

FIRE BECOMES HER

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CHAPTER ONE

It shouldn't be legal to feel like this.

Strictly speaking, it wasn't, but the law couldn't touch Ingrid Ellis as long as Linden Holt did. There on the dimly lit dance floor, holding her glass in one hand and Linden's shoulder in the other, she was safe. She could drown herself in flicker, knowing the Holt name would serve as an adequate shield if the night turned.

Ingrid touched the crystal flute to her lips. Magic tasted like sour pears and possibility; power surged against her skin, speckling her tongue with electric bite. It spread down her arms, warming her fingers and toes, until she felt as though she could burn the whole speakeasy down with a single flourish.

Here, magic was alive in every corner. Speckles of flicker burst in bronze and gold from dancers' toes as they triple-stepped across the floor. A man at the bar exhaled sparklets. By the door, a smiling woman made tiaras of illusive silver for her friends before they rushed toward the dance floor, a medley of giggles and nerves.

Ingrid curled against Linden's practiced frame, letting him lead her through the lazy steps of a tired Balboa. She couldn't even hear the sharp brass of the band over the roar of magic, her toes brushing the ground like guesswork.

“Ingrid, are you awake?”

Ingrid lifted heavy lashes and a heavier head. The band had transitioned to a melancholy blues tune, the lagging rhythm shaking sprinkles of silvery magic from her fingertips with each note of the wavering bass.

At well past midnight, this song was more her speed, and she longed to press her face into the curve of Linden’s neck, bury herself in his closeness until the sun rose over Candesce’s city skyline. Instead, Ingrid pushed herself upright, taking command of her limbs once more as Linden led her off the dance floor. Curious eyes followed them.

She and Linden were an unusual sight in this part of town. Linden reeked of money, with his three-piece suit, polished wing-tips, and slicked-back hair the color of a worn gold coin. Besides, he’d drunk not a drop of flicker all night. To a casual eye, he might look like an outright prohibitionist, but if any of their observers watched more closely, they’d see a vial engraved with a bold letter *H* peeking out from his pocket. He didn’t need their bootleg flicker when he had a pocketful of flare.

Ingrid set her glass down on one of the wooden tables lining the dance floor and slid into a high-backed chair, taking care to cross her legs and lean her chin on her hand, ever so carefully casual. Had they been at Ainsley Academy, she never would have let herself go like this. There, every word and every whisper mattered. But here, no one knew her. It didn’t matter what they saw, because it wouldn’t matter what they’d say.

“What is the point of having the most talented dance partner in the room if she’s only going to fall asleep on me?” Linden asked with an exaggerated pout.

“When everyone knows you’re good, there’s no need to prove it.”

Linden threaded his fingers through the wooden dowels of the chair back, brushing fingertips against the sequins of her blue-green dress, and leaned forward until they were only inches apart. “But how will everyone know I’ve got the best girl?” He said it like it mattered, like he meant it.

Ingrid suppressed a shiver, unfurling a smile on her lips instead. “As long as *you* know it.”

“Ingrid Ellis, I’ll never forget as long as I live.”

He pressed a kiss to her temple, and magic thundered to the place where skin met skin. Her cheeks warmed, a combination of his touch and the last sparks of flicker rushing through her, and then her stomach cinched. It was a familiar sensation, subtle at first, a gentle rocking of her insides like she was seasick. The unsettling nausea rose inside her like a wave each time he looked at her, each time he touched her, knowing it was temporary and dreading the day it had to end.

She’d wanted Linden Holt for years—his status, his money, his magic. She’d played him like the band played swing: too fast and hard for him to keep up. It was supposed to be about power, about her rising to the top no matter the cost. It was never supposed to be about love.

But that’s what this was—love. Nothing else could poison her from the inside out. Nothing else, except maybe a glassful of magic.

Linden brushed back her hair, fingers tangling with her cropped chestnut waves, and Ingrid’s stomach lurched again. When he’d invited her out that night, she’d known it for what it was: a last hurrah. She’d known it the moment she saw his signature calling card outside her dormitory—a plain rock, the size of a coin, wedged in the gap between door and floor with eight lines drawn in white chalk to denote their meeting time. It was quiet and unobtrusive,

just like their love. Almost invisible. All through their school days, that little rock had brought her hope. Now she felt as though it was lodged in her throat, waiting for her to swallow and choke.

“I need another drink,” she said. It was easier than the truth: *I need another day*. But she’d not get the latter, so the former would have to do.

Injecting her steps with her very best flounce, Ingrid let the sharp sequins of her dress scrape against her knees as she walked away. The bar was as good a place as any to let herself breathe.

“Give me enough to drown in.” Ingrid shoved her empty glass toward the flicker chemist, a girl about her age with sharp eyes and sly curls peeking out from her cap. The flicker was particularly good that night—an ambitious brew that cut across the tongue at first but mellowed to a slow simmer in her stomach. It wasn’t quite flare, but the speakeasy’s bootleg was as fair a substitute as Ingrid had ever tasted.

“Careful,” the girl said, snatching Ingrid’s glass. “With the look on your face, people might take you at your word.”

Ingrid massaged her cheeks, sliding onto an oak stool. “That bad?”

“I’ve seen your type before. Out on a Sunday night, dressed like a magazine ad, with your very own Rich Richerson footing the bill.”

“I’m not a type,” Ingrid snapped.

The girl shrugged. “Well, I’ve seen *you* before.”

An uneasy silence built a wall between them. Ingrid’s eyes snagged on the way the girl smiled with her whole jaw. She had a round face dusted with freckles and a bit of an underbite, but no trace of malice in her expression. She hadn’t meant it as a threat, Ingrid felt sure of it.

“Louise,” the girl said.

“What?”

“My name. Louise.”

Ingrid scoffed. “I didn’t ask.”

The girl—Louise—shook her head. “And you say you’re not a type.”

Ingrid narrowed her eyes. When she’d first come to Ainsley Academy, vacating her life of poverty for a life of scholarly pursuits, Ingrid realized the quickest way to be treated as an equal was to mimic the vague dismissal her peers showed those they considered beneath them. But when had she started actually believing people like Louise were *beneath her*? Louise was no one to her, nothing. But still, Ingrid teetered on the edge of wanting to be better and needing Louise to know she wasn’t.

I am just like you, she wanted to say without saying it. *I won’t be for long.*

To Candesce’s elite, names were power, names were history, names were currency. It was why she wanted to replace Ellis with Holt so badly. But here in this place, where snitches wore the same disguise as them all, names were dangerous. This girl had given Ingrid hers for no other reason than to prove a point. Ingrid could respect that enough to do the same.

“Ingrid,” she said, surprised to find a note of regret in her own voice. “My name is Ingrid.”

But Louise only gave her a quick nod before busying herself with Ingrid’s drink. She poured pink lemonade into a short, wide glass and squeezed three drops of flicker from a pipette, silver tears sliding through the air until they crashed onto the surface. For a moment, Ingrid was filled with the absurd urge to reach across the bar and take the pipette and squeeze drops of flicker directly onto her tongue. But power was power, and flicker was not flare. She

could drink every drop of flicker in this club, but it would never be the same as the raw, rushing wildfire of real magic. Flicker was no more than a weak imitation.

Just like her.

“You’re good at that,” Ingrid said, the compliment slipping through a cage of teeth.

“I know.” Louise didn’t look up from her work.

“Have you always been interested in flicker?” Ingrid asked as she watched Louise slice a lemon and dip it in sugar. Flicker chemistry was an art, one Ingrid had little chance to learn about in her proudly proper school. From the scattered experience she had in flicker clubs like this, she understood each chemist had their own recipe, a magic all its own.

“I’m not interested in flicker,” Louise said, sliding the lemon onto the rim of the glass. “Like everyone in here, I’m interested in flare, just can’t afford it.”

Ingrid glanced over her shoulder at Linden, his vial of flare tucked safely in his pocket. It was a marvel he didn’t think to hide it better. Even in an establishment operating outside the law, Linden still felt protected by it. Any one of the patrons might spy his vial of liquid fire and think to steal it. They had him outnumbered, certainly. It wouldn’t even occur to him to consider such things, so she’d have to do it for him.

“That boy . . .” Louise said, staring over Ingrid’s shoulder. “You want me to scorch him?”

“No, no.” Ingrid waved her away. “He’s with me—though likely not for much longer.”

Louise placed the glass in front of Ingrid, rosy delight with a silver magic finish on the surface. “That why he’s so jumpy? Knows you’re about to chuck him? He looks like he might bolt.”

“He doesn’t need to bolt. Everything always goes his way.”

Louise snorted. “But not yours?”

Ingrid shot her a look. “That’s different.” *I’m different.*

“Sounds like you’re a perfect match.”

“You’re the only one who thinks so.” A harsh laugh escaped Ingrid’s chest, the painful truth ricocheting against her lungs. *You’re the only one who knows.*

Secrecy was how they made it work. It was how she justified a relationship that couldn’t last beyond their school days. They loved only in the dark, behind closed doors, between towering bookshelves, in shadowy corners of illicit flicker clubs. They loved with an unspoken promise that no one else could know, no one else would understand.

Linden Holt was the kind of boy who’d grow up to be president, and Ingrid Ellis was the kind of girl who’d grow up to be trouble. It was a headline waiting to ruin him.

But it was a headline that could reinvent her. Linden’s father was an eight-term senator with the largest parcel of magic-rich land in Alorden, the westernmost district of Candesce. Senator Holt practically had a lock on the upcoming presidential election, with President Morris stepping down. Ingrid was no one; she had nothing—nothing except this. Sometimes when she closed her eyes, she let herself imagine a life beside Linden—the flashing cameras, the fashionable clothes, the unlimited access to flare. But only in the moments between wake and sleep did Ingrid ever let herself feel so in control, so powerful against those who would never see her that way.

“Last day of school tomorrow,” Ingrid said by way of explanation. “Got to make this night count.”

“There will be other nights.” Louise cocked her head, fixing Ingrid with dark eyes like polished stones. For a moment, the

space between them sharpened. “You dance like you might catch fire if you stop.” Her words settled over Ingrid like a new string of pearls around her neck.

“Best not to stop, then.” Ingrid raised her glass as if to toast her misery and let the magic run down her throat.

When she rejoined Linden near the dance floor, Ingrid was roaring with magic. Louise’s flicker wasn’t flare, but it was surprisingly good quality. Silver shimmers curled away from her fingertips in wisps and spirals. One of the tendrils of magic caught on a loosely hung leaflet sporting a drawing of a flame and the phrase *Everybody burns*. What was once the mantra of a long-dead revolution was now a common saying in speakeasies like this, along with *Share the flare, All’s flare in love and war*, and *Flicker? I hardly know her!* There in the speakeasy with flicker rushing through her, Ingrid felt like it was a little true. They could all burn, regardless of class, regardless of birth. Magic didn’t discriminate.

Since coming to the capital, she’d seen all the things flare could be. Without the threat of poverty, magic could be so much more than utility. It could be art, it could be skill, it could be danger. She’d seen the way her classmates used it to light up their complexions with an ethereal glow, and the way Flare Force officers used it to burn their enemies from the inside out.

When Ingrid was small, flare seemed so much larger. In the corners of the world where a vial of flare was a small miracle, it was unthinkable to waste it on such frivolities. To her, flare was life. It was the warmth of the radiator, the light in their lamps. In the one-room house where she’d grown up, it was the difference between starving or freezing, living or dying. To put her lips to flare when it could be fuel, when it could be light—once, it would have been unthinkable.

Now it was all she could think about, how it would feel to have so much she didn't have to choose between light and warmth. To have so much, she could drink a whole glassful and still have more. Without the weight of worry on her shoulders, her only fear would be what might happen if she drank too much, the embers beneath her skin igniting to end in naught but ash.

Magic was more than a little like love—too much of it, and she'd burn right up.

With untrained focus, she sent a flurry of silver into the air, flicker bursting from her hands like confetti. The shimmers slowed and died, vanishing as they languished in midair.

A sigh rippled through her. "I wish they didn't disappear," she whispered.

"Why's that?" Linden asked. "We can always make more." He sent his own magic after hers, flare cutting through the hazy air in swooping golden spirals. The threads of magic danced double time before the power burned out, leaving an imprint on her vision like a sunspot.

"You can make more." Ingrid stared at her fingertips, feeling the power ebb and die against her skin. Linden would never run out of flare. Those at the top had enough to fill a reservoir, and the rest of them had to make do with the little they could earn in an honest day's work. Or not so honest, depending on how refined they liked their magic. Flicker would do in a pinch. The illicit, synthetic magic never made more than a temporary impression on the world. It couldn't light up a city or power a town car, but it could still burn inside her, a short fuse waiting to diminish or detonate.

Ingrid let her arm fall, the absence of magic in her bones crackling through her like dying embers.

Linden caught her hand, his wildfire smile spreading quickly across his lips and through his touch to warm the coldest parts of her. “Night’s still young.”

“And I intend to make the most of it.” Ingrid tried to pull away, heading toward the dance floor, but Linden’s grip tightened.

“Seriously, Ingrid. Are you all right? You’re acting like it’s your last night to live.”

“Isn’t it? Tomorrow, you start your new life.” They would all go off into the world for their senior-year internships, applying what they knew and learning more than they could possibly dream. But it did not matter that she had top grades and a stellar application. She was still the daughter of a convict, with no meaningful connections. No one with any sense would hire her. Linden and their other classmates would rise, buoyed by their family names, their family money, their family magic; and Ingrid would sink, with no family worth calling her own. She lowered her voice to barely a whisper. “And just like magic, I’ll fade away . . .”

“Now that I can’t abide.” Linden placed his palms on either side of her face. “You, my dear, are brighter than any magic, and I won’t allow anyone to take away your shine.”

He kissed her then. Ingrid thought she could taste flare on his lips, and her desire to feel power in her veins warred against the unsettled attachment churning in her stomach—that consuming love, a beast all its own.

“Linden.” His name, a plea from her lips to his, passed between them. She hovered in the space between demanding more—knowing she was worth it—and accepting less—knowing she couldn’t have it.

He pulled away, taking her chin in his hand. “Ingrid, listen. You know you’re my girl. You *know* that, right?”

She'd prepared for the blow, rehearsed the moment in her mind. He would be gentle, but in the end, they'd both walk out alone. One way or another, their relationship wouldn't last the night. Now the moment Ingrid had been bracing for all evening had finally come, and she wasn't ready for it. In fact, she thought she might be sick—though that could have been the excess of flicker.

"Can we do this tomorrow?" she asked, barely hearing her own words.

"Do this? Do what?" Linden's freckled cheeks became a patch-work of red.

It almost made her want to apologize. This boy who was a legacy disguised as youth could blush like the rest of them.

"It's the last day before senior year. You'll be off to your father's campaign, and I'll be—well, I'll be off too. Can't we have this one night before it all ends?"

"Whoa, before it ends? Ingrid, slow down a second."

Ingrid sighed, straightening the shoulders of her frock—a luminous viridian thing adorned with peacock feathers at the hem and sequins that dug into her palms like shrapnel. She'd worn it precisely for this unfortunate occasion; if she was to be humiliated, at least she'd be humiliated in style. "It's all right. You're a Holt, and I'm . . . It's all right. But can we pretend for a little while longer?"

"Pretend? Ingrid, I don't—" Linden ran his hands through his hair, a nervous laugh escaping his lips. "Scorch it, I'm doing this all wrong, aren't I?"

"Honest truth, I've never been dumped before, so I wouldn't know the right way from wrong." If he was going to end their relationship in the middle of an underground speakeasy, music blaring

and flicker pulsing through the air, she would do her best to endure it. She would not be submerged by this, she would not sink, she would not drown. She was not just another fish in the sea—she would show him what a shark she could be. “If it’s over, it’s over. Just let me have this last night.”

Linden reached for her hand. “It’s not over—at least, I don’t want it to be.” He met her gaze with amber eyes that shone under the flicker lights. “I understand if you do, but I—I’m still doing this wrong.” A nervous smile quaked across his face.

“Apparently.” Ingrid pulled her hand from his, but a hesitant heat rose in her chest.

“I’m sorry. It’s just I’ve never done this before, and I want to make sure I do it right.” Linden put his hands in his pockets, shoulders shrugging closer to his ears.

Linden might play sheepish for the masses, charming them with his smile, but Ingrid knew the boy beneath the act. His tricks wouldn’t work on her. Though from different ends, they were still cut from the same cloth—the kind that did not wrinkle.

“Ingrid,” he said, his cheeks flushing again.

“Linden.” If he could be obtuse and dramatic, so could she.

A frown creased his lips. “Come on, I’m trying here.”

“Well, maybe you’re not trying hard enough.” *Try harder, try harder.*

“Iloveyouokay?”

“What?” Ingrid forgot to feign disinterest, her arms falling to her sides.

“I. Love. You. I love you, and I don’t want to lose you.”

Ingrid didn’t move, his words a spell far stronger than any magic.

Linden removed his hands from his pockets and took a step toward her. The space between them narrowed and vanished until

they were in close embrace—his hand against her spine, her fingers at the nape of his neck—a frame for a small dance. Neither of them moved to the music. They stood in perfect stillness, a perfect moment for a perfect minute.

He removed a sapphire-and-diamond ring from his pocket and leaned in, his breath a whisper against her ear. “Marry me?”

Ingrid’s fingers closed around the weighty piece of jewelry, but before she could form a coherent response, a crash sounded from the opposite wall. The trapdoor on the ceiling swung open to admit a stampede of officers. Their boots drummed duty, their eyes flashed danger, and their hands blazed with roaring red flare.