

Excerpt:

one

The classroom smelled like a Sephora. Instead of paying attention to Professor Norma's snoozer of a lecture on landforms, the caged animal-lights were swiping fruit-flavored gloss across their lips and rubbing floral-scented salves into their hands--all in anticipation of that final gong. Once struck, Typical Topics would be over, and the most anticipated weekend of the year (since last month's dance with the Allendale boys) would finally begin.

Sadie gazed beyond the metal-framed windows. Those smoke-gray clouds were still hovering. Oppressive and suffocating, they loomed above the private grounds of the Charm House boarding school like an overbearing parent, there to put a damper on her plans and, even worse, her new hairstyle. Hair that Sadie spent most of the day admiring in the reflection of her dead laptop screen.

She'd meant to charge her computer the night before. Really. But Claw Spa, the new beauty salon Sadie was opening with her pack mates, had become a major attention suck. Saturday morning was fully booked, and they were wildly unprepared.

Lindsey, tiger-light and queen of the claws, had to set up a manicure table. Taylor, chameleon-light and color expert, needed a dyeing station. Amy, snake-light and scaly skin specialist, had to blend her oil treatments. And Sadie, lion-light with superhuman strength and a dry blond mane, was stuck rearranging furniture--a bummer, but not a surprise.

They had finished setting up around midnight. While Lindsey, Taylor, and Amy applauded their work, Sadie, now surrounded by mirrors, fixated on her unruly hair. Gathering it in a bristly bundle, she tried twisting it into something elegant at the nape of her neck. Tying straw into a bow would have been easier. "I should just shave it off."

"Funny," Taylor said as she worked her short pink layers into spikes. "I've been thinking about all of that"--she waved her hand in the general vicinity of Sadie's head--"and I have an idea. Trust me."

"You've been thinking about it?" How long had Taylor been contemplating Sadie's look? "Is it that bad?" Her stomach dipped as she remembered the girls at her old school, how they called her Hairy Poppins. And Taylor's whole "trust me" thing? That was an elephant-sized ask.

Only weeks earlier, Taylor had secretly terrorized the animal-lights--and worse, her own pack mates. Her plan was to scare the girls (mostly Lindsey) so they would stop sneaking out to meet the boys. If the animal-lights were discovered, the evil doctors at Institute of Behavioral Science would lock them in cages on the thirteenth floor, just like they did with Kate, and experiment on them 24/7. So Taylor's intention was to keep them safe. But really, T? Did you have to turn invisible, scratch venom into our bodies to make us sleep, then carve the number 13 into our skin? You couldn't think of any other way to keep us safe from IBS? Nothing?

Apparently, she couldn't. And technically, that was fine. Taylor meant well and the Pack forgave her. But "trust"? Yeah, that was going to take a while.

"Sadie, I'm not saying your frizzy vibe is brutal," she continued. "I'm just--"

"Then I'll say it," Lindsey interrupted, her emerald-green eyes fierce and focused. "Sadie Lady, we love you, but your frizzy vibe is brutal."

"Brutal is a little harsh," Amy said. "Brittle is more appropriate." Her sympathetic smile revealed one fang on either side of her mouth. "Why don't I heat some orange and clove oil and--"

"We can give you a mane-over!" Taylor bellowed.

"Purrfect," Lindsey said. "I'll do her claws!"

Two hours later, Sadie was running the sharp points of her gold nails through flat-ironed, deep-conditioned blond hair that faded to black.

"Wow, you look sixteen!" Amy gushed.

"Yeah, the ombré technique is a total mane-changer," Taylor said. "And the dark tips hide your split ends."

"You actually look pretty!" Lindsey added.

"Actually?"

"Not that you didn't look pretty before. You did. On the inside. But now you're pretty on the outside, too."

Sadie was too excited about her mane-over to be offended. Before heading to bed, Taylor gave her a bottle of dry shampoo and strict instructions not to get her hair wet or it would frizz again. Which was why Sadie was currently admiring her reflection in a dead laptop screen and praying the rain away instead of listening to--

"Miss Samson!" Professor Norma shouted, or maybe it just sounded like a shout because of Sadie's extra-sensitive hearing. "Are you paying attention?"

Chairs creaked as everyone turned.

"Uh . . ." Sadie's cheeks warmed. "You were talking about animal migration."

"Correct. I was talking about animal migration. Twenty minutes ago . . ."

The hyena-lights giggled. Jealous of the Pack's popularity, they feasted on their misfortunes.

"Now I'm asking our Charm Club leaders for status reports, and since you're one of those leaders, why don't you update us on your progress."

Lindsey, Taylor, and Amy glared at Sadie, silently reminding her not to divulge their secret. As if she needed a reminder. The Charm Club project was worth 50 percent of their Typical Topics grade. And with her slipping GPA, Sadie was counting on a high score to bring up her average. If word got out that their club, the Claw Spa, was charging for treatments, they'd fail. Granted, the Pack wasn't asking for money. Just that customers cover the Pack's chores and hand over their desserts whenever asked. This seemed like a reasonable request, considering Claw Spa was the only club providing an essential service. But try telling that to a professor preaching a free-flowing exchange of ideas and teamwork.

"Our progress?" Sadie lowered the screen on her laptop. "Um, last night we set up the spa in our dorm rooms, and it opens tomorrow. That's about it."

Professor Norma lowered her glasses, which were attached to a beaded string that held them around her neck, against her navy cardigan. Her small features were tight, and her makeup-free skin was the color of Silly Putty. She was probably a terrible joke-teller. "Can you share your most positive experience so far?"

Sadie reached for the glossy tips of her hair and sat up a little taller. "Um, the Allendale football game is tomorrow night, and Family Day is Sunday, so we're booked solid, which is cool."

"Sounds promising." The professor searched Sadie's eyes like hiding places. "And your most challenging experience?"

"Fitting everyone in, I guess. Demand is pretty high."

"Well, you are offering a free service."

"Free?" Val yipped. "Ha!" She and the other hyena-lights had started a comedy club named Cackle. Ever since Professor Norma had said she thought the name was clever (cackle is the sound of a laugh, and it's also the name for a group of hyenas), Val had been incredibly cocky.

Professor Norma folded her arms across her dangling glasses. "Is there a problem?"

"Only if you think doing someone else's chores is a--"

Lindsey growled softly.

"Chores?" Professor Norma's thin eyebrows arched.

Lindsey glowered at Val and whispered, "Watch it, hy-e-nerd," knowing that Professor Norma couldn't hear her.

"Val, are you suggesting that--"

"Nope. All good. I was just workshoping one of my jokes for the Family Day showcase. I guess it needs more work. Sorry about that."

Unlike the other teachers at Charm House, Professor “Normal” did not have an animal-light, so quiet whispers often went undetected. Sadie often wondered why Headmistress Flora had hired a Typical in the first place. Yes, she taught Typical Topics, so that part made sense, but still. The whole point of Charm House was to protect its students from the outside world. A world in which researchers from the Institute of Behavioral Science hunted animal-lights and imprisoned them on the thirteenth floor of their creepy building, where they experimented on their prisoners and would continue to do so until the source of their animal powers was uncovered. Professor Norma’s daughter was a light, which was why everyone trusted her. But what kind of light? And where was this daughter? Was she with Kate--Amy’s old roommate, who had been captured by IBS the week before Sadie arrived? No one seemed to know.

“Who else will be presenting their club during the Family Day showcase?” the professor asked.

Before anyone could answer, the gong rang. The weekend had officially started, and the students began clearing out.

“Miss Samson, may I have a few words?”

“Of course.” Smiling, Sadie made her way to the front of the room, anticipating another compliment. All her other teachers had had something positive to say about her hair, and every student (except the hyena-lights, of course) had booked a spa appointment, hoping for a similar look. If Professor Normal’s few words were flattering, she could have as many as she wanted.

“I’ve noticed a change in you lately,” she said once Sadie approached her desk.

“I elevated my style.”

Professor Normal glanced at Sadie’s black tips. “I see that.”

An awkward silence filled the space between them. A space that no longer smelled like fruity gloss and floral salves. Just tension.

“Any chance of you elevating your grades?”

“My grades?” Was that what this was about? Because come on. For the first time, Sadie had best friends, regular friends, and a crush on an Allendale boy who liked her back. As the only lion-light at Charm House, she no longer feared mean girls; they feared her. She was CEO of Claw Spa. Boss-lady of the jungle. Leader of the Pack. Yes, socializing had been cutting into her study time lately. But she’d bounce back. Good grades had always come easy to her. But BFFs? Not as much.

“I’m concerned,” Professor Normal said with a coffee-scented sigh. “The other teachers are, too.”

“Don’t worry. I’m a cat. We always land on our feet.”

“Do you think your parents will feel the same way?”

"I do," Sadie said, sure of it. Her parents always wanted her to branch out and make friends. So yeah, they would feel the same way. How could they not?

two

The Claw Spa opened its dorm-room doors immediately after breakfast, and now Sadie's bacon-free belly was shouting, Time for lunch! Had it been five hours already? She chased her hunger with cucumber-infused water, then greeted her next customer.

"Welcome to Claw Spa," she said to Sondra, a petite rat-light with chin zits and oily brown hair. "Checking in?"

Sondra nodded, brows raised, smile wide. Like a caterpillar on the verge of metamorphosis, she, and the dozens who checked in before her, wanted a beauty transformation, just like Sadie's. "I'm getting ombré hair with Taylor and an oil treatment with Amy."

"Same," said her friend Kara--a dingo-light with deep-set brown eyes and sharp, uneven teeth. "Can you see if Lindsey has time to do my nails?"

Sadie checked her spreadsheet. "I can squeeze you in with Lindsey if Sondra skips her treatment with Amy."

Did it make sense? No. Amy's schedule had nothing to do with Lindsey's. But someone had to stop Sondra from getting an oil treatment, or her already greasy hair would look wet.

"What do you say?" Sadie asked, desperate to speed things up. The check-in line was snaking into the hallway, and the reception area was standing room only. The beds, which Sadie converted into couches thanks to some creative pillow placement, were taken. Same with the four chairs she positioned under Amy's heat lamp. Who knew the hot orange light, meant for warming cold-blooded reptiles, could cut nail-polish drying time in half? Lindsey, that's who.

Sondra approved the change, and Kara thanked her with a suffocating hug.

"Once you agree to the terms, you'll be all set." Sadie folded a piece of paper and slid it across her desk. It read: Kara and Sondra do our laundry Monday, November 8. Then she handed them a pen. "Your signatures, please."

They scribbled their names without hesitation, and Sadie filed the paper away in her desk drawer. "Next!"

Rachel stepped forward. An energetic monkey-light with a nasty nail-biting habit and the swollen cuticles to prove it. "One manicure, please."

“What about a hot oil hand massage?” Sadie said, realizing that Sondra’s cancellation left Amy wide open. “Those cuticles look parched.” If Rachel’s bloody nubs came within five feet of Lindsey, she’d pack up her Caboodles kit and walk off the job.

“But I booked a manicure.”

“Yeah, but right now, you need a little less mani and a lot more cure. The oil treatment will be perfect.”

Rachel began nibbling on her thumbnail.

“Trust me.” Sadie slid a folded piece of paper across her desk, which Rachel promptly signed. Now that Sadie had someone to return the water glasses to the cafeteria after closing, she could dry-shampoo her hair, raid Lindsey’s closet for a flattering outfit, and get to Allendale without missing a second of the football game.

Not that Sadie liked football. She loathed it. Her father, a San Francisco superfan, always shouted at the TV when the 49ers played. Which, thanks to Sadie’s super-sensitive lion-light hearing, sounded like he was screaming into a megaphone aimed at a microphone.

It was Beak she looked forward to--a like-minded sports hater who also preferred books to balls. And she hadn’t seen him, or his distracting green eyes, since the dance, four weeks earlier. She listened to “Without Me” by Halsey several times a day to relive their magical night.

Beak’s warm breath against her neck while they swayed to the heart-pounding beat of the song. The grape bubble gum scent of his skin. How the twinkle lights in the gym hinted at the C-shaped scar on his cheek--a scar he got while breaking up a fight between his sister and an innocent girl at a coffee shop. How he shared his most guarded secret--that this sister was Lindsey--and Lindsey had no idea that Beak was her brother. . . .

Granted, Beak already knew that Miss Flora (his grandmother) and Professor Jo (his mother) had let Sadie in on the family secret. What choice did they have? Sadie figured it out. But Beak said he was relieved that he had someone to talk to about it and that that someone was Sadie. Which made the soda-pop love mist inside Sadie’s belly fizz even more.

Since then, they’d texted frequently and shared each other’s locations on Trkr. She loved seeing a picture of his face move around the app’s map as he roamed the Allendale campus, loved knowing where he was. Not because she was a stalker, but because it helped her feel connected to Beak when they were apart. There hadn’t been any more school-approved occasions for the Charm House girls to hang out with the Allendale boys until this football game. And Sadie couldn’t wait! She’d put in her earplugs, cozy up to Beak on the bleachers, share her popcorn, and captivate him with her new hair. Then, as if hearing her thoughts, he texted.