



LISH McBRIDE

FIREBUG



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*To my brothers—
I couldn't have picked better ones if I tried.
(And believe me, I've tried.)*

1

STOP, DROP, AND LET'S ROLL

RYAN SLAMMED the book shut and tipped his head back, sprawling on the bench and claiming it as his own. I looked down at my lap, his current pillow, and shook my head.

"It's cheating."

"I'm not asking you to write the paper for me, Ava. Just engage in a lively discussion about the book." His put on his best pleading face—eyebrows up, a tight smile that showed his teeth, his hands clasped in supplication and—the kicker—his hazel eyes begging. Say what you would about Ryan James, the boy had killer eyes. And he knew it too. It was almost impossible to say no to him. Almost.

"You want to discuss a book you haven't read so you can write a paper on it. So, yeah, totally cheating."

"You seemed way less concerned with moral fiber yesterday." His grin was so impish, there were probably imps nearby taking notes. Not that imps are native to Maine.

I could feel the flush creeping up my cheeks as memories

of yesterday, when I'd closed up the bookshop a little early so that Ryan and I could have a little, er, "quality time," started a conga line through my mind. I looked out at the harbor until my blush dulled.

"Illicit make-out sessions aren't even in the same league as skipping your required reading, hoss."

Ryan sighed. "Can't I just watch the movie?" Then he started laughing, no doubt at the scandalized look on my face.

"You did *not* just say that to me, Ryan James!" I sputtered, and shoved him off my lap. He hit the bricks with a thud but kept right on laughing. "*The Count of Monte Cristo* is a classic for a reason. I don't know what I see in you. Ugh. Such blasphemy."

He rejoined me on the bench, and I helped him brush some of the grass off his jacket. We were deep into mud season, or "early spring," as I'd heard it was called in other states, and Ryan was lucky that grass and twigs were all he was brushing off. The weather had warmed lately, the snow melting, for the most part, and what was left was more mud than a body knew what to do with.

Ryan leaned over, brushing a kiss along my temple while putting his arm around me at the same time. "You're so mean. Why do I date you, again?"

"Because you like pain?" I made it sound like a joke, but really, I had no idea why Ryan dated me. Besides his killer eyes, Ryan had curly brown hair that always looked a little tousled, like he'd been doing something forbidden, a lean build, and these lips . . . man. He made me act like a mush-headed girl, which I hated, but it was hard to avoid his allure. He always had this sort of hand-in-the-cookie-jar look about him, just bad enough to be fun.

He pulled a cigarette out and placed it in those devil lips, using his free hand to pat his pockets for a lighter. I cupped my hand around my old-fashioned Zippo, flicking the cap open with my thumb, and lit his cigarette.

“You’re always ready with a light—that’s one thing in your favor.” Ryan took a drag on his cigarette, the cherry flaring a bright red. I tucked the Zippo into my pocket with a tight-lipped grin.

The lighter was a prop, empty of fluid and flint. Since I was playing a regular human girl, props were necessary. I could set fire to the bench we were sitting on and every boat in the harbor if I put my mind to it, and that’s all it would take: just my mind. But Ryan? He didn’t know that. He was normal. He thought *I* was normal.

Ryan sighed, the smoke from his cigarette coming out in a *whoosh*. “I wish I was homeschooled. You didn’t have to finish reading *Lord of the Flies* when you hated it.”

“They were stuck on an island and no one even *tried* fishing or digging for clams? I understand the symbolism of the pig, but really.”

“They were ignorant boarding-school kids. It’s not like Woodland Foraging and Basic Survival Skills was a class.”

“Whatever. Anyway, don’t be jealous. I had to read two books to replace it and write a five-page essay clearly stating my reasons for protest.” Then Sylvie and I did a dramatic reenactment of the essay using sock puppets we made to look like the main characters from *Lord of the Flies*, but I didn’t tell him that. I think I can honestly say that was the day my little hyperactive coworker and I really became friends. She made a killer puppet that looked like an angry clam. Then she sang a song called

“Clams, the Better White Meat,” which she accompanied on the mandolin. She’s thinking of turning the whole thing into a full-length musical.

Ryan threw up his hands. “You win. I’ll read the book.”

I curled into him, kissing his cheek. “Good, because you would have failed if you went off the movie, anyway. They’re different.”

He turned into me, his face only a breath from mine, those damn hazel eyes going bedroom sleepy. “You couldn’t have just said that?”

I shook my head. “Nope. Tell you what, though. I’ll discuss it with you while you read it and go over your paper with you.”

“You’re a harsh mistress.” Ryan was about to kiss me when I heard a disgusted scoffing noise behind us.

“Hey, Ryan. Hey, homeschool.”

Aaaand enter Brittany, sullen bitch queen of Carrant, Maine.

“Hey, Brittany.”

“Orphan.”

I rolled my eyes. “Get new material.” Technically, I was not an orphan. My mother was dead, yeah, but my dad was probably still around. I just didn’t know where, or who, he might be. I kissed Ryan on the cheek. “The sound of her mind cogs screeching as she tries to think up new insults is my cue to leave.” I stood up and brushed my hands on my jeans.

Ryan grabbed my arm, glaring at Brittany. “You don’t have to go.”

My phone chirped and I shrugged. “Yeah, I do.” It was maple sugaring day, and if I missed that, Cade would have my head.

CADE was my guardian. He was one of those family friends so entrenched that he transcended trivial things like genetics and blood. We weren't related, but we were family, even if the state labeled him differently. He was my mom's childhood sweetheart and, to be honest, her forever one as well. You could tell from the way she'd looked at him that Cade was my mom's true heart. Which sounds like a vomit-worthy line from a crap poem, but for them it had worked. They'd been epic poetry in motion.

Whatever the label, my guardian took his job as a parental figure seriously. Everything became a lesson, and being regular old human didn't stop him from training the firebug side of me one bit. Especially during maple syrup season.

I pulled the truck up to the cabin and wasn't surprised to see that we had company. I recognized Lock's car—which probably meant Ezra, too, since he would never turn down a free meal—and Duncan's beat-up Jeep. Apparently it was a party. Cade was fairly serious about his maple syrup, or really anything we could make or grow at home. He owned the used bookshop, Broken Spines, where Sylvie and I worked, and he didn't make oodles of money. So he planted gardens. He canned, pickled, jammed, traded, and did whatever he could to supplement his income. Some of the syrup from today's session would go to Duncan, and in return, we'd get some smelt and whatever else he pulled out of the water.

The guys were already settled in the shack, which was mostly just a roof and a concrete floor with a brick-lined hole in the center for the fire pit. The "walls" were a few structural timbers to hold the roof up, and that was it. Sugaring produces a lot of steam.

A game of cribbage was about to begin, snacks were on

the card table, and Duncan had brought some Allen's Coffee Brandy, according to tradition. And also according to tradition, Cade kept looking at it and shuddering.

"No true son of Maine can resist Allen's," Duncan said, pouring himself a small measure. Duncan also brought a case of Moxie for those of us not old enough for Allen's, but only Lock would drink it. Imagine Santa dressed in L.L. Bean, and you might have a good grasp on what Duncan looks like. He was, of course, whittling. Duncan was a golem maker, and I knew that the things he whittled were more than mere wood.

"Then I guess I'm no true son. I'm fine with a mugup, thanks." Cade poured coffee for the rest of us. If you put my guardian and me together, we're like opposing bookends. He's tall, blond, cheerful, and bespectacled. The thin gold wires frame blue eyes that are almost always in good humor. I'm surly, brown eyed, and have more curly dark brown hair than I know what to do with. My vision is perfect, my height is average, and if you look deeply into my eyes, you'll probably just see flames. If you look into Ezra's, you'll probably just see bullshit. Not so sure about Lock's.

I grabbed my mug and one-arm-hugged Cade. We may be opposites, but I love my guardian more than anything. I tousled Ezra's hair and took a seat by Lock.

"I know what you're doing," Ezra said, not glancing up from his cards. "You're trying to irritate me, thinking my vanity would howl at you messing up these glorious tresses." He moved a card on the end into the middle of his hand. "You should know by now, Ava my darling, that my hair will be fantastic *no matter what*."

The thing is, Ezra was right. He seems like he's two steps

away from sashaying down a runway or entering a photoshoot all the time. He's not handsome or pretty or good looking. Ezra Sagishi is nothing but time-stoppingly, heart-rendingly, sent-straight-from-temptation gorgeous. Good cheekbones, dark hair with deep russet tones, amber-golden eyes that look lined in kohl, and a smile that actually does stop traffic. I've seen it happen. Twice.

And he knows it too. Ezra is a fox, literally, and they don't believe in false modesty. Stealing everything that isn't nailed down, yes. But modesty? Not in their lexicon.

I nudged Lock. "I know Ezra's here for the free food—did his stomach drag you along?"

"You don't think I'm here for the sparkling conversation? The scenery? To watch Ezra lose spectacularly?"

"I do everything spectacularly." Ez moved another card. "What makes you think I'm going to lose?"

"Because we won't let you cheat. There goes everything in your favor."

Ezra gave a minute shrug. "Can't argue there. Anything you need to wait for isn't worth it."

"Whereas I am a creature of patience."

"Well, I'm not," I said. "And you didn't answer my question."

"What else would I be here for? You, cupcake. I'm here for you."

Cade smiled over his coffee mug. "Have you come to make me an offer? I'm almost positive my girl here is worth her weight in chickens, so let's start talking dowry."

"Chickens? Cade, you insult the girl."

"Thank you, Duncan." I leaned in and kissed him on the temple.

"Now, goats, that's getting closer. But not cattle. She's not worth large livestock anymore. Maybe when she was a little younger . . ."

"You're all jerks."

"My apartment building doesn't allow goats," Lock said. "So you're safe. For now. I'm here to keep the trees calm. For some odd reason, firebug, you make them nervous."

Ezra may be all fox, but Lock is half-dryad. Or as he puts it: half-dryad, all man.

I decided to ignore the rabble and get to work. Maple sugaring is a process. You tap the trees, collect the sap, and then boil it down. Sap has to be kept cold, and since the weather was warming up, this would be our last batch. It's a forty-to-one process, so if you have ten gallons of sap, you're going to get one quart of syrup. That makes storing the sap indoors difficult unless you have a lot of freezer space, so we kept ours outside.

It takes several hours to boil the stuff down, and that takes wood. Or, at least, it usually takes wood. Using me to provide the fire, or at least part of it, kills two birds with one stone, which is Cade's favorite way to do things. He loves multitasking. It saves us wood for our woodstove, which is the main way our cabin is heated, and works on my endurance.

Cade stacked a few logs into the fire pit to give me a little fuel to work with, and I settled in for the long haul. With the wood and the abundant oxygen, it wasn't hard to get the fire going. All it took was a little concentration on my part.

My phone beeped, and a photo came through: Brittany with her arm around Ryan, her lips pressed to his cheek. Ryan bowed away from her, one eyebrow raised in question.

Wish U were here, homeschool. Ryan seems lonely, but what R friends 4? ;)

I thoroughly regretted ever giving Brittany my phone number. The flames shot up with a *whoosh*, the tips reaching like a tower to the ceiling. I pulled the fire back before anything was scorched, but the ceiling looked . . . *smoky*. I'd need to wash it.

Cade eyed the ceiling speculatively. "Lock, could you take her phone? Ava is apparently having concentration issues."

I mumbled an apology, my face flushing. A firebug without control is dangerous, and I'd let mine slip like an amateur. Lock took my phone, at the same time setting a bottle of water at my feet and a snack bowl to my right. Like the flames, I'd work better with a little fuel to keep me going. He squeezed my shoulder, and I instantly felt less embarrassed about making an ass of myself. Lock's good like that.

Cade was still examining the ceiling. "Maybe I should get the shack warded as well. Something to look into."

I doubted it would happen any time soon. It had cost a mint to fire-ward the cabin, and the shack didn't have the same level of priority. I'd read an article that said the average cost of raising a child is around \$250,000. I bet that looked like a sweet deal to Cade after raising me the last few years.

We were a couple of hours into the syrup-making process, and I was taking a break, when my phone beeped again. When Lock's followed, I knew it wasn't Brittany this time. Ezra's phone saying, "*Did we get up on the wrong side of the coffin this evening?*" in the smooth, rolling voice of the actor Cleavon Little, confirmed that it was Venus. Ezra wouldn't assign that text tone to anyone else. We all grimaced, the joy draining from the room in a messed-up Pavlovian response. I grabbed

my water bottle and kissed Cade on the cheek. He hugged me tight.

Duncan got a kiss on the cheek too, and the same silent conversation we always had passed between us. *Take care of him*, my eyes said.

And his replied, *Will do*.

We never discussed whether that meant until I got back or in case I didn't. Probably for the best.

COMBAT BOOTS don't make the best running shoes. Of course, I hadn't been planning on joining a marathon. The file that Owen, Venus's pet firebug, had emailed us had said "ice elemental," not "god of sprinting." I'd expected the creature to throw icicles—and hadn't been disappointed—and I'd known to keep my hands to myself. Nothing like a quick hypothermic death to ruin my night. But nowhere in the file had anyone said, "Oh, and by the way, he runs like a gazelle with an espresso addiction." At least not in the parts I'd skimmed. I didn't read the files closely, because if I read too closely, they became real. And I desperately needed them to be statistics. I only wanted the bare minimum of information. I didn't want to humanize anyone I had to hunt—and I mean *humanize* in the loosest sense of the word. Most of the people I met on the job were about as human as string cheese.

I leapt over an overturned trash can, my feet sliding on the ice as I landed. A conveniently placed brick wall broke my momentum, bruising the hell out of my shoulder, but I kept going. My quarry was sprinting away from me, leaving the lacy pattern of hoarfrost twisting fernlike on the buildings and pavement in his wake.

The creature turned long enough to throw another jagged ice missile at my head. I ducked with a curse, only barely getting out of the way. He'd been doing that just often enough to keep me from getting within easy range, continually breaking my concentration. It's hard to dodge, run, *and* throw a fireball. And anyone who thinks icicles aren't dangerous hasn't spent a winter in the Northeast. But fire, well, that's another story, isn't it? Everything fears fire.

Calling this a job makes it sound like it involves a time card or a name tag, something that will lead to bigger and better things. A choice. I guess it is, sort of. I can choose to hunt down targets for the Coterie, or I can be "in violation of my blood pact." In the Coterie that means someone like me shows up and helps you into a pine box. No one turns them down twice. No one gets the chance to.

Why couldn't I work only at the bookstore or have one of those mindless summer jobs every other teen got to have, like scooping ice cream or washing dishes? I would have sold my soul for a crap paycheck and a little polyester uniform.

Instead, I got to be brass knuckles in human form. Worse, really. I was there to kill the creature I was chasing. Not warn, not smack around, but straight up end his existence. That's the fun of being Coterie owned. And I *was* owned. I was chattel to Venus, queen of the manor and head of the Coterie. Lock and Ezra at least had the illusion of hope. Since they were tithes, their blood pacts were over at age twenty-five. They donated a few years of service to the Coterie, and Venus left their families alone. Mine only ended with death—mine or Venus's. Oh, there was a line saying she could release me at any time of her choosing, but Venus doesn't give up her toys. I think that line

is in there to give me false hope or leave her the option of trading me to someone else if I become too problematic. Lock's and Ezra's don't have all those clauses—they're not as valuable as I am—but on some level we all know they are the same pact. No one leaves the Coterie without enforcers on their tail, and no one knows that better than the enforcers themselves.

A stitch sliced into my side as I tried to catch the ice elemental. Now, he was hardly innocent. The file told me that. Ice men like ice, which makes sense. They create it wherever they go, and they don't differentiate between a tree and a human being when it comes to building materials. Then they build nests, like birds. In their enthusiasm to create ideal conditions for themselves, they often freeze people to death. Venus couldn't give a shaved yeti about the most recent victim being human, though. She only cared that this particular ice elemental had been poaching on her turf. I was the only one in this equation who cared about the humans. All creatures have a right to survive. I know that. But Ice Man could have built his nest somewhere else.

Kinda sucks, doesn't it? Most girls my age worry about prom dresses and SATs. I have to weigh the ethical nature of being an assassin against the value of human life and basic freedoms. Makes detention seem like cake.

"He saw me, and he's doubled back. I think he's headed for the park," I heard. Ezra's voice was so clear, it sounded like he was right next to me, whispering. My earpiece looked like it was part of a high-tech walkie-talkie. The idea was similar, only ours ran on a spell. Safer that way. Actual walkie-talkies run on radio waves, and those can be intercepted. Not a great idea when you're working for the Coterie. But ours? I could speak

safely into the microphone attached to my watch and know that only Lock and Ezra heard me.

“As your eye in the sky, I feel I should inform you that there’s a pond in the park.” Ez and Lock had flipped a coin for roof duty. Lock won.

Cursing to myself—though the boys probably heard it—I doubled my speed and shot out of the alley I’d been running down and across a street into a play park. The night was so cold, my breath crystallized in front of me, so the park was understandably empty. The ice creature was closer to me now. He was getting tired and had been slowing down, but as soon as he saw the playground, he put on more speed, heading toward a small frozen duck pond ahead of him. The ice might be thinning, but it was still ice. It was still his element, and I had to keep him away from there. He stopped tossing ice missiles and focused on running. Which was his mistake. The only things keeping me at bay so far had been the distraction of dodging and attempting to close the distance between us.

“From the sound of your panting, I can tell we need to start jogging as a team again. Clearly you’re not training on your own. Ezra, stop groaning. It will be good for you. By the way, Ava, Ez is in position and I don’t see any cannon fodder about, so we’re a go.”

Owen would have started on the outside—enveloping the creature in a low flame until he melted slowly away, fully aware the whole time. The Coterie and Owen: a match made in heaven. Or, more realistically, a match made in much warmer and brimstone-y climates.

I am not Owen.

I concentrated on something small—the creature’s frozen

heart. Ice elementals are made of snow and frost and other wintertime things. But deep in their chest lies a heart that looks like a Swarovski crystal about the size of an apple. It's hard and dense, and if I tried to do something pedestrian like hit it with a bullet, nothing much would happen. I mean, yeah, it would shatter, but after about three seconds the elemental would just fuse it back together. Magic.

But I wasn't going to shatter it—I was going to melt it. If this were a movie and I the action hero, this is where we'd have a dramatic standoff. The creature would ask me why, and I'd either apologize or give my tortured reasoning. But this wasn't a movie. The creature didn't care why I had to do it. And I'm not much of a hero. So before he could reach the ice, and without a single word, I concentrated until a white-hot flame erupted in the elemental's chest.

I stopped running, my hand glued to my side as I stood gasping, hoping the stitch there would go away soon. His heart gone in the smallest of seconds, the elemental probably didn't know what hit him. Or, at least, he hadn't had time to care. That was the most I could hope for.

Yanking my phone out of my pocket with half-frozen fingers, I took a picture of the melting elemental—the proof that would get the boss-monkey off my back for a little while.

We waited until he was a puddle. Lock tossed a handful of seeds from his pocket into the water. Green sprouts shot up, opening out into large, heart-shaped leaves. A sea of tiny blue flowers erupted between the leaves.

"Pretty," Ezra said.

"*Brunnera macrophylla*—a perennial forget-me-not." Lock looked up at the cold, clear night sky. Though we were an hour

from home, we were still far enough from Boston that there wasn't much light pollution. "It's an early riser, well suited for the season." He slipped an arm around me. "Ready to head out, Aves?"

I nodded.

"Wanna make Lock whip us up some late-night hot chocolate?" Ezra asked.

I nodded to that, too.

2

DREAMS AND OTHER THINGS THAT HURT

I WAS BACK in the hallway, which meant I was asleep and this was a nightmare. That's the only time I ever walked those particular halls. They were just as I remembered—dark, windowless, cavernous and yet claustrophobic at the same time. The wood was cold and unforgiving under my bare feet, and the air smelled like old smoke and bitter herbs. Two men stood next to me, sized for the hallway—gargantuan and hulking. I doubt they were actually human. They were too big for that, but since the cowls on their robes hid their faces, I couldn't begin to guess what they were. I wouldn't see their faces until after the ceremony. Not until I became one of them. And really, it didn't matter. They were Coterie. They were all monsters.

There are two levels to the Coterie organization. Inside those levels are all kinds of sublevels, but really only the main two are important: the Associates and the Elite—or as Ezra calls them, the Suckers and the Made. Associates work in Coterie nightclubs and businesses—they run around and help

out, doing odds and ends, hoping for a little handout, a scrap of power. They thirst to be part of the Coterie machine. Suckers. They're hangers on, the remora fish to the Coterie's shark. They're useful and necessary, but when it comes right down to it, they don't matter. They aren't Elite, and therefore they aren't to be completely trusted. They certainly aren't special. The Elite are raw potential, sculpted and shaped by Venus's hands until they become something hideous and twisted. Not born that way but made. Created.

I had another word for it. Damned.

Once you go through the blood-pact ceremony, you're Elite, and that's it. You're Coterie until you die. If you don't like that idea and you complain, then Venus makes your wish come true the only way your contract allows: her death or yours. Guess which one she's going to pick?

I was barely thirteen when I stood in that hallway, Venus's goons flanking me so I didn't bolt. Cade wasn't allowed to attend, even though he was my legal guardian. He wasn't Coterie. He wasn't even an Associate. The goons latched on to my arms with grips that went beyond iron. Both were warded, and neither had much sympathy for me. There was no small talk, just two thugs holding a quaking firebug in their grips in front of large oak doors.

At some signal I neither saw nor heard, the thugs opened the doors and dragged me in. The room was dark and not as big as I'd thought it would be. Thirty people in robes of dark crimson, their deep cowls putting their faces into shadow, stood in a circle, parting only for me and my escorts. My bare feet left prints, outlines of sweat and heat, as they led me through the crowd. I couldn't see anyone's face. I'd known I wouldn't be

able to, but it bothered me all the same. The only light was from a series of candles set on tall wrought-iron candelabras. It was a little over the top for my taste, but the scene did its job. I was terrified out of my wits.

The circle enclosed me; the thugs released my arms and disappeared back into the sea of red. Venus stood in the center with me, the only other person besides me not wearing red. Her robe was snow white and blinding. She stood there, silver dagger in hand, and said nothing. A small smile played on her lips, and even though I'd never gone further than kissing a boy, I remember thinking, *That's a lover's smile, and not the nice kind.* It was a smile of desire that had nothing to do with sex or love. Venus's smile was one of possession. The curve of her lips said that no matter what happened after this, first and foremost I was hers. I would always be hers. I swallowed hard, sparks appearing around my hands like tiny stars.

One of the red-robed figures came up and drew on me with oil. The hands were small and delicate, which made me think it was a woman, but that was the only evidence I had. She drew on my forehead, the palms of my hands, and the tops of my feet. I couldn't quite figure out what she was drawing, and before I could ask, she used an index finger to cover my lips in that same oil. The sharp smell coming off it was so strong that my mouth was filled with the taste. My throat constricted, and I had to choke down the saliva.

Someone handed the woman a brass bowl, and before I could wonder at its contents, she reached her hand in, settling a mound of ash into her open palm. I barely had time to close my eyes before she blew the ash onto the oil. The marks she had drawn sprang to life then, and it felt like fire, like the burn

of a blowtorch against my skin. I screamed and fell to my knees. Red robes tried to draw me back up, but I didn't make it easy on them. I hung like dead weight, my skin burning, a thunderous headache banging between my temples, and in my mouth now only the taste of ash.

With a distinct and unhelpful certainty, I knew those delicate hands belonged to a witch. I'd just been warded, and while it wasn't permanent, it certainly sucked. The robes finally got me on my feet, and Venus snatched my hand. She clasped it, her icy fingers prying open my balled fist.

"Ava Jane Sheppard," she said, raising the knife.

"Halloway," I said. "It's Halloway now." I had seen no reason to hold on to my name—no family to attach it to, and plenty of old Coterie baggage my mother's name might stir up. Taking Cade's name made sense to me.

"Halloway it is, then," Venus said, "Ava Jane Halloway"—and then she sliced my hand with that silver knife. Blood welled. I wanted to yank my hand back, instinctively cradle away the pain, but I couldn't extract it from her grip. She fixated on the wound, and for a split second I thought her vampiric nature would get the best of her. With her free hand, she lifted her ward, keeping the chain around her neck. She placed the ward in my palm, rune side up, the design for fire winking at me before the silver charm disappeared into the blood and ash.

"You belong to us now," she said. The room narrowed to her and me and my bloody palm. "The Coterie comes first, before all things. It is your family now. Your lifeblood." She put the hand still holding the blood-smearred knife over my heart. "Your heart beats only to please us." Her hand moved to my forehead. "Your only thoughts are for our well-being." Blue eyes

dug into mine. “When you speak, you speak for us. When you move, you move for us. Where you walk, you do so at our will.” Her fingers touched lips, palms, feet, and all I could do was stand there. She pressed a folded square of linen onto my wound, and I could feel it pulsing like a second heartbeat.

Venus never looked around. She only had eyes for me. The witch returned with another brass bowl, this one filled with hot coals. Venus used the linen to pick up her ward and dropped both items into the bowl. The linen caught and burned, but the ward remained untouched. Only my blood dried and flaked away from the heat. The witch put the bowl on a stand, and Venus finally let go of my hand. Before I could hold it to me, the witch grabbed it and squeezed. The wound responded with more blood, and the witch tipped it while holding a cold glass vial close underneath. The clear glass became clouded with blood and ash. She set it aside, and my hand was wrapped with fresh linen, then returned to me at last.

I hugged it to me while Venus used her dagger to remove her ward from the bowl. I knew better than to think that was her only ward, but a reckless part of me whispered that I should turn my powers on her anyway, to see how much of her we could burn. My fingers pressed harder into my bandage, and I knew there would be singe marks where they rested. For now I kept them covered.

Steam rose as the ward was dipped in cool water before Venus returned it to its usual resting place around her neck. The witch handed me an honest-to-goodness feather quill, and a parchment was unrolled before me. I signed my name with ink made of ash and my blood and knew it was mostly a formality. The real pact was in the ritual. That’s where the magic

lay. The witch in front of me was a blood witch—blood was her element as much as fire was mine. I was screwed. There was no getting out of my pact. That didn't mean I wouldn't try.

Venus put her lips on mine, leaned back and her smile widened, growing with her feeling of possession. "You are mine, now, little firebug," she said, and I trembled.

And then the cowls came down. I was allowed to see their faces now. I was Elite. I was Made, I was Damned, and there was no going back.

IBOLTED AWAKE, drenched in sweat and swearing like a sailor. I gulped in warm air and oriented myself. The ritual was over, past and done. I was home. I was safe. My breath came out in a relieved whoosh. Then I sat on the edge of my mattress.

I don't wake up well, even when I'm not having nightmares. I had almost kicked Lock when I climbed out of bed. Lock had started out curled by me but ended up on the floor, probably when he became tired of me elbowing him for snoring. Ezra was sleeping on the couch because he was too good for the floor, and too handsy in general for bed sharing. Not that he wanted to get handsy with me, specifically. His was more of a hands-on-anybody sort of thing.

I heard Cade whistling in the kitchen, accompanied by the occasional clink of dishes. Damn it, he was doing my chores again. I dug around the floor until I found my slippers. The idea of flopping back into bed was very tempting. After hearing the clink of another dish, though, I started searching around on my nightstand for a ponytail holder to pull my hair back and get it under control. Finding the elastic was harder than it

sounds. My room is small but messy, and I'm always losing things. It was even smaller with Lock sprawled out on my floor like a human rug.

I finally found a band behind a picture frame on my desk—me, Lock, and Ezra at Palace Playland last summer. In the photo, Lock and I are mugging for the camera, my dark hair wild from the sea spray, wind, and rides, Lock grinning like a mad person and squeezing me to him despite my rat's nest. Ezra looks like Ezra—pretty and too cool for school, his hair mussed but seeming like he meant it to be that way. Ez had wanted to stay at the beach but caved after I'd reminded him that the amusement park was full of marks. What can I say? I'm a fiend for Skee-Ball, and Ezra likes to pick pockets. Lock made him turn all the wallets in to the lost and found at the end of the day. Ezra didn't actually want the money, he just liked the challenge, and that challenge doubled when he had to find a way to get thirteen wallets into the lost and found without anyone noticing.

I smiled at the picture and went about the annoying process of taming my hair into a ponytail. I'd have to do some laundry soon or clean my room, I thought as I took in the mess around me. It was too small to not keep it in some sort of order. Though if I left Lock in it long, he'd clean it for me, which was enticing. I use the word *room* in the loosest sense of the word—it was just a small loft above the den. There was enough space for a single mattress and box spring, a nightstand, and a sorry excuse for a dresser. I think the loft was originally intended to create an office space in the one-bedroom cabin. Whatever its initial intention might have been, it was cozy, it was clean (sometimes), and it was mine. I'd never had my

own room until I started living with Cade. Every once in a while, I would reach out to touch the wall, just to make sure it was real.

Cade had tried to give me the bedroom downstairs when I'd moved in, stating some nonsense about a teenage girl needing her own space, but I refused. Moving me into the house had been costly—the walls had had to be treated with fire-retardant sealers and paint, a sprinkler system was installed, and we were probably the only house in America that owned fifteen fire extinguishers. Cade rarely has to get them refilled anymore except for maintenance reasons, but he still checks them. Regularly. The couches and mattresses are routinely treated with a chemical that makes them fire resistant. And, hey, it makes them stain resistant too. We buy the stuff in bulk and keep it in the unattached shed, where Cade stores anything even remotely flammable on lockdown. I'm not allowed within ten yards of the storage shed.

At least he wasn't making me do monthly fire drills anymore. I think after he'd forked over the cash to get the cabin spelled and warded against fire by a Coterie-sanctioned witch, he'd chilled out a bit. He would have felt better with an independent contractor, but there wasn't a witch within three hundred miles who would come near me without Venus's okay.

Wards aren't cheap, so we only had the witch do the house itself. Between the magic and the stuff we sprayed on the walls, we figured we were covered. The furniture and linens had to settle for human-made chemicals only. Except for my sheets. They sported a fine edging of warded embroidery. You think silk sheets are expensive? Not even close to how much warding

will set you back. I guess it's a good thing I can't go to college (as if Venus would allow anything that might cut into my time, or as she saw it, *her* time). Couldn't afford it anyway.

So I wouldn't take the only bedroom in the house. Cade did enough for me; I wasn't about to make him sleep in a loft.

I padded into the kitchen, my slippers making a soft scraping noise on the hardwood floors. As soon as it was warm enough, I'd go barefoot again, and I was looking forward to it.

Cade had the sleeves of his button-down shirt rolled haphazardly so he could scrub the dishes. I gave a small wave to our morning visitor, Duncan, who was sipping coffee at the kitchen table. He smiled back before I turned a glare on my guardian as I poured myself a cup of coffee.

"You're doing my chores again." If Ez were awake, he would shake his head in dismay at me for saying that. Ez spends his entire life doing his best to avoid work, and here I was asking for it. What he doesn't get is that chores are important. They are daily ritual. And normal teens do chores. After a night like the previous one, hunting the ice elemental, I wanted back into normal as quickly as possible. Duncan got it—I could tell by the way he looked at me. Not for the first time, I wondered what Duncan had done in his life that made it so easy for him to understand me. Cade probably thinks I do the chores just to repay his kindness.

He placed a wet plate into the drying rack. I set my coffee down and grabbed a dishcloth and the dripping silverware already in the drainer.

"You looked tuckered out, Rat."

I smacked him with my towel. "You turned off my alarm."

"I sure did," he said, completely unrepentant. He rinsed

some bowls and put them in front of me. “And nearly stepped on your friend in the process.”

“How am I supposed to be a responsible adult if you let me sleep in and you do my work for me?”

He reached over and put a blob of suds on the end of my nose. “You have two jobs, you work really hard, and you help around the house. Everyone deserves a break, Rat. Besides, you’re not eighteen yet.”

“Soon.”

“Soon doesn’t mean now. It means later. Don’t rush it on me.”

Duncan chuckled into his coffee cup. “Rat” may not sound like the most endearing nickname in the world, but it was when it came from Cade. When I was little, before I lived with him, he used to call me Mouse—something to do with my squeaky little-girl voice, I think. But when I showed up on his doorstep about five years ago, drenched from rain and shaking with cold and grief over my dead mother, he’d said I looked like a half-drowned rat, before he ushered me in and wrapped me in a blanket. After that, he didn’t call me Mouse anymore. I guess I was no longer small and squeaky.

Lock and Ezra came stumbling into the kitchen, Lock quietly taking a mug out of the cupboard and getting coffee and Ezra flopping in a chair, whining and waiting to be served, as usual. I grabbed a cup of coffee for Ez, holding it out of reach until he said “please.”

Ezra cradled the mug in his hands. “What is it with you people and your hours? It’s not even *noon* yet. That’s hardly civilized behavior. Rising at the crack of dawn and getting up to who knows what—” Cade silenced him by slipping a plate of

food in front of him. The only way to close Ezra's mouth was to put something in it. Lock leaned against the counter and didn't say anything, but I could tell he wanted to roll his eyes.

Ezra looked at his bacon and then stared at me. Ez likes his bacon hot, and crispier than Cade cooks it. I flicked my fingers and made it happen, a small spark wending its way toward the table.

Cade pinched it with wet fingers. "She's not a microwave," he said, but he was scrutinizing me.

"Why am I in trouble? And how is this any different from sugaring?" This argument was so old, it had grooves in it.

"Sugaring works on your endurance, and you benefit from the making of it. What does cooking Ezra's bacon teach you?"

"That Ezra likes his pork products crispy?"

"He just doesn't want people to use you. And I agree, Ava," Ezra said around a mouthful of bacon. "Except when it comes to me. It's not using if the person is your friend."

Cade shot him a withering look, one I knew well. It was friends you had to watch the closest. They were the hardest ones to say no to.

"When are you taking off?" I asked.

Cade put the last dish in the rack and let the water drain out of the sink. "In a few minutes. I want to get to the shop early and do some rearranging."

"I can be ready in five," I said.

He wiped what was left of the suds I'd forgotten off my nose. "No, you'll eat some breakfast and finish your coffee, and I'll see you in an hour."

"Besides," Duncan added, "evicting Ezra in under five minutes is hardly humane."

Ezra groaned. "I can't imagine how anything this morning could get less humane. It's so *bright* in here. Why do you people need so much light? It's freakish and unnatural."

"That's the sun, Ezra." Lock said, taking a sip of his coffee. "I'm told it comes up every morning."

"Well, it's trying to kill me. Someone do something."

Cade fished an old pair of sunglasses out of a drawer and handed them to Ezra, who put them on immediately. He looked ridiculous, but at least he stopped complaining.

I finished drying the dishes and hung up the towel neatly. I knew better than to try to argue with Cade about going in to work. We both knew I'd split the difference and show up in thirty minutes anyway. "Aye, aye, Cap'n," I said, surrendering.

Cade put a plate down in front of me—eggs, bacon, home fries, biscuits, a banana, and half a grapefruit. I ignored the grapefruit and started buttering biscuits. I scowled at the banana. Lock took the other half of the grapefruit to go with his coffee, because he's a damn hippie.

Duncan nudged a pot of jam closer to me. "To go with your butter," he said.

I slathered my biscuit with jam. "Do you hear that cheering? That's all the cholesterol in my arteries welcoming their new friends, butter and sugar. *Yaaay*, new friends."

Cade joined us at the table. "Don't ignore your banana, please, Ava. And thank Duncan for the eggs and jam—he brought them over for us this morning."

"Thank you, Duncan," I chorused with Lock, though my mouth was full of biscuit. I threw Cade a "sorry" before he could lecture me about table manners.

Duncan was always stopping by and bringing us things. When he went fishing, we got fish. When he made jam, he always brought us a jar. He also had a ton of chickens, so sometimes we got eggs. Duncan was one of the few people I ever saw in our kitchen. Cade didn't have any family that I knew of, except for parents that he didn't get along with, and because of me we didn't really have any friends.

My mom and I were on the run all the time I was growing up, and even though it put Cade in danger, sometimes my mom would sneak back to Currant. It was like staying away was a Herculean effort for her; she couldn't help running out of fuel, and the only way to fill up was to come home.

Even at the age of five I knew that home was where Cade was. That time, we'd snuck home for the holidays and ended up snowed in for the whole week. For one week my mom looked happy and I was totally spoiled. I ate candy and read books and drank homemade cider. Cade got me new pajamas and showed me how to string popcorn and cranberries for the tree. I'd never had my own Christmas tree before. Cade didn't own any ornaments, so we covered it in popcorn chains and paper snowflakes. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Duncan came over, and I asked him if he was related to Santa, because they looked alike, and he told me yes. Then he handed me a present with a big, red ribbon. I tore into it.

Inside the box were four carved animals. The biggest was the pony, and it stood five inches high. Then a dog, a cat, and a tiny wooden bird the size of Duncan's thumb. They looked so real, I thought any second one of them would breathe. Duncan sat cross-legged with me on the floor, and then he gave each one a little tap. The tiny wooden figures sprang to life and

lined up, biggest to smallest. Duncan had me clap, giving them a marching beat, and then the creatures pranced, heads high, and paraded through the house. It was magic. Duncan was magic. When the parade ended, the figures froze in midprance. I squealed and made him do it again and again.

I fell asleep that day curled up in Duncan's lap, the wooden creatures held in a death grip in my little fists. I'd had to leave them behind at the end of the week and I tried not to cry, because I knew it would make my mom even sadder, but I couldn't help it.

Cade kept them for me. They're on a shelf in my room, and every once in a while I want to ask Duncan to make them dance, but I never do. I'm afraid that if I see them parade again, they'll lose their magic. Irrational, but there you go.

Duncan watched me devour my breakfast, a thoughtful look on his face. "Rough job last night?"

I nodded—an answer to his question and a cue that I didn't want to talk about it.

"They're all rough," Lock said.

Duncan didn't push for more detail. He just drank his coffee, sympathy muddying his eyes. When I couldn't take it anymore, I excused myself and went to take a shower.

But Lock made me finish my banana first.

BROKEN SPINES was my home away from home, and what I considered my real job. It wasn't huge, but it was packed to the gills with paperbacks, comfy chairs, and a shop cat named Horatio. We couldn't afford to get the store warded yet, so I had to be extra careful about losing my temper at work. In the meantime, we'd managed to get the chairs, curtains, floors, and

walls sprayed down with the same stuff we used on the furniture at home. Basically, everything except Horatio and the books was covered.

Cade has a thing for taking in strays, be they feline or firebug. We found Horatio one morning, sick and half-starved outside the shop. We rushed him to the vet and, five hundred dollars later, we had a furry little tenant. Horatio keeps the mice down (mice are death to a used bookshop) and the fur up—one of my jobs is de-hairing the couches. Everyone thinks Cade named the cat after Horatio Hornblower, but he's really named after the character from Hamlet. In the play, Horatio lived to tell the tale. So did our cat. He's a survivor. Like me.

He greeted me with a purr when I walked into the store, his head stretched out for a scratch, but I was far from his favorite. At first he'd seen me as a competitor for Cade's attentions. I'd had to bribe him for weeks with kitty treats and catnip before he relented and decided to honor me with his approval. In Horatio's mind he was royalty and I was the lucky peasant who got to feed him. Huzzah.

I began dusting and organizing before opening the doors to the public. I heard Cade in the back, cleaning up a bunch of used hardcovers. I was not allowed near him during this process. He used lighter fluid—it's the best thing to remove sticky residue from old books—so . . . not a good place for me to be. You could say that about the entire store, I guess. Cade thought it was good for me to work there, though—practice in restraint and patience. Personally, I thought it was asking for trouble, but I liked my job, so I kept my mouth shut.

The bookstore was quiet; most of the people were friendly

or left you alone, and I got to read a lot. Oddly enough, it held some similarities to my Coterie job, with the solitude and people-leaving-me-alone thing, except Cade never ordered me to kill any of our customers. At least, not yet.

As I finished the tidying, the bell rang and I looked up to see Ryan sauntering over to me.

“Think I can take my favorite girl to lunch?”

“Favorite implies that there are others.”

“My nest of love slaves is a mighty one, but you hold the spotlight.”

“You’re so gross.”

He tossed me a small velvet box. I opened it and was greeted with earrings—three silver stars on a fine chain dangled from each post, like they were shooting through space.

“Thought they might go with that necklace you always wear.”

I realized that my hand had unconsciously gone to the chain around my neck. A simple silver chain with an interlocking heart and star dangling from it. A gift from Cade to my mom, and all I had left of her.

“I love them. How did you—” My eyes narrowed. “You did *pay* for these, right?”

He leaned on the counter and grinned. “You ask so many questions. Just say thank you.” When I kept glaring, his smile faltered a bit. “I paid for them, okay? Dearly. Can you just put them on now? For me?” He pushed an errant curl behind my ear.

I put them in, watching Ryan the whole time. He seemed happy that I was wearing his gift, but I couldn’t shake the feeling

that he also seemed a little sad about it. Maybe he'd bought them for someone else originally? An ex? Stole them from his mom?

I tucked the same lock of hair that Ryan had just straightened behind my ear again and found paper. He'd snuck an origami flower behind my ear without me catching on. I could see that it had been refolded a few times, and it was a little lopsided. He'd obviously worked hard at it, and it was nice to see Ryan not be perfect. I grinned at him in thanks. It was easy to grin at Ryan. "Earrings and a flower? What did you do? Make out with a nun? Because that is some guilt you must be working off."

He ignored me and leaned in, planting a gentle kiss on my lips. "They look great. Now, lunch?"

"I'll ask Cade."

As I wound my way into the back room, I thought about how odd it was to get a present from a boyfriend. I'd never really had a boyfriend before. I barely had friends. Cade, Lock, Ezra, and Duncan, sure—but Cade is more family than friend, and Lock, Ezra, and Duncan fall into the same category as far as I'm concerned. Of course, Cade is always at the top of the list because he feeds me on a regular basis.

And I guess Sylvie is a friend, in some respects, though I have to keep a lot from her. She doesn't know there's anything different about me, Lock, and Ezra. It's safer that way.

Ryan is not my friend. We go on dates, we hold hands, and we've steamed up our fair share of car windows, but I wouldn't list him as my buddy. We would never sit in our pajamas and watch movies or get BFF bracelets. You can't be true friends with someone when you're lying to him all the time, not really. And I was one big walking secret. Our whole relationship was

like a game to see how many times I could play the Sick Grandma card to cancel on a date when I was really out doing Venus's dirty work.

My mom had taught me what it meant to love a firebug. Everything was fine as long as you kept it light. No delving into major relationships. Avoid all complications, especially the pitter-patter of little feet. Once my mom figured out she was pregnant, she was vapor. If the Coterie found out, they'd have staked their claim on me. Best-case scenario, I would be a firebug and forced to work for the Coterie my entire life. Worst case, I was human and a bargaining chip, a walking weakness to be used against my mother. Mom had already spent most of her young life working for the Coterie. Working for Venus. One unplanned pregnancy was all it took for her to break free—the idea of me having to suffer the same fate was too much. So she shook her tail feathers and made for the hills.

But it wasn't just for me. My mother had worried that if I took after her, Venus would make life hell for my dad, too, forcing him to become a breeder. Venus the undead mafia kingpin (or queenpin, I suppose) would own him.

The firebug gene is recessive. So to produce a firebug, both parents need to carry the gene. My dad turned out to be a carrier—he had the gene but couldn't actually produce fire. Plain ol' human. That much my mom had told me. At first she hadn't known if he was a carrier or not, but she couldn't take the chance of waiting around to find out. If I had been born human, she would have brought me back to my dad so he could raise me. She wouldn't have been able to keep me or let the Coterie know I was her daughter—so she would have walked away. I have no doubt. Anything to protect the ones she loved.

It's easier if you look at it like it's a disease. My mom was full-blown, while my father had the potential lying dormant inside his DNA. If they'd had more kids, some could have been firebugs, some could have been carriers, and some might have been just human. Normal.

Lucky me, I won the genetic crapshoot. Full-blown, just like my mom. That's one reason that we're so rare: even if both parents possess the gene, the chances that their offspring will be firebugs aren't very high. The other reason we're rare is that we don't seem to have a very long life expectancy. We have the Coterie to thank for that, or groups like them. Poachers. The Coterie wanted us because they wanted to use us for their own ends. Living weapons. Mom told me Hitler tried his damndest to track down our kind as weapons for the Third Reich. Too bad Owen wasn't alive then. Ol' Tiny Mustache would have loved him. Peas in a psychotic mass-murdering pod, those two.

So Venus would have looked at a pair that could definitely breed firebugs as Christmas in July. She could have built her own personal army out of us, breeding my parents like cattle. My mom couldn't wait around to find out if I was normal or not. So she did the impossible—she fled the Coterie. Which meant we had to be on the run, living under the radar. Not just for a little while, but forever.

I FOUND Cade seated at a desk, bent over an old leather-bound hardcover, running a finger up the spine to see how it was faring.

“Can I go to lunch?”

“With Sylvie, or the delinquent?”

“Right, because as an assassin, I should really watch who I’m seen with. Wouldn’t want to impugn my own reputation.” He grunted and I rolled my eyes, both of us winning the blue ribbon for maturity. “Besides, no one has ever proved that he’s a delinquent.”

Cade looked up from the book and stared at me over his glasses. “Don’t you think it’s a bad sign that your best argument for your beau is that nothing has been proved in court?”

“Don’t you think open disapproval is the best way to drive me into the arms of the aforementioned beau? I mean, really, this is textbook stuff when dealing with a rebellious teenager, Cade.”

He put the book down and leaned his elbows onto his knees. “You don’t get to be textbook, Rat. I wish you could. I wish that boy were the least of your worries. You have to be more careful than most, and that includes who you date.”

“Exactly. It’s a date, Cade. Not a betrothal. You don’t have to start thinking of how many chickens and goats I’m worth yet.”

He gave me the patented that’s-not-funny-and-you-know-it look that every parent or guardian develops. Do they teach it in a class? Hand it out with the diapers?

“You have other options open to you—why this boy?”

“Why not this boy?”

“It’s difficult for me to endorse any suitor you meet because he wandered into the bookstore while playing hooky.” He took off his glasses and rubbed a hand over his eyes. “Didn’t Lock ask you out to see a band or something?”

“So you’d rather I date the guy I met through my Coterie assassin gig than the one who was skipping school? That makes sense.”

He put his glasses back on. “Not the same thing: Lock made a responsible decision to protect his family; Ryan is a bored kid with too much time on his hands and not enough life skills to make good choices.”

“One class, Cade. Let’s not blow this out of proportion. As for Lock taking me to see a show, he’s my friend. Friends do things together. I know you’re a bit out of the loop, but I hear that’s how it’s been done for centuries.”

Cade sighed, and I could almost see him mentally throwing up his hands in frustration. He didn’t actually do it, though. Instead he got up and kissed me on the forehead. “Sometimes I forget how young and new to the world you are.”

Ooooookay. “So . . . can I go?”

“Fine. Before you leave, call Sylvie and see if she can come in a little early today.”

“Will do, boss-man.” In the eyes of the law I was almost an adult, but neither Cade nor I cared about that. He knew I was capable of making my own decisions and blah blah blah-bitty-blah, but that didn’t mean I’d ever stop seeking his approval. Cade was my only family, and when you only have one person chiming in on things, a negative vote hurts.

Ryan and I went to a café down the street for lunch. I picked at my hot Italian sausage grinder, and I was too bummed out after my conversation with Cade to even make any innuendo-laden comments about it. Which is just sad. With “hot Italian sausage” in the name, the jokes practically write themselves.

Maybe I was coming down with a cold. I needed to eat, but my stomach wasn't up for it. Ryan didn't seem to notice, babbling on about . . . well, I wasn't really paying attention to what he was babbling about. I was eyeing my pickle and wondering how horrific my breath would be after I ate it, and then wondering why that made me want to eat it even more. Are teenagers naturally contrary, or was it just the firebug in me, drawn to friction and heat?

"So, do you wanna go?"

Ryan's face was all pleading, hopeful puppy dog. I was tempted to just agree and figure it out later, but that could land me in something I hated or, worse, interfere with my Coterie life. How on earth did other people manage double lives? Batman must be tired *all the damn time*. Of course, Batman also has Alfred to keep his shit straight for him. I had a sudden image of Cade as Alfred and Sylvie as my hyperactive Robin, and almost choked on my soda.

I poked my sandwich with a sword-shaped toothpick. "Sorry, Ryan, I haven't been paying attention. I guess I'm a poor lunch companion today."

He grinned and swiped my pickle without asking. If it were anyone else, I'd have stabbed his hand with a fork—I like pickles. And manners.

Normal girls, however, do not stab their boyfriends with forks over a pickle—or cremate them with their supersecret mind powers, as I also considered doing—and since I was going for normal, no stabby-stabby or burny-burny. Some days are just no fun at all.

I made a mental note to tell Cade about this. *I didn't stab*

him when he stole my pickle! And you say I'm not gaga for him!
On second thought, that might earn me a lecture on violence.
Or pickles.

"I asked if you wanted to go into Boston this weekend. Then I said I had amazing things lined up guaranteed to knock your socks completely off. And yet here you sit, socks still firmly on and mind totally not blown."

My immediate response wasn't just no, it was *hell, no*. Extreme no. No ad infinitum, ad nauseam, with trained No! dancers doing a routine in sequins on top. If the Coterie were a human body, then Boston would be its whole central nervous system. That's where Venus was based, for crying out loud. No way was I voluntarily going anywhere near her territory. I might not have had a choice in working for Venus, but that didn't mean I had to spend my downtime hanging out around her and her flying monkeys. But again, since I was playing a normal girlfriend, I couldn't just toss the table over and run screaming from the café. I would have to find something reasonable to calmly object to. What I needed was more information. Unfortunately Ryan didn't seem to have anything else to say on the subject. "To do what?" I asked.

"There's a theater doing a foreign horror movie marathon. Totally blood, guts, and gore, but with subtitles so we can pretend to be highbrow." His grin was all boyish charm, and he grabbed one of my hands with both of his. My heart gave a dramatic little swoon. My brain rolled its eyes in disgust. It was like my hormones wanted me to gush all my feelings for Ryan in some ridiculously overblown Bollywood-style dance montage, while my brain was leaning toward black-and-white art cinema. Problem.

I didn't know all of Boston, but I knew the area around the Inferno pretty well, and that was usually where Venus lounged about while she managed operations. It was a Coterie-owned, money-laundering, restaurant/dance club that also served as Venus's evil lair. To my knowledge, there were no movie theaters in the vicinity. As long as we didn't wander around the city, Ryan's outing might be safe. I still didn't want to go, but he'd get suspicious if I passed on it. That movie marathon had my name all over it.

"Well, you had me at blood, guts, and gore, but I have to check with Cade. What's our timeline look like?"

Ryan's face lit up in his trademark grin, the one that had most of the teenage girls in Currant swooning. I couldn't say no to someone so swoonworthy, right? Based on all the literature I'd consumed, girls swoon. Usually because of too-tight corsets or the sight of Elvis's gyrating hips, but it did happen.

"I'll pick you up, say, six on Friday? Bring you home Saturday morning?" I raised an eyebrow at that and received an overly innocent expression from Ryan in return. "The marathon runs late, so we can either stay the night in Boston and drive home in the morning, or, if that raises old Cadey's hackles, I can bring you home straightaway. But it will still be in the early hours of Saturday morning."

I hated it when Ryan called him Cadey. "I'll ask and let you know, okay?"

Ryan nodded and ate the last chip on his plate. He cast a hopeful glance at mine. "You going to eat that?" He pulled the rest of my sandwich toward him while I scowled.

He grabbed my hand and gave my fingertips a quick kiss. "You're cute when you do the mock-pissed thing." Then he

started devouring my sandwich. I wasn't doing mock anything, of course. My hand twitched for my fork, and the corner of the paper napkin in my lap burst into flames. I knocked it to the floor and stomped it out with my boot.

"Do you smell something burning?" Ryan asked, taking a brief break from destroying my sandwich.

"Nope." I smiled tightly at him and shoved my hands into my warded pockets.

3

ESCAPADES IN FOWLNESS

AFTER MY LUNCH with Ryan, Lock and Ezra picked me up for another Coterie mission, at Venus's command. The boys showed me their wards automatically, knowing I wouldn't get into the car unless they had them on. It only took Ezra forgetting his once before that became standard practice. He'd had to go to a Coterie witch to get her to grow back his eyebrows for him, which had cost him a pretty penny—meaning Ezra had to go out and steal more to get the cash back. He loves stealing, but hates extra work, and when he *has* to steal, suddenly it's work, and repugnant to him in every way. Ezra's mind is complicated.

So now Ezra and Lock hold out their chains and I make sure I see the rune for fire etched into the silver warding charms around their necks before we go anywhere. Though Ezra's only looked silver. Were-foxes weren't exempt from the silver sensitivity that plagued most of the were community. So his was made out of platinum.

We drove for forty-five minutes before we reached our target.

"What is it?" Ezra asked, his head tilted to the side. The implied follow-up being "... and can I steal it?"

"No," Lock said.

"It's a Baba Yaga house." I couldn't keep the surprise out of my voice. I'd read about them, but I'd never actually seen one. A Baba Yaga house is a cabinlike structure situated on some big-ass chicken legs. It's like the architectural version of a mermaid, but instead of a woman/fish combo, it's a house/chicken combo.

Ezra scoffed. "As safe houses go, that's not the best choice. It looks like an avant-garde nightmare." He stepped forward. "Let's get this over with. What a waste of perfectly good nap time." He reached for the gate, and Lock and I both jumped forward at the same time, but we were too late. When Ezra opened the gate, it creaked. Loudly.

The house shuddered, its feathers ruffling as it lifted up from the ground. Dust and the occasional feather floated on the breeze as the house raised itself to its full height, revealing some really orange, somewhat bedraggled chicken legs. I swear, in the silence that followed, I heard a faint "Bu-kaw!"

Lock grabbed Ezra's shoulder and mine, holding us firmly in place. "At least it doesn't know we're here and we haven't spooked it or anything," he said. His words were even, but the expression he turned on Ezra was 100 percent sarcasm.

A man's cracking voice drifted down to us. "Tell Venus she'll get her money! I just need more time."

Now it was Lock's turn to scoff. "He must be new," Lock said to Ezra and me. "More time? Yeah, because the Coterie is in the kittens and hand-holding business."

I cupped my hands to my mouth as an impromptu megaphone. "I'm sure we can reach some sort of agreement, Mr. Monticello, but you have to tell your house to sit so we can talk it out like civilized—" That's as far as I got before he screeched. The house did an about-face and started loping through the woods. "Damn."

Ezra took off his shirt, folding it neatly before he draped it on the fence. "I've got this." After he finished stripping down, Ez shifted. I've never seen anyone else shift, but from what I've heard, fox shifters aren't the norm. Like the creature they turn into, their shift is quick and graceful. In a few steps, Ezra went from a human Adonis to a russet-colored fox. If I'd blinked, I might have missed it.

Ezra's amber eyes shone in the light as he hopped on his little black feet in front of us.

"Don't get distracted," Lock told him, shoving his hands into his pockets. "Now get going. We'll catch up in the car. If you can, steer him deeper into the woods." Ezra bounded off after the crashing sounds the Baba Yaga house made as it moved through the dense thickets of spruce and pine.

"How does he get so small?" I asked as I climbed into the passenger seat.

"Out of all the things we just saw, that's the one that your brain won't accept? Not the giant chicken house, but the size of our friend when he's a fox?"

I clicked my seat belt as Lock jerked the wheel and punched the gas. We tore off down the street.

"Sylvie explained conservation of mass to me, and it just doesn't make sense. How does he get smaller?"

"It's magic, cupcake, not science."

“But—”

“Science would also tell us that we couldn’t possibly be chasing a house on chicken legs, you couldn’t be a firebug, and I couldn’t talk to trees, but we both know that all those things happen.” Lock turned abruptly down a side road. “Now be quiet. I need to listen, and it’s difficult from a moving vehicle.”

We tracked the house using Lock’s intel from the trees and Ezra’s yips and barks. It got to the point where we couldn’t drive anymore and we had to get out. Then we tracked it by the giant mounds of chicken poo. Lock stopped at one big pile and what was clearly a beanstalk growing out of it.

“The moron is feeding it magic beans.”

“He’s afraid,” I said. Lock squeezed my hand. Fear of the Coterie, of Venus, was something we both knew well.

“You’re going to have to burn these,” he said after we’d had our moment. “They’re an invasive species.”

We heard what sounded like a woman screaming. No matter how many times I heard Ez make that sound, it gave me the willies. But it was a sound that carried well, so we used it as one of our signals.

Lock ran ahead to help him while I stopped at each beanstalk, put my hands on it, and vaporized it back into the ether. By the time I caught up, Lock had the house bound in a cage made of twisted tree limbs, a living chicken coop. Ezra was running around the house’s feet, yipping excitedly. Everything is one big game to a fox. Lock was sweating from holding the house in place. Since the rest of my team was occupied, that left me to do the fun part. Venus didn’t want a crispy fried-chicken house, so I couldn’t burn it down, and Mr. Monticello was clearly not coming out. I buried my exasperation—before I

accidentally started a forest fire—and got ready to climb. Lock took my jacket and handed me my warded gloves. I slipped them on and began my ascent.

Mr. Monticello decided to take the express elevator down before I made it to the top. I can't say I blame him. The wet sound he made when he landed will show up in my nightmares for a long time.

I had to burn the clothes when we were done. The smell of charcoal and the eye-watering, acrid reek of chicken poop was never going to come out. I kept the warded gloves. They were too expensive to toss. Lock called Venus, and we had to wait until a recovery team came for the house. It was a long hike back to the car and a longer drive to the fence where Ez had left his clothes. Since he was the least exhausted, Ezra drove while Lock curled up in the back and I napped in the passenger seat. I was really looking forward to a hot shower.

THE BOYS dropped me off at home, and I took the longest shower in the history of long showers. Once I was clean and dressed, I sat down for dinner and asked Cade about Ryan's proposed road trip. Cade was less than enthused. Not for the reasons that most people raising a teenage girl would have—Cade trusted me and had no delusions in that arena. We'd always been honest with each other. Lock and Ezra stayed over all the time, and though Cade knew we were just friends, a lot of other parents would have said no. I'd brought that up once, and he'd laughed.

"My parents had that rule, and I've always thought that was funny," he'd said. "Like teenagers can only have sex at night in

someone's house. If you were really dead set on it, I couldn't stop you. It certainly didn't stop me."

"Ew." I pretended to gag.

"Your face could freeze like that, you know."

"Totally worth it."

He rested his chin in his hand, an amused twist to his lips. "Despite current evidence to the contrary, I prefer to believe that I've raised you right and know where you are at night." He'd earned a hug for that.

So it wasn't illicit behavior that Cade was worried about. And he certainly wasn't worried about Ryan doing anything harmful toward my person. When your little princess can scorch an entire city block with her mind, you just don't have those kinds of fears. No, Cade had the same worries I'd had.

"Isn't that tempting fate?" he asked. "Might as well strap pork chops to your body and run into the lion's den." We were eating dinner at home. Cade had cooked, so my steak was tender and well-marinated and sitting next to some tasty roasted root veggies.

I can cook, since I'd been on my own with my mom for years and it wasn't a skill I could live without, but unlike Cade I tend to cook in a very utilitarian fashion. I eat so I don't die, and I can't seem to get beyond that. I create fuel. Cade creates a meal. I go for quantity, while he stresses quality. No one will starve in my presence, but I'm not a chef. Cade, though, is a foodie. He likes smelly cheeses and fresh herbs and shudders at my idea of cooking.

Firebugs have to be careful about two things: calories and potassium levels. We burn through both like mad when we light fires. Both are easy to maintain—eat a lot of bananas and

make sure to keep electrolyte supplements handy. But I get seriously tired of bananas. There's really only so much you can do with them. When Cade's not around, I eat them plain and bitch *a lot*. When he is around, he bakes them into things, slices them into oatmeal, and sneaks them into desserts.

I glanced at the counter. Yup, a banana pie for dessert. I was starting to have an ingrained response to the color yellow. When I saw it, I wanted to vomit and light things on fire.

I sliced into my steak. "I realize that it's Venus's turf, but what am I supposed to tell him? He thinks I go to Boston all the time, so I can't say I don't like the city. Besides, I don't think there are any theaters around there, and it's not as if Venus and her crew are the art house theater types."

Cade had given up eating for the moment, focusing on the conversation at hand, his fork and knife held loosely in his fists. "Boston isn't *that* big—you might run into her or one of her minions . . . or some as-yet-unforeseen third misfortune." With me there always seemed to be an as-yet-unforeseen misfortune around the corner.

I stabbed a chunk of sweet potato with my fork, giving it the eye before I took a bite. Last time we'd had sweet potatoes, Cade had snuck plantains into the dish because even though sweet potatoes are high in potassium, he didn't think it was enough.

"No plantains, Rat."

Says the plantain man. It could be a trap. I brought my glass of milk closer, just in case. I'd chug it if I hit plantain.

"Can you remember the last time I went out and did normal-teen activities? When I went to Boston to do something fun? Not work, *fun*." I squished an errant chunk of what looked suspiciously like plantain with the tines of my fork.

“That’s a turnip,” Cade said, reaching for his wine. “Counterargument: It’s not fun if you or your friends are injured at the end of it.”

Oh, the temptation to roll my eyes. “Point, but you could say that about anything. I could walk down the street tomorrow and get hit by a bus. Does that mean I shouldn’t walk anywhere?”

“Faulty argument. You’re taking something that is extremely likely—Venus discovering you—and comparing it to something very unlikely—getting hit by a bus in a town that does not have a bus system. Try again.”

“I want to do something normal,” I whispered, suddenly tired and overwhelmed by a feeling of hopelessness. “If we went to school together, I’d have pictures of him in my locker. We’d hold hands while we walked down the hallway. I’d ask him to the Sadie Hawkins dance, and then we’d blow it off to go to the movies.” I slumped in my chair. My next argument was going to hit a spot Cade felt bad about—me having to be homeschooled—but I used it anyway. Sometimes I am a grade-A jerk-a-tron. “I don’t get to go to school, though. No walking hallways and no locker so covered in photos of us that students gag themselves with their fingers and pretend to vomit when they see it.” I straightened up, suddenly angry. “I have *dreamed* of envy-induced vomit pantomimes, Cade. I want them. I deserve them.”

Cade looked at me over the rims of his glasses. “If you went to high school, you’d be the one pantomiming vomit at the girls who wallpapered their lockers with pictures of their boyfriends. You’d tell them you didn’t like the idea of giving over your personhood and identity to the worship of some high school mouth-breather. Then you’d probably ditch class

to go get coffee with a college boy in a leather jacket who writes bad poetry and loves Hemingway. If you were going for a cliché, that's what you would go for."

Gah, Cade knew me so well. It wasn't fair. "So I buy Ryan a leather jacket and we're almost there." I slumped even farther into my chair. "I don't even like Hemingway," I grumbled. "And maybe just once I want the normal girl cliché." I waved him off before he got into his "What is normal?" diatribe. Because it didn't really matter. No matter what Cade would say next, we both understood that I'd never really know.

Well, I might have been missing out on the American teen experience, but I still got to kiss Ryan's lips, and that was nothing to complain about, let me tell you. There were a few other trade-offs as well. No curfew, a long leash, and I never needed a bonfire to make s'mores. It wasn't all a crap parade.

Cade wiped his mouth with his napkin before straightening the cloth and setting it back in his lap. "I won't lose you just so you can feel like every other girl on the planet. You aren't normal, Ava. You're *special*. Not because of what you can do, but because you're my little girl."

Ugh, how did you argue with that? This was why I always lost our debates. Cade was one of those guys who could talk about his feelings to no end, while just the mention of anything mushy made me squirm. Sometimes, when we were watching a movie and it got really emotional, I would go to the kitchen for a glass of water, even if I wasn't thirsty. That's how uncomfortable I got. But I wasn't going to fold this time. I steeled myself and brought out the big gun.

"Please. I don't ask for much, and you know it."

Cade studied me, and I could see him beginning to cave.

"I'll keep my phone on. I'll be careful." He grimaced and stared at his plate, and I knew that I'd won.

"All right," he said. "And don't just be careful, Rat. Be smart."

I clapped my hands. "I will," I said. We spent the rest of the meal discussing what we were reading and changes we were thinking about making to the bookstore. Happy thoughts. If only I were Peter Pan and happy thoughts were enough to help me fly away from the Coterie. Lock would have made an excellent Tinker Bell.

After dishes were washed and put away, we got into our pajamas and Cade made popcorn on the stove. It was movie night, and it was Cade's turn to pick. He used his turns to educate me, so the film was usually black and white—occasionally colorized—but always good.

I curled up in my favorite spot on the couch and snuggled deep down into an afghan. Cade brought me my own bowl of popcorn so I didn't steal all of his—not that it stopped me poaching from his bowl anyway—and we settled in for that night's selection, *Key Largo*. Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall . . . I mean, what's not to love? All in all it was a pleasant evening, and I'm glad, because my evenings were about to get a whole lot more uncomfortable.

I DON'T know why I thought Ryan and I would be going by ourselves. When Friday night rolled around, I found myself squeezed into a Volvo with Brittany and her latest conquest. After a few minutes of stunted conversation, I fervently wished she'd remove his tags and release him back into the wild. Maybe if I'd tried harder we'd have had *loads* to discuss. Like when he

was talking about Robbie's bitchin' party last week, I could have snuck in some charming anecdotes about how I burn creatures to death for a living.

The closest specimen in my life of what normal teen behavior might look like is Sylvie, and she likes *kaiju* movie marathons and cosplaying as obscure anime characters. I'm fairly sure she mastered Elvish and Klingon before she got her braces on, and she likes to read old chemistry books that come into the store. I'm afraid that if we were to leave her alone in the shop too long with normal household cleaners, she'd build a bomb. Or a spaceship. Or Godzilla. Any of those options seems equally likely. I might not know normal, but I'm certain that Sylvie is not the best barometer for it. Which just made Ryan's friends that much more perplexing. Surely they couldn't all be jerks, right?

"Interesting ensemble," Brittany said when I climbed in the car, her tone slow and lazy. "I hear hobo chic is really in this year. Wherever did you get such a lovely . . . shirt?"

She made the last word a question, obviously pointing out to the others that my shirt was of dubious origin and quality. I did most of my shopping at thrift stores, something Brittany would obviously never do. But my clothes got scorched, ripped, scuffed, and stained on a regular basis because of my job. It wasn't worth buying new stuff, especially since Cade was footing the bill.

What I wouldn't have given to be able to tell Brittany about the chicken house. Instead I had to smile and tell her I got my clothes at the thrift store. She smirked as if she'd scored a major point somehow. Like Ryan gave a crap where my clothes came from. "Besides, I just read an article saying something like

eighty percent of designer clothing is made by children in sweatshops. Small fingers make tiny stitches.” She frowned at me, and I saw her unconsciously reach out and trace the seam on her jacket. I had no idea if what I’d just said was remotely true, but she didn’t know that. I nodded sagely at her—a sort of *trust me* expression on my face. She looked away first.

Ryan turned his head so she wouldn’t see his grin. “Play nice,” he said when he got his expression back under control. “Don’t make me turn this car around.”

I was glad when Ryan cranked the music up too loud for any of us to try to talk. Brittany started sucking her boyfriend’s face at some point, and after that I kept an eye on the scenery outside the window, thankful for the pounding music that most likely drowned out any slurping noises coming from the happy couple. I never thought I would be grateful to have my ears assaulted by uninspired whiny alterna-pop, so already the evening was bringing about more surprises than I cared for.

We stopped to get gas halfway through our drive.

“Does anyone want anything?” I asked, because that was how Cade had raised me, even though Brittany didn’t deserve my good manners.

“Just a bottle of water. A girl’s got to watch her figure,” she replied, not so subtly eyeing my waistline.

“With that comment alone, you’ve set feminism back twenty years. Well done, Brittany.” I needed to get away from the gas pumps before anything unfortunate happened.

I probably weighed a good twenty pounds more than she did, most of it muscle. If only she knew that I would kill for a muffin top. She might be aiming for anorexic, but I desperately needed the reserve those few extra pounds of fat could give

me. My metabolism becomes turbocharged when I light fires. It's not safe being a skeleton in those situations. There'd been some nights when my fat ass had *saved* my ass (*ba-dum-tsh*).

Ryan snagged my belt loop and pulled me into him as we walked through the chiming doors. "Wow, she really doesn't like you."

"Remind me why you're friends with that rabid show poodle?"

Ryan grabbed a soda and some chips. "Our parents are friends. She's not that bad when you get to know her, really."

"She's not that bad when *you* get to know her. When I get to know her, the hate grows exponentially."

He laughed and went to pay for the gas while I picked up some beef jerky and something to drink. I considered poisoning Brittany's water, but I was fresh out of arsenic.

And the evening had only just begun.

An hour later, as we closed in on Boston, my mantra had become, *At least we can't talk in the theater*. Wait a minute. I surveyed my fellow passengers as Ryan looked for parking. This was not a subtitle crowd, even if half-naked girls and gore were involved.

I tapped Ryan's shoulder. He turned the music down so he could hear me.

"We're not going to a movie, are we?"

Brittany made some noise between a scoff and a snort. It was a biological miracle. Human throats shouldn't be able to make that sound. She had to be an alien, or a genetic experiment that had gone horribly, terribly wrong.

"Does this look like a movie-theater outfit to you?" She opened her jacket to reveal a tiny skirt, heels, and what was

either a sparkly handkerchief or a shirt. I honestly wasn't sure which one.

"Yes?" I crossed my arms and sank into my seat. As far as I could tell, Brittany dressed like that all the time. What, exactly, made this outfit a non-movie-theater outfit? The hoop earrings? The body glitter? Did she wear less or more to the movies? Was this her version of understated? It wasn't that warm yet. She was going to either get hypothermia or die of exposure. You kind of had to admire her commitment. I shrugged. "How should I know?"

She made that weird noise again and looked away from me, like I was dismissed from her presence. "Silly of me to ask as if you would."

That seemed to be as close to an apology as Brittany ever got. I glared at Ryan's profile. "Then where are we going?"

"It's a surprise."

Have I mentioned how much I love surprises? As Ryan backed into a spot, I really took in my surroundings. I have to admit I'd been too distracted to pay attention until then. Imagine my dismay when I recognized the streets around the Inferno, Venus's club. I desperately hoped there were other restaurants in that section of town. Boston is a big city. He wouldn't pick the one place in the great state of Massachusetts that I wanted to avoid, would he? I crossed my fingers and prayed that we were going anywhere else.

My silent entreaties belly flopped as soon as we walked around a corner and saw the neon-red sign. I'd waltzed straight into Cade's as-yet-unforeseen third misfortune. Neither of us had thought Ryan would actually take me directly into the lion's den.

As it was Friday night, the line twisted around the corner of the building. Not that there wasn't a line every night. There were three levels in the Inferno. The top floor, or Heaven, was a dance club and bar. I was only seventeen, so no Heaven for me, which suited me just fine. At ground level, Purgatory, a maître d' is there to take your name and seat you, whether you're in a nice suit or ripped jeans. You could get surf 'n' turf or a fancy burger in a nice candlelit atmosphere. Most places can't pull it off, but the restaurant managed to be fairly high end without being snooty. If the place had belonged to anyone but Venus, I would have loved it.

Below, as you might have guessed, was Hell, and while Purgatory was open to the general public, Heaven and Hell were VIP. It's easiest to think of the Coterie as a mob family, except what mattered was that you weren't human. Whether you had joined up through coercion (like Lock, Ezra, and me) or by choice, the one unifying factor of the Coterie was that back in your bloodline, something grew fangs, talked to trees, or had the ability to start fires, and those genes bred true. If you were in a Coterie establishment and you were human, odds were you were someone's sack lunch. Or Venus's juice box.

Duncan had once told me that some cities have a Council, a ruling body that kept this kind of thing from happening. Boston had one a long time ago, but not anymore. Maybe Venus ate them. So, personal reasons aside, I didn't exactly want to bring Venus three boxes of human takeout. Okay, fine, she could have Brittany and her paramour, but I wasn't handing over Ryan.

I couldn't think of a way to derail this train, though. Fake illness? They'd probably just go in without me. That was even

worse. Ryan grabbed my hand and tugged me to his side. Since he was unsure as to whether the line was for the dance club or just to get in, Ryan led us to the front of the building.

I had to try something. “You know, I don’t feel well, and this place looks really busy. I bet it’s not up to code. Didn’t I read somewhere that they were shut down for rats? And cockroaches. And cockroaches riding rats, like a rodeo. It’s a bad scene.”

“I’m sure if we slip them a twenty or something, Ava, they’ll overlook you.” Brittany examined me as she wrapped her boyfriend around her like a stole. “Maybe a fifty.”

Ryan dropped my hand and made his way to one of the bouncers, but the bouncer didn’t look like he was listening. His eyes tracked the crowd as Ryan talked, and he gave no indication that he was hearing any of it. The bouncer raised up his hands in an I-can’t-help-you gesture, and my heart did the there’s-hope dance. Then the bouncer looked over, and realization hit as he saw my face. I gave him a minute head shake, hoping he’d understand that I didn’t want to be recognized. Amazingly, he got it, because without a twitch in my direction, he suddenly lifted the rope and motioned us in. What I really wanted to do was seize Ryan and his ridiculous friends and shove them down the sidewalk. I needed to take them somewhere safe—like a shark tank or a hungry-bear sanctuary. But they were already inside, and there was no way I could make them leave. If I didn’t go in, they’d have no one to protect them. Defeated, I mouthed “thanks” to the bouncer as I passed him, even though I wished he’d thrown us out on our asses.

My luck held through the *maître d’* and all the way until we were seated. Or, at least, everyone was seated except me. I was about to climb into the booth next to Ryan when Ezra

pounced. I suddenly felt myself lifted off my feet as Ezra gave a yip of joy, and if he hadn't yelled "Ava, my saucy dumpling! My curvy cherry blossom! The delectable damsel of my loins, how *are* you?" while he did it, I might have been able to pass it off as a case of mistaken identity.

When I found my feet again, I was blushing and Ryan looked ready to hit something, probably Ezra.

"Hey, Ez," I said with a sigh. "I'm fine."

He noticed Ryan's glower and snuggled in closer to me, kissing my cheek. "We're not working tonight, are we?" His voice was a soft whisper in my ear, and though I couldn't see his face, I knew what it looked like. Mischievous smile, eyes glinting, and warmth in his cheeks from the game. Foxes like to raid other people's henhouses. The phrase "Gentlemen, lock up your ladies" is a good one to use when Ez is around. ("Ladies, lock up your gentlemen" might also be useful. Ezra loves attention. He isn't about to let a little thing like gender get in his way.)

"What are you doing here? I didn't know you'd be in town tonight," Ezra said. He hadn't quite let me out of his grasp, something Ryan had definitely noticed, and when Ezra observed Ryan's rising blood pressure, he of course had to rub it in. He squeezed me closer. At least it wasn't Lock, I thought. That would have been way worse. Which was of course when Ezra said, "Hey, Lock, look who tumbled in."

Lock ambled over, a serving tray under his arm. His bleached-blond hair was spiked and reflected the candlelight as he approached. Lock is stockier than Ezra, and not a classic beauty like our foxy friend, but I knew for a fact that he went home with just as many numbers. Lock is a charmer, and unlike Ezra, he won't steal your wallet.

He didn't look charming now. He was hiding it well, but I could tell by the expression on his face as he scanned the people I was with that he was unhappy with my current life choices. His expression held both annoyance and hurt, if you knew how to read him right, and I knew how to read Lock. I felt instantly guilty.

"Paws off, Ezra," he said, leaning in to give me a chaste kiss on the temple, which for some reason I found more embarrassing than Ezra's manhandling. I felt my cheeks get hot. He slipped an arm around my waist, tugging me out of Ezra's grasp and tucking me in close. "So this is the elusive Ryan," he whispered into my ear. "I thought you'd skip the bad-boy phase."

"You knew?" I didn't whisper. It's rude.

Lock continued being rude. "When you didn't spill, we asked Cade. He was a little surprised that you hadn't told your *friends*. Besides, I saw your phone yesterday when you tried to burn down the shack." Ah, the photo Brittany had sent. Another thing to thank her for. Guess who's getting a box of angry vipers for her birthday.

Ezra patted my head in a way that managed to be both affectionate and condescending. "Please. Like you could hide things from us." He grinned. "We discussed it and decided that you were a big girl and we'd only step in if he broke your cold black heart."

"How thoughtful," I said through gritted teeth.

Ez looked Ryan up and down. "Lock, pay up."

Lock kept his arm around me while fishing money out of his apron. "I was sure he'd be taller." He shoved a ten into Ezra's open palm. It was bad enough having one guy manhandle me in front of my date, but to have Lock come in and steal me

away with nothing more than a bit of possessive dialogue while money changed hands was worse. Ryan was frowning so hard, I thought his face might crack. Brittany looked like she was going to combust with sheer glee. Her boyfriend just needed some popcorn for the free show. I leaned away, but Lock squeezed me back in.

“Seriously,” Ezra said, chirpy as usual. He was lapping up all the attention like a cat. “You almost never come to Boston. We always have to visit you.”

Except that Ryan thought I went to Boston all the time, because that was the lie I’d told him to cover all my Coterie business. Crap.

Lock at least remembered my cover story and jumped in to save me. “Ez, you know when she comes to town it’s all about visiting her sick grandma. She always puts loved ones first.” I wasn’t sure if that was a dig at me keeping Ryan to myself or not.

Lock eyed Ryan, aiming the next line at him. “She’s big on charity, but I bet you knew that already.” He grinned, and I shoved his arm off me with a glare.

Ryan bristled at the insult, his jaw taking on a firm set, but he didn’t say anything.

Ezra’s raised brow was the only indication that anything was off. “Of course,” he said, “I didn’t mean to imply that Ava is anything other than a saint. A curvy, delicious, foul-mouthed saint.”

Between the back and forth, the staring from the table, and all the affection, I was officially beet red all the way to my roots. I should have facked a stomachache when I had the chance. In fact, I actually did feel like barfing. I smacked Lock’s arm as it

moved to snake back around me, but that didn't take the smug look off his face as he stared at Ryan.

"By the way, if you're looking for your black jeans, they're at my place," Lock stage-whispered at me. "I put them with your spares and your toothbrush."

I glowered at my best friend. The bastard. On the occasions when I had to work close to the city and I was too tired or too weak after a job, I crashed at Ez and Lock's apartment, rather than take a room in one of the Coterie-owned hotels. Can you imagine their mini bar? Candy bars, vials of blood, raw meat, brains, maybe some bottled water . . . ew. I had a bag full of spare clothes and supplies at Lock's place, and he had just used that information to take Ryan's jealousy to code red. It looked like he was ready to shoot flames out of his ears. Which I did once, by the way, just to see if I could. It took months for my hair to grow back properly.

"Ava," Brittany drawled, her eyes now fixed onto the snug way Lock's T-shirt fit. I didn't care for the way she was examining him, like she was eyeing a choice steak at a butcher shop. Unlike Ryan, her boyfriend didn't seem to care much about what his date was up to. He was actually trying to read the menu. The menu didn't have pictures, so someone would have to help him. "Why don't you introduce us to your friends?" Brittany emphasized the word *friends* like she didn't believe that was all they were. Ryan didn't miss the implication either. She smirked, knowing full well she was throwing nitroglycerin onto the flames.

There was really nothing else I could do. "Everybody, this is Ezra and Lock. Guys, this is everybody."

Most people would have left it at that, but not the unstoppable blonde from the black lagoon. “Ava, I swear, you have the comportment of a farm animal.” She leaned over the table, oh so subtly displaying her bountiful (and probably stuffed) cleavage as she did so. “Hi, boys. I’m Brittany.”

I should have given her a blistering retort, but honestly, I was just impressed that she knew the word *comportment*.

“This is Jeff and—of course—Ryan.” The little blond she-devil grinned savagely as she introduced him.

Ryan stuck his hand out. “Ava’s *boyfriend*,” he added.

Ezra feigned surprise. “Why, Ava, you sly dog.” He slid into the seat next to Ryan, ignoring his outstretched hand. Instead, he slid his arm around the back of the booth and got up close and personal. “Well, aren’t you the looker.” He grabbed Ryan’s chin. “Isn’t he just the end, Lock? So very pretty.”

“He *is* pretty,” Lock said. “Would you say eyelashes to die for, Aves?”

Ezra gave Ryan’s chin a little shake. “I could just eat you up.” The light caught Ezra’s eyes, and they shone. He suddenly became very serious. “I really could.” Ryan shrank away from him, and I could tell he’d caught the oddly implied threat. Then he realized what he was doing and straightened his shoulders, chest out.

By then, bouncy Ezra was back. “You simply must tell us all about yourself.”

“Aves hasn’t mentioned a boyfriend,” Lock chimed in, “and we’re just dying to hear all about you.” Liar. My friends were filthy lying sadists. Lock grabbed Ryan’s hand off the table and shook it, winking at him conspiratorially. “She’s fond of her

little secrets, aren't you, cupcake?" He chucked me on the chin. He actually took his knuckles and gave my chin an affectionate little push. Between that and the use of "cupcake," I think Ryan was experiencing some sort of aneurysm. I know I was.

Dead. The bastard was dead. I didn't care how pissed Lock was that I'd tried to keep Ryan a secret.

Ryan looked thrown by the whole thing. He was used to being the one who started the trouble, who stirred things up. What he didn't know was that he was a small-town amateur next to Ezra. On some level, he recognized that he was out-classed, and he didn't know what to do.

Why had I kept him from my friends? I'd tried to tell them once, but it had felt strangely like I was betraying Lock. I wasn't supposed to keep secrets, though, not from him, and he was hurt, so he was pushing me into hot water with Ryan. Ezra was just in it for the fun.

Mostly I'd kept Ryan to myself because it was nice to have one corner of my life not touched by the Coterie. So much for that. Besides, it felt weird and almost juvenile to call up Lock and gush about my boyfriend. I wasn't that kind of girl and he knew it.

Apparently neither of us was being terribly understanding about the other's foibles at the moment, if our mutual glare was any indication. I briefly considered setting Lock's hair on fire just to teach him a lesson. There was enough product in there that it would only take a spark. I put my closed fist up by my forehead and pushed my fingers out like an explosion. "Snap, crackle, pop," I sang softly.

"Don't you dare."

All the fun must have left the situation for Ezra because he

was no longer doing his part of the flirting. In fact, he appeared slightly alarmed. "Where are my manners?" He surged out of the booth and damn near shoved me into it. "You guys must be ready to gnaw the leg off a buffalo, am I right?" He laughed a little hysterically. Before I could reply, he'd called over some waiters and told the group that it was, of course, on the house. The last was meant to mollify my companions, but all it did was take me from hot water to molten lava. Now I was going to have to explain why I was getting star treatment in a restaurant that no one at the table had ever been in and that I had tried avoid. This is why I hate surprises.

I should have feigned Ebola and stayed home.