooves, her ears folding back, which at least stopped him from seeing how red they had turned.

Prince Adrian cleared his throat. “Well, ah, Cici, if that’s alright to call you. And you can call me Adrian.” He offered her his hand. “And I think I owe you some cake?”

Clarine stole a glance at Adrian’s face, and was relieved, at least, to see that he was almost as red as she. She accepted his hand and let him guide her back to the table. She only got a single piece of cake, though, seeing as her hunger seemed to have been replaced with butterflies. Adrian asked the waiter for a bottle of club soda.

A few minutes later, they were in a side hallway, out of the view of any party-goers. Clarine was dabbing Adrian’s jacket with a napkin soaked in club soda. He was incredibly muscular underneath that uniform, she noticed. She kept her ears pinned back so he couldn’t see her blush.

Clarine sucked in her breath. “It’s not working,” she admitted. The red frosting, in particular, was proving a pain to get out of the silky silver uniform. She took a step back so she could look up into the prince’s face.

Adrian looked philosophical about the whole affair. He pulled the uniform forward as best as he could to look at the stain. “Oh, well. I, uh, can’t let mother see me like this,” he admitted, giving her a shy little grin. He glanced around, then took her hand. “Follow me.”

Without waiting for her answer, Adrian pulled Clarine down the hall, then into a little alcove that opened up into a bigger, emptier hall. Thick velvet ropes carrying ‘No Entry’ signs in very official looking font barred their passage, but Adrian ignored them.

“I don’t think I’m supposed to be here,” Clarine said, nervously eyeing the guards who watched them pass.

He glanced over his shoulder at her, his grin broadening. “You have my permission.”

“Do they know that?” They passed a second pair of guards, who eyed her.

Adrian laughed, but it wasn’t unkind. “You’re with one of the princes, Cici. They know it.”

Clarine made a soft little ‘oh’ noise as she let him keep pulling her forward. Within minutes they were out of earshot of the party, into a completely deserted wing of the castle, and then, too fast for her to register the soaring, beautiful, empty rooms they passed, into a suite of rooms that were clearly lived-in. His bedroom, she thought, then amended, his bedrooms. There were several, including a giant antechamber, a closet bigger than her own bedroom, and a bed that wasn’t much smaller.

And then Adrian’s uniform jacket was flying across the room to land on top of a laundry hamper. Clarine traced its flight back and found Adrian, topless, digging through a closet of assorted suits and uniforms. It was one thing to have felt his muscles, but another to see them on display. She caught herself staring and hastily turned away. The cake was still in her hand and she

wolfed it down, just to have something to do. Certainly not to hide the fact that she had been drooling, she told herself.

“All set!” Adrian called, and Clarine turned back. He was wearing a pristine new uniform jacket, identical to the previous one but for the medals. She reached up to touch the bare spot on his breast where all the awards would have gone.

Just to let him know that they weren’t there, she said.

Adrian glanced down and frowned. “Oh, yeah.” He looked over towards the pile of laundry, and shrugged. “They’re a pain, plus I’d have to take the jacket off again.”

Clarine tried not to look disappointed. “So, uh, shall we go back to the party?” she asked, to cover the silence that had started to stretch.

Adrian looked like he wanted to suggest something else, but he nodded and offered her his arm. Clarine took it, trying her best not to lean against him. Even his arms were hard as stone. He led her out of his rooms and back into the empty parts of the castle. Were the hallways this empty on their way to his rooms, Clarine wondered? The guards all seemed to have vanished. Perhaps they were all stationed back near the velvet ropes.

At the turn back to where they had come, Adrian paused. “Would you, um,” he blushed again, looking unaccountably shy. “They’re going to set off the fireworks soon, and there’s a parapet overlooking where the launch area. It should be deserted. Would you like me to show you?”

Clarine took in the helpful, excited look on the prince’s face, then, with a little blush herself, nodded. “Sure. Lead the way, your highness.”

Adrian took Clarine the long way around, avoiding the party as he explained about the history of the palace and the functions of the many rooms. They passed the occasional guard, but Adrian never paid any attention as the guard saluted until he and Clarine had passed by. She supposed he was just used to them. The rooms themselves were gorgeous, Clarine was sure, but she found her focus stuck on the prince.

“Here we are,” Adrian told her as he let go her arm and pushed open a massive wooden door. Beyond was a long, curving stone walkway. On their right were huge glass windows overlooking the ballroom where the queen was still holding court. On the left was a thick, crenellated parapet, and beyond that, a huge lawn. The wall itself was almost four feet thick.

They walked about halfway down, until they could see, dimly in the night, several figures setting up the firework launchers. Adrian helped Clarine climb onto the crenellation, where she sat, her legs folded underneath her, taking in the view.

“Won’t someone see us up here?” she asked.

Adrian shook his head. “You can only see a little bit of the walkway from the ballroom, and only if you stand right next to the glass. Me and my brothers used to hide up here when we were little. Oooh, look!” The first firework went off, lighting the sky in brilliant scarlet and gold.

Clarine found herself leaning back against Adrian, his warm, muscular chest supporting her easily. He slipped his arms around her middle to hold her steady as more fireworks went off over their heads.

“Aren’t they pretty?” Adrian asked in a hushed voice. But Clarine wasn’t watching the fireworks. She had tilted her head up and was studying his face. Before she realized what she was doing, she had reached up and pulled Adrian’s muzzle down to meet hers.

Adrian started to say something, but then their lips touched and they were kissing as though both had meant this all along. Clarine turned, wrapping a leg around Adrian’s middle, one hand draping over his shoulder, the other running over the back of his neck and up to his magnificent antlers, tracing them. She felt the silver foil rip under her fingers.

“Sorry,” she breathed, pulling away from him.

“They’ll molt soon, anyway,” he responded as he picked her up and set her back down so she was facing him. Then he leaned in to kiss her again, his hands running over her back and sides, down to her thighs and then back up. Behind them, more fireworks, blue and green and red and purple, exploded, and, in the distance, they could hear people cheering.

Adrian broke away, panting a little bit. “Are you sure?” he asked.

In reply, Clarine reached behind her back and tugged on her dress’s zipper until it opened enough to free her breasts. He stared in amazement and admiration until she drew him down to her. He murmured into her chest, covering her breasts with kisses until his lips found one of her nipples. She moaned as he bit it gently, then began to suckle. His hand came up to fondle her other breast, his calloused thumb teasing the other nipple. Clarine arched her back, putting her weight on her hands, electricity shuddering through her body.

Adrian’s hand was on her thigh. Clarine shoved it under the hem of her dress. He took over from there, sliding his palm up her leg, which she obligingly spread for him. His fingers brushed the seat of her panties and she gasped. She tucked her head down and bit his shoulder to stop herself from crying out, crushing his muzzle to her chest. He, meanwhile, tugged her panties aside, one calloused finger tracing her already damp entrance bottom to top, then back down before cupping her sex in his warm, rough hand.

Clarine wiggled against Adrian’s palm, moaning into his shoulder. He started to rub, slow and gentle, his hand twisting so that his thumb could find and then tease the little nub of her clit. She jerked against him, cries stifled by his muscular body. His hands kept moving, rubbing, pinching, teasing, while the crack and boom of fireworks sounded overhead.

Adrian pulled back enough to free his head from her chest, breathing heavily. She released his shoulder and lifted her muzzle to meet his in another kiss. Their lips parted, and she found herself nibbling on his tongue, then hers was exploring his muzzle.

Abruptly, the prince pulled back, smiling down at her, one of his hands on her chest, the other still between her legs.

“What?” Clarine asked, flushing.

Adrian blushed a little himself, letting his hands drop. “I want to ask you something.”

She started to ask him what, then closed her mouth when she realized what was most likely on his mind. She blushed harder, certain that he could see it through the fur on her face. Well, it was what she wanted, too. She kissed him again before she nodded and reached for her purse, hoping she still had a condom in there.

His fingers traced over her cheek and then, abruptly, he was gone. Clarine had barely registered Adrian’s movement when she felt his hands under her dress again, tugging her panties down. She arched her back to give him room to maneuver her underwear down and off, and was vaguely aware of a black, lacy piece of cloth sailing over her head into the darkness below.

Still blushing, Clarine managed to get her purse open and was digging through its contents for a condom when Adrian’s tongue brushed against her pussy. She squeaked and nearly tossed her purse after her panties. Hitching herself up onto her elbows, she saw Adrian kneeling between her legs, his giant antlers, silver foil ripped and missing where she had touched it, curving gracefully over her thighs as he licked her again.

Clarine covered her mouth with her arm to stifle a moan as Adrian’s tongue found her clit. He tickled at it, tracing shapes that jolted through her nerves. She let herself lay back on the stone wall, whimpering into her arm as he played with her sex, alternating between attention to her button and her slit. A hand slipped up to join his tongue, teasing and rubbing before spreading her gently, giving his tongue leave to slide into her.

She nearly bucked as she felt him slip inside, her hooves scrabbling at the parapet side. Clarine’s free hand ran up her own side to fondle her chest. She rocked her hips into his muzzle as he ate her out, his tongue exploring what felt like every inch of her. Adrian’s other hand joined in, rubbing over her clit.

“Adrian,” Clarine moaned, muffled by her arm. She felt full of molten lava, building up inside of her, until the dam burst. She cried out, loud even through her arm, drawing her legs up until her knees were almost touching her stomach. Adrian kept licking and rubbing as she orgasmed, drawing her climax out. She was unaware that she let her arm fall down, her cries mingling with the crack and thunder of the fireworks going off overhead.

Eventually, though, Clarine settled, her moans fading away into the occasional panting gasp. Adrian pulled away, but not before giving her sex a soft little kiss. He leaned over her and kissed her properly, letting her taste herself on his lips, before he offered to help her up.

“Thank you,” he said, sincerely, with a broad, almost boyish smile, and offered to help her up.

With a smile of her own, she pressed the slightly crumpled condom wrapper into his offered hand. When he glanced down at it, her smile broadened. “You’re not done yet, your highness.”

Adrian stammered at her, asking if she were sure, but she was already sitting up and undoing his belt. His pants and boxers fell, revealing muscular thighs and his already half-erect cock. Clarine ran her fingers over it and Adrian rewarded her with a shiver and moan. She decided she liked the sound of his moan and bent over to lick the head of his length, eliciting another.

Thinking that turnabout was, after all, fair play, Clarine took the first few inches of Adrian's cock into her muzzle, cradling it with her tongue. He tasted delicious, salty and sweet all at once, and she started to suck on him, ever so tenderly. Adrian responded with a gasp, followed by her name, whispered and urgent, as his length quickly hardened.

He was huge, possibly the longest guy she'd ever seen, and though he wasn't unusually thick, he wasn't exactly thin, either. Clarine pulled off to admire the long, slightly tapered shaft as Adrian applied the condom.

"Are you sure?" he asked her. She pulled his head down to kiss again.

"Very sure," she said when their lips parted.

Clarine scooted to sit on the edge of the parapet, then leaned back on her hands. With a shy grin, he maneuvered himself between her legs, then pushed slowly, achingly slowly into her sex. She gasped as he sunk into her, her sex still wet and eager from his tongue. She had been wrong about his girth, too. He filled her to her limits, and still he was inching his way inside of her, until their hips met. Clarine shuddered, one hand sliding down her stomach, then up his, then along his chest and neck. He turned his head to kiss at her fingers while her ankles hooked behind his back, locking him against her.

She pulled Adrian's head down, first to kiss her again, then to her chest. His hands traced over her sides, then ran his hands over her breasts, squeezing them softly as he covered their tops in kisses. His hips worked against hers, grinding his length inside of her, before he pulled out and then drove back in, bouncing her against his thighs. She gasped the first time, then moaned throatily as he repeated the motion again and again. He only pulled a few inches out each time, leaving the majority of his cock inside her.

Clarine let her weight fall on one arm, her head back, exposing her bosom to his hands and mouth, while her other hand ran through his hair. Adrian's fingers teased over her nipples, while he kissed and licked and occasionally nipped at her breasts. All the time his hips kept moving, never picking up speed, never pulling out more than a few inches. Soon, she was grinding against him, that molten fire feeling back in her stomach.

"Clarine," Adrian murmured into her chest. His voice was urgent, his body shivering against hers. She didn't have the breath left to answer him, she just squeezed around his shaft, her legs tightening around his waist. With a muffled cry, he slammed into her, his hips bucking against her as he came. His hands never stopped playing with her chest, but his mouth slide down to take one of her nipples, giving it a bite.

That was too much for her, and she cried out as she came again. Her body tensed against his, fingers intertwining in his long hair. Overhead, there was a last burst of golden and silver crackling fireworks, the lights raining down, illuminating the castle grounds.

Adrian slipped his arms around her middle, holding her as they finished, both of them panting heavily, their eyes closed as they basked in the afterglow. Soon, too soon, he gently laid her down as he pulled free. She scooted a little to the side to make room for him as she tried to smooth out her dress. It was hopelessly wrinkled, and her panties were long gone, somewhere down in the dark lawn.

Adrian got his pants back on, the condom vanishing somewhere she couldn't see, and then helped her get back into her top.

"We should get back down," he said, still looking flush. "People will start to wonder." Clarine accepted the proffered arm, and let him lead her back.

They passed a few guards, way more guards, Clarine thought, than they had passed on the way up. And all of them seemed to have a rather knowing smile as they watched the pair wander through the empty part of the palace. Clarine just hoped they hadn't been heard.

Sara was nowhere to be found when they reached the ballroom – probably stuck in a broom closet with her girlfriend, Clarine thought – but Clarine didn't much mind. They slipped in with the crowd of nobles, trying not to draw too many stares. Adrian danced with her for a long while, which was, as far as she was concerned, much better than trying to shake down movie stars for autographs.

It wasn't long until Adrian introduced her to his mother. Or rather, his mother descended from her throne to force Adrian to introduce them. Clarine curtsied low before the queen, uncomfortably aware that her panties had gone sailing off into the night not too long past.

The queen's gaze took in Clarine's wrinkled dress, and Adrian's mussed hair and torn silver foil, her lips pursed, before she nodded in acceptance of Clarine's curtsy. "Well, I'm glad my son has found someone to, ah, dance with. I hope that we shall see you around more often, Cici."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Clarine managed, trying very hard not to look at Adrian.

Clarine spent the rest of the ball in Adrian's company, though, after the conversation with the queen, it seemed like one of Adrian's brothers was with them the entire time as well. Sara never reappeared and, at the end of the night, Adrian hired her a cab to take her home, with a promise to keep in touch.

A week later, Clarine was sitting on her couch, listening to Sara detail the very interesting broom cupboard that she and Violet had explored, when there was a knock at her front door. She told Sara she'd be right back, and went to see who could be visiting.

It was a bear in dark brown livery, carrying a very large box. He handed it to her when she opened the door, touched his hat, and told her, "From the Prince, ma'am." She thanked him, then watched as he departed in a black sedan.

“What is it?” Sara asked when Clarine returned to her living room.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Only one way to find out, I guess.” She set the box on the coffee table and opened it, revealing a set of antlers, half-covered in silver foil, on a black velvet cushion, a little card on top. Clarine plucked it out and read:

Dear Cici;

Thank you for the wonderful time at the ball. I told you these would molt soon. I seem to recall owing you some clothes – could I possibly take you shopping this weekend and then perhaps out for dinner? I promise my family will not be invited.

Yours, sincerely,

Adrian

Sara snatched the card out of Clarine’s hand as soon as she finished reading it. The horse read through the note herself, then grinned up at her friend. “Why, Cici, I think you have a story to tell me.”