



FANGS & FINS

BLOOD,
BLOOM, & WATER
BOOK ONE

AMY MCNULTY

FANGS & FINS CHAPTER ONE PREVIEW

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Fangs & Fins by Amy McNulty

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CHAPTER ONE

EMBER

Someone must have invented sweat-resistant business suits.

Because I had no other explanation for why these movers were all dressed like they were about to hold an 8 A.M. conference in a boardroom overlooking Manhattan.

“How can they see where they’re going?” asked Ivy across the kitchen table, her slightly husky voice low. She held a torn-off chunk of bagel halfway to her mouth, her jaw hanging open as she stared at them.

There was that, too. All of them wore sunglasses. Sunglasses and suits. I supposed they looked more like bodyguards than businessmen. Which made even less sense.

“Don’t stare,” said Ivy, averting her eyes as one guy—he seemed younger than many of the others, but who could tell behind those shades?—breezed past her and deposited a big brown box with “Kitchen” scrawled across the side atop the already-cluttered counter.

“Oh! Sorry,” I said, jumping up and running to grab the assortment of half-used dish towels, dirty dishes, and junk mail covering the counter. “I guess we should have cleaned this stuff up.” I locked eyes with him—or I think we did, as his sunglasses turned my way anyway—and something like fire shot up my body.

I couldn’t even see all of his face, but somehow, deep down in my bones, I could tell he was hot. I had a knack for that. I’d yet to translate said talent into anything resembling a boyfriend or even a date past that

third grade social Mom had forced our then-neighbor's son to accompany me to. But I sure could pick them. In my head.

I broke off our stare first when Ivy cut between us and pulled open a cupboard. "Since you had, like, zero notice before three people moved into your house, I think you get a pass." She frowned, shutting it and opening the next one.

"A glass?" I asked, moving around her to pull open the proper cupboard. The hot mover guy stepped aside and headed back toward the hallway leading to the propped-open front door, but he did linger slightly, his head turned over his shoulder. I wished I could see his eyes. My instinct was telling me they were sexy and vibrantly-colored—whatever color they may have been.

"Thanks," said Ivy, but there was a smirk on her face when I turned back to face her. I realized I was holding the glass I'd taken out for her in the wrong direction. It was a hair's breadth from clinking against the window over the sink overlooking our backyard and the line of trees that led to the woods behind our property. That was what I got for staring after Mr. Sunglasses Mover instead of watching what I was doing.

"Sorry," I said, handing the glass over. Ivy approached our fridge and made herself at home, pulling out the orange juice her dad had put in there the night before. Apparently, she and Autumn liked the pulpy kind, which meant we'd now be stocking two types of oj in our already-crammed shelves.

It took me a moment to remind myself that she was making herself at home *because* this was her home now. Her dad was going to be here all the time, and she and her sister were going to live here half the week. *Her* sister. My sister. My step-sister anyway. Ivy Sheppard, one of the most popular Union High students, was now my step-sister.

True, it hadn't happened until I was eighteen and a senior in high school, but at least I could say I'd finally had my wish granted and gotten a sister. There was Daryl, Dad's son from his first wife, but since Dad was mostly out of the picture, Daryl was no more than a distant blip.

He'd friended me on Facebook a few years ago, but we commented on each other's posts so infrequently, Facebook had long ago decided not to bother showing us each other's posts unless we somehow managed to get enough likes to make the algorithm blow up. And since my life had practically zero "blow up" moments to it so far, well...

"If I never have to move again, it'll be too soon," muttered Ivy as she pulled the glass of orange juice away from her lips. A blur of white in my peripheral vision caught my attention. My black-spotted white cat—*our* cat, now, I supposed—had braved coming out from the basement despite all the activity to pick at his breakfast. "Did my dad mention that my mom just moved over the summer?" Ivy asked, crouching to pet Arty—short for "Artemis"—on the head. He stiffened but allowed himself to be pet as he chewed and she stood again, shuddering before downing the rest of her glass, making it look like she'd had to steel herself before ingesting the drink. That was how I would have felt if I'd been drinking pulpy oj. "I know college is right around the corner, but man, am I done with packing up two sets of everything. Whatever I can't fit into an overnight bag isn't coming to college with me."

"Do you know where you're going?" I asked. "To college, that is?" I took the glass from her and flipped it over to place it in the top rack of the dishwasher. While I was at it, I did my belated daughterly duty and started loading the rest of the dishes waiting to be put inside, too.

"No," said Ivy, her full, bright red lips frowning. "Though not for my parents' lack of nagging." Her eyebrows scrunched together as she crossed her arms and glared at me. "Do me a favor and never bring up college around my dad, okay? It seems to engage his 'get child to get serious about applications' protocol."

I laughed. "Sure."

Ivy watched me a moment more and then picked up a dirty plate. *Ivy Sheppard* was helping *me* with chores. "And you?" she asked. "Thought I better ask before Dad walks in and gets reminded I'm less than a year away from adulthood and still none the wiser about my plans post-

Union High.”

“Bradview,” I said, referring to the small liberal arts college about ninety minutes away. “I’m already accepted.”

“Ah,” said Ivy, a flittering smile appearing on her face. “That’s right. Dad said Noelle’s ‘kid’ was bright. Full scholarship, right?”

“Well, a good scholarship,” I admitted. “It covers most of tuition, minus room and board and all that.”

“Light years better than I could do.” She wiped her hands on a towel, and I took note of the chips in her dark blue nail polish. “I think even Bradview is out of my reach.”

I bristled somewhat at “even Bradview,” but I didn’t say anything. So it wasn’t as prestigious as an Ivy League or as fun as a state college. The campus was cute. And it had courses that interested me. It boasted a ninety-two percent job placement rate. It was more than good enough, right? My best friend, Journey, refused to believe my choice had had anything to do with something other than how close it was to home. My mom would be lonely without me... At least that was what Journey had said before Mom’s whirlwind romance. Now she had three daughters and a second husband. Her world no longer began and ended with me.

“I’m sure that’s not true,” I said, not letting my drifting thoughts stop me from responding.

Ivy laughed wryly. “Next time we get report cards, I’ll show you.”

“Oh, you don’t have—”

“Where did you find these guys?” boomed Easton—Ivy and Autumn’s dad, my step-dad—as he entered the room. The cat shrieked at his sudden entrance and bolted back down the basement stairs. Easton stared at my poor, overwhelmed furball with a curious expression, but he didn’t say anything. He had on a dress shirt and finely-pressed slacks, but his tie hung loosely on either side of his neck and his sleeves were rolled up. “The Secret Service?”

He watched two of the moving men as they passed through the hallway, a curio cabinet balanced almost completely levelly between

them.

"I let my secretary handle the arrangements," said Mom as she scooted around the movers, her purse held high above her head, to join us in the kitchen. She had on her weekday face—makeup that was subtle but flattering—and the ashen blonde hair she shared with me was arranged into bun perfection behind her head.

"Morning," she said, and before I could reply, she pecked her lips to Easton's.

Right. Morning to him first...

"Morning, sweetheart," she said, tapping her fingers to my back lightly before she reached around me to grab her stained coffee mug. "Morning, Ivy. Where's your sister?"

"Probably still in bed."

"She better not be," said Easton. He squeezed my mom's shoulders and went to head toward the stairway, almost smacking head-on with one of the movers clutching another box marked "Kitchen."

"Whoa, buddy," said Easton, spinning to try to avoid him and tripping over his own two feet.

Before Mom could do more than gasp, the mover had let go of the box, wrapped an arm around Easton's waist to pull him upright, and then caught the box before it had dropped more than two inches.

Oh. Mr. Seems-Younger-Hot-Stuff is back. And he has got some moves.

"Well," said Easton, clearly a bit flustered. He reminded me of a teenage girl for a second. "Thanks, bud. Quite a set of hands on you there."

The snort that Ivy let out was enough to draw everyone's attention, even the sunglass-donning mover.

"Here, let me," said Mom, pushing forward to take the box from the mover. But he held tight.

"No, ma'am," he said, and his deep voice sent a jolt to my legs. They went wobbly like JELL-O. "Policy is the customer doesn't handle it until we've put it down safely. I don't want the boss saying I wasn't cooking

with gas.”

Mom looked at him like he had a screw loose—he probably did, given his choice of attire while performing physical labor—but pointed to a free spot on the table. Easton disappeared down the hallway, calling Autumn’s name up the stairs.

“That’s quite a uniform you all wear,” said Mom, always eager to fill any prolonged gaps of silence. “Doesn’t your dry cleaning bill get a bit out of hand?”

“I’m surprised none of you pass out,” added Ivy as she crossed the room to grab her purse off the table before the mover could squish it with the box. “Or bump into something.”

The mover’s lips turned up slightly in a smile. “They’re for protection,” he said, tapping one of the temples of his glasses before digging both hands into his pants pockets. “I don’t go anywhere without my cheaters. UV rays are bad for the eyes.” He jutted his chin toward the hallway, which was filled with light from the propped-open front door.

No one could argue with that. Unless it was to ask what “cheaters” even were. I supposed the context made it obvious: sunglasses. And why did none of them take the sunglasses off once they got inside? Then again, they had their hands full.

I was making excuses for a moving company’s bizarre attire choices.

Easton came back in, Autumn stomping her feet behind him.

“Thank you for choosing our company,” said the mover. “I’m heading off shift, but Leopold will finish the kitchen.” He looked over his shoulder. “I think we’re almost finished.”

“I don’t want to go to school unless I find my hair tie,” whined Autumn as she crossed in front of him, plopping herself down at the table.

Ivy sprang into action, standing behind her sister and gathering her long, dark brown hair into a ponytail. It was clear they were sisters. Autumn was like a mini-Ivy without all the makeup. The only difference was the color of their irises: Ivy’s were deep blue, whereas Autumn’s

were pale brown.

“Didn’t I tell you to put your most important things in your tote bag?” asked Ivy, leaning forward to look Autumn in the eye, her own brown ponytail whipping her face.

“I *did*,” said Autumn, huffing. “Dad *lost* the tote bag.”

“I did not lose the tote bag,” said Easton as Mom stepped forward to tie his tie for him.

“Thank you,” said Mom to the mover, who nodded curtly before making his exit. I hadn’t moved from my post against the kitchen sink as this had all unfolded. I couldn’t take my eyes off him, and I thought—for at least half a minute—maybe he was keeping an eye on me, too. But I couldn’t say for sure with those dark lenses.

The minute he turned the corner, I spun around to face the window over the sink. It was hard to make out my reflection, but I saw enough to know my hair was still a mess. That was what I got for coming down for breakfast before I swapped my flannel pants and baby tee for something resembling out-of-the-house attire.

“I told you to put it in your car,” said Autumn from behind me.

“I did,” said Easton. “Ivy, honey, are you ready for school yet? Ember...”

I spun around, not used to my name on my new step-dad’s lips yet. Not used to this whole father-daughter thing at all, really. Though I supposed I was too old now to get much of it. “Yes?”

He looked me over quickly and grimaced. “Are you... ready for school?”

In my pjs?

Mom laughed as she pat his chest, his tie tight around his neck and his sleeves halfway rolled down. He was coming together as a proper office worker, though he had nothing on the sleek attire of the movers. “Ember, go get ready for school,” said Mom. “You’re going to be late.”

“Right,” I said, squeezing my palms together. I’d lost track of time in all the bustle. I was used to a quieter home. A *much* quieter home. Not

that I was complaining necessarily. It was just different.

“Ember, please don’t be late,” reiterated Mom. “Ivy’s counting on you.”

I scooped by without comment, avoiding the boxes starting to spill into the kitchen from the hallway. Supposedly, Easton, Ivy, and Autumn had downsized their things in preparation for moving in with Mom and me in our slightly bigger home, just like we’d done a few Goodwill runs to prepare for it. If they actually had downsized, I’d have hated to see how much they used to have.

“It’s no big deal if she needs a few more minutes,” said Ivy, no sense of bitterness to her voice. She undid her hair and slid her own ponytail holder around Autumn’s hair. “Here, nut. You can use mine.”

“I want *mine*,” said Autumn.

“This is the same thing,” said Ivy. She leaned down and whispered into her ear and Autumn nodded.

I felt like I was intruding, so I headed toward the stairs, squishing against the banister to let more of the besuited, bespectacled men past. I didn’t think I imagined their heads turning my way as I did. I *was* wearing my pjs, but considering they were the ones in suits lifting a dresser, I’d have to say I reserved the right to be flabbergasted they’d care.

I whispered “excuse me” and decided to ignore the stares.

“*Christopher Columbus*,” said one of the men quietly—so quiet, it was almost like he hadn’t intended for me to hear. “Where’s Dean?”

“He’s heading off,” said the other as I reached the third stair. “He took note of them.”

I froze. *Took note of what?* It went quiet then and I realized that these guys weren’t even breathing hard, like the dresser held aloft between them was nothing more than a bag of groceries.

“Miss?” said one, speaking loudly. “We need to get past.”

“Right,” I said, putting my feet into action. When I got to the landing, I stepped aside and watched as they breezed up the stairs and into my

old playroom, which Mom and I had cleared out for Autumn.

Nope. They didn't even break a sweat. No wonder they didn't dress pragmatically.

"Ember!" shouted Mom from downstairs.

I ran into my room and shut the door, pulling out black leggings, a striped skirt, and a navy blue sweater. I changed quickly—I usually showered at night—and ran a brush through my hair. No makeup. The few times I'd tried it, for dances and such, it had itched. And no one had even noticed the difference. So all that was left was a stop at the bathroom to brush my teeth. It was going to be hard getting used to sharing the bathroom with two new sisters—it already was, thus the fact that it was so nearly time to leave and I still wasn't ready—but they were already downstairs, so it was finally my turn. My bladder uttered a "hallelujah."

"We're leaving!" shouted Mom up the stairs after I'd finished in the bathroom. "Have a nice day, honey!"

Easton was taking Autumn to school and Mom was off to work herself. That meant the movers would finish up the job with no one in the house, but apparently, Mom's assistant had already arranged for them to lock up and drop by the office with the house key.

It all felt a bit dodgy, but that was what happened when your parents got married on a whim a few months after they'd started dating and your new step-dad's house sold in two seconds flat. They'd thrown together a small courthouse ceremony on Saturday and had spent all last week getting ready for the move.

I went back to my room to grab my backpack where it hung off the back of my desk chair. I was about to turn to go when I froze. One of those suited movers was in the backyard—walking into the little woods back there that belonged to our neighbor.

"What the heck...?"

The movers had no business in the backyard. And certainly not on the neighbor's property.

I blinked. Maybe I'd just seen things. Or maybe this crazy moving company just happened to employ some really nosy, inappropriately-dressed young gentlemen.

"Ember, we going?"

I took a deep breath. *Right.* Off to school with one of the coolest girls I knew.

"Coming!"

When I saw what might have been a flash of green light from the woods out of the corner of my eye, I brushed it off as an eye floater.

Maybe if I hadn't, I would have been better prepared for how my life was about to turn upside down and sideways round.

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Amy McNulty is an editor and author of books that run the gamut from YA speculative fiction to contemporary romance. A lifelong fiction fanatic, she fangirls over books, anime, manga, comics, movies, games, and TV shows from her home state of Wisconsin. When not reviewing anime professionally or editing her clients' novels, she's busy fulfilling her dream by crafting fantastical worlds of her own.

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