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# RECIPE FOR A HEIDI

## INGREDIENTS

Hair (plaited)  
Two eyes (brown)  
Assorted other body parts  
Epic collection of *Mycroft Christie Investigates* DVDs  
Detective skills  
Tendency to fall in love with imaginary people

## METHOD

- Whisk all ingredients with parental implements until thoroughly mixed up.
- Dump resulting goop (including parental implements) in the Goldfinch School for Troublemaking Dropout Freaks.
- Remove Troublemaking Dropout Freaks for summer holidays.
- Bake until mental.

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You know your life is not exactly normal when you're sitting on the steps on the first day of school, sugar-high giddy from knowing they're about to unlock the doors.

But then no one at the Finch is normal. They only send you here when you've been kicked out of every other boarding school on the planet – if your parents can afford it. Unless you're me, when it's the Mothership and Dad Man who can't seem to stay still. I've usually just about figured out where the girls' toilets are by the time the Mothership decides that, three hundred miles away, there are *other* girls with wobbly thighs who absolutely need her to be the one making them run round and round a hockey pitch in the rain. And then we're off. Dad Man gets a new old van full of paint pots to drive around some new old

buildings. I get a new old bedroom, in the bit of an ex-chemistry lab that's now Staff Housing. Everything else stays the same.

At least it did until we ended up here at the Finch. I mean, I started out like always: the period I like to think of as the Never-ending Era of Pathetic Noobishness, where I eat lunch on my own, and sit in class on my own, and discover that someone has stapled a dissected frog to my backpack so I'm going to be known as Frog Girl till we leave on my own. And then one day, I was sitting on the end of the balance beam that pokes out of the PE stores into the car park, waiting for the Mothership to drive us back down Heart Attack Hill (no Staff Housing for us this time, not when there are so many "dubious influences" around), and Fili came to say hello. Not that she actually said hello, obviously. Fili doesn't do that sort of conversation. She just perched on the beam, and swung her boots, and lent me one earbud so we could listen to some noise. Same thing the next day. We sat together in French, because she's really good at French. And then I met Ludo and Big Dai, and Heidi the Frog Girl was gone for ever.

It's funny how you don't know how much you want something till you get it. It's like Mycroft Christie says in episode 1.7, "The Pinocchio Man": "Deep down, Jori, we all simply want to *belong*."

Mycroft Christie, in case you live under some kind of rock, is the most brilliant person in the universe, and totally my boyfriend. Sort of. Technically, he's not real. Technically, he's the debonair twenty-third-century time-travelling hero of the best! TV show! ever! *Mycroft Christie Investigates* is not actually going to turn up on my doorstep any time soon to whisk me away to fangirl heaven. Mostly because he's time-trapped in present-day London pretending to be a detective for complicated plot reasons. And because he's obviously in crazypants love with his foxy arse-kicking sidekick Jori Song (with whom he fights crime and has Unresolved Sexual Tension). And also because they cancelled the show after three seasons, so now he only really exists inside my DVD player. But he's dashing, and charming, and conveniently

available at the flick of a remote control, which is the sort of thing a girl finds handy when she's stuck with the Mothership and Dad Man's board game obsession for company all summer.

Downside of not being Frog Girl: once you have some, you really miss your friends when they aren't around.

The holidays haven't been a total disaster. I mean, sure, everyone else has been off to exotic locations courtesy of Guilty Parent Airlines, while I've been slinging scones at tourists at the Little Leaf café. Fili's been visiting the ancient grandmother in Senegal, Ludo's been on Daddy's yacht, and Big Dai went on safari with his sister's family. Me, I got to wear sunglasses once all summer, and that was only because I lost a bet with Betsy and she made me dress up as Night-Time Roller Disco Harry Potter for a whole afternoon. (Betsy is my boss. She's not very sensible. The scones are yummy, though. As is her son, Teddy, who makes them. Sometimes he "accidentally" makes a whole extra batch at the end of the day, so I have to take some home – though that mostly happens when The Lovely Safak is around. That's his very tall, very beautiful girlfriend, who is also very nice so I can't even hate her. Sigh.)

But none of that matters now. Finchworld is starting again. Sneaking up to the bedrooms (where Non-Resident Students, i.e., me, aren't supposed to be allowed), to lie on Fili's bed, BBMing gossip from one side of the room to the other (in a very intellectual, non-Scheherezade Adams-y kind of way). Watching *Mycroft Christie Investigates* for the bajillionth time, with me and Dai doing our special carpet-slapping dance to the theme song. Searching for kittens on YouTube and eating toast. And, you know, maths tests and stuff. But I don't care about those bits. I can ignore those bits. The rest is going to be spectacular.

SPECK.

TACK.

YOU.

LA.

(You're allowed "LA" in Scrabble. According to Dad Man anyway. I think he might be a CHEATER – seven-letter word, fifty extra points.)

I hear a scrape behind me, and Dad Man's face appears, scrunching as he drags back the huge oak doors of the Manor house. I look down the long driveway, as the first of a line of Mercedes eases through the gates at the bottom of the hill.

"You coming in, then, love?" says Dad Man, yawning because he's been up here since this morning, dragging luggage about. "There's a few been here since lunchtime, had early flights."

I'm already skipping up the wide stone steps of the posh, for-the-parents entrance with its funny square hedges on spikes, because the details of those with early flights may just possibly have been written on my calendar, and in my phone, and on the back of my hand in red felt pen, just in case.

"Try the common room," he shouts after me, as I skid along the polished floor of the hall, past the notice boards and empty offices.

And there she is, sitting on the squishy blue sofa in front of the plasma screen, eating an orange. Filicia Mathilde Diouf, the world's blackest Goth, all silver rings and eyeliner and that one sarky raised eyebrow that says "hi" and "I missed you too", and "Now stop standing in the doorway like a dork" all on its own.

I grin, and flop down on the sofa beside her.

She offers me a piece of orange, then looks me up and down. "Nice coat."

"Detective," I explain.

The Coat is my Thing right now. It's a raincoat: one of those belted beige ones that old pervs wear in parks to flash people. I found it in a cardboard box in the Finch garages, after an afternoon's dust'n'spider battling with Dad Man. I've decided it was left there by some ancient teacher, who figured out the only way to escape the Goldfinch was to flee secretly in the night-time,

leaving all his possessions behind. Old Stinky Mancoat sounds disgusting, I know, but I kind of like the way it skims the ground. It flaps out behind me when I'm on the Bike o' Doom, in a not uncapelike, vaguely superheroic manner. It makes me feel very detect-y. I kind of love it.

The fact that Mycroft Christie also wears one is totally a coincidence.

Fili nods. Eats more orange. Flicks pips away with a flash of silver rings.

With anyone else, the silence would be awkward. With Fili, it's just proof that she likes you. And anyway, there's a shriek from outside, echoing off the walls of the corridor, announcing the arrival of our resident noisemaker.

"HEIDIHIII!"

A human cannonball flies through the door and flings its skinny arms around me. Also hair. Lots of hair, all glossy and dark and a bit more in my mouth than is pleasant. I miss a few sentences while trying to escape. These little details do not worry Ludo.

". . .and the traffic was like AWFUL and I was totally UNPLEASED, because I wasn't even going to GET here, and there's like THE party tonight, and I have SO much to tell you before we even get to that, only you will SO not believe OH MY GOD, FILI! You're here! I didn't even KNOW you were here!"

Fili receives the hair-in-face treatment, too. Ludo keeps talking. Fili rolls her eyes, and shoves a wet chunk of orange in Ludo's mouth. It slows her down to a mumble for all of five seconds.

"OH MY GOD, I've missed you SO much!"

She hugs us together again, and I find myself grinning like a loony. This is what I've been waiting for, for months. All we need now is Big Dai and we'll be set: Team Finch, Finch Force Four, the Leftover Squad, reunited for another term of thrilling adventures. The credits are about to roll, introducing Ludo, sexy-beautiful

wild child; Fili, enigmatic tech witch; Dai, the big guy with the heart of gold; and me, Heidi, the fledgling detective whose geekiness is actually strangely attractive. Together we'll fight crime and/or homework, guided by our mentor Betsy, who'll supply us with our undercover missions via coded messages hidden in cupcakes. We'll have our own theme tune. And costumes. We'll be magnificent.

They don't actually know any of this yet, obviously. That's how undercover we are.



A couple of hours later, once I can't see the TV for bodies, I realize I'm at the McCartney Party.

At the start of each term, there's a blowout. The Upper School kids have to use up all the contraband hidden in their suitcases anyway before it gets confiscated, but the real prize is to get kicked out before school even begins – all in loving memory of STUART A. MCCARTNEY, 1989. McCartney is a legend. No one knows exactly what he did to get the boot. The story probably changes every year. But his name's on the Student of the Year board, carved into wood, painted gold, and hung in the entrance hall where he stays, inspiration to all. The McCartney Party's not exactly invite-only: you just need to know where it is, and you'll only know that if you're the inviteable type. Usually it's in one of the Upper houses (the sixteen-to-eighteen-year-olds: Stables for the girls, Lake for the guys); whoever got lucky enough to bag one of the bigger double bedrooms and has a roomie who doesn't mind people being sick in their bed. It's the thing everyone will be talking about tomorrow. It's the gossip textbook for the whole term.

And I'm at it. We're at it.

UM.

WOT?

This is not standard Heidi protocol. The Finch isn't exactly your average school, but it has its cliques. The hairy guys in bands, the wispy girls, the We Hate Everything crowd. Our popular kids come equipped with credit cards and police cautions, but it's no different from any other school once you slice past the extra cash and the bad reputations. Same rules everywhere. And the rules say that weird-ass Leftover Squad Lower Schoolies do not get to play with the grown-up toys. Maybe Ludo might have sneaked in last year, back when she hung with the Blondes. Maybe even doomy loomy Fili, when she was an emo. But never Big Dai, the fat gay kid in the corner. And definitely never me, the teacher's daughter, that freak with the plaits; the girl who only ever hears about this stuff the next morning, after the Mothership's driven me back up the hill.

Maybe I've been watching too much *Mycroft Christie Investigates* lately, but it's possible there's a hole in the fabric of time and space, responsible for our being here.

The room is filling up now, starting to get crowded and stuffy. Bottles and cans of Coke get passed to the corner by the window, where, under cover of an armchair, Brendan Wilson tops them up from a glass bottle. Packets of crisps fly overhead. Jo-Jo Bemelmans brings in a stack of pizza boxes, and the smell of cheese and garlic takes over from the icky mix of perfume and hairspray. Scheherezade Adams swans in, all bounce and straps and brand-new nose.

I think about sneaking out, but Ludo's squeaking next to me, eyes big, reeling off a list of names under her breath like a butler at some fancy soiree. She's got her hand wrapped round my wrist, squeezing whenever someone especially significant goes by. It's not so bad, I suppose. I'm out of the habit of being squished in with so many other people, but really it's not that different from watching TV, in smell-o-vision. And I'm in the perfect location to play detective. I'll observe the Finch species in its natural habitat: monitor behavioural patterns, take notes.

Timo Januszcz is drinking alone.

Flick Henshall has reportedly locked herself in the second floor loo in Stables. (Are these two facts related?)

Honey Prentiss has broken her arm, which may prevent her from playing the oboe all term. (Scheherezade looks quite pleased.)

Miyu Sugawara wants Oliver Bass to know that someone is a mean mean bad girl (not her words) very loudly, just at one of those moments when the room falls oddly quiet. (Note: Anna-Louise Darbyshire's ULife page has been an impressive array of snog photos all summer, none of them featuring Oliver.)

And there are the newbies to check out, too; the ones who were just pretty or hipster enough to get the McCartney Party auto-approval. A new candidate for the Blondes. Some guy with peroxide hair, a military greatcoat, and piercings on his piercings, trying to eat pizza without snagging mozzarella on his spikes. A skinny boy all in black Fili's gone to talk to by the window, as if Goth radar is yanking them together – though he looks vaguely familiar.

There's another new girl I almost miss, first from the crowd around her, then from how almost invisible she is in person. She's pale and gaunt and angular, arms and legs folded up and sticking out like some sort of insect, and wearing the sort of make-up that looks like it isn't make-up. I hear someone say "model". It computes.

"OH MY GOD," breathes Ludo. "Yuliya Kusnetsova? She's, like, EVERYWHERE. She did, like, *Vogue Italia* two months ago? She's HUGE."

She's actually the opposite, but I let it slide. The name's familiar anyway.

"I think she's Fili's new room-mate," I say. "They've got that big double on the top floor of Manor, upstairs from you?"

Ludo gets her death grip on to my wrist again.

"NO! Oh. My. God. Seriously? OH MY GOD. That is. . ."

"Awesome?" I suggest.

“TOTALLY!”

Somehow I'm not sure Fili will be so keen. But before I can drag her away from Gothboy to ask, I feel a tug on one of my plaits, and then nearly fly off the sofa as a body leaps over from behind and drops into the empty space beside me.

“Ding ding, Ryder. All aboard.”

Big Dai Wyn Davies: man mountain, king of the bear hug. Well, what's left of him. Dai didn't get to be Big Dai just from being six foot four, and it looks as if he's going to need a new nickname. Same stupid grin, same rubbish spiky blond haircut, entirely new body.

“Holy crap, Dai, the lions really did eat you.”

He looks stupidly pleased. “Safari diet. Followed by masochistic gym torture.” He flexes an arm at me. Bits of it stick out, in a manner that is probably meant to be impressive.

“WHOA!” says Ludo, leaning over me to poke his biceps. “Personal trainer?”

“Yep. On whom I had the most pathetic crush, so, hello, dedication! You likey?”

Ludo gives him a small round of applause. I wrinkle my nose.

“You look like someone Photoshopped your head on to a lifeguard.”

“I'll take that as the compliment you *obviously* intended it to be. You're looking majestic yourself, by the way. Loving the coat.”

“Detective,” I explain, waiting for the penny to drop. Dai's even more of a Mycroft Christie fangirl than I am.

“Oh yeah? Like that guy off the telly, right? God, can you believe how much time we wasted last year, watching that crap?” He chuckles, shaking his head. “We were such nerds.”

I look down at myself. The Coat has started to seem a bit more bizarre now there are quite so many other people here to see it. In fact, now I'm paying a bit more attention, everyone else seems to be dressed a teensy bit more appropriately for a party. Not just

the Upper kids who always look like that, all swingy hair and glitter make-up for nine a.m. biology, either. I mean *everyone*.

Fili doesn't count: aside from her being crazy-beautiful already, it is Goth Law never to be seen without the uniform and the face. And Ludo is always perky, and pretty, and strung about jingly sparkly things. But she's different somehow: just a few slim gold threads around her wrists and neck instead of that ever-increasing cuff of grubby neon plastic bangles she had last year, golden streaks in her smooth dark hair, red lips instead of peachy-pink. Dai's got new clothes to go with his new absence of stomach, too: magenta polo shirt with the collar flipped up, low-slung jeans so there's a wide line of boxers showing. He's even wearing man-jewellery: some tourist junk from his holiday, beads with a bit hanging down shaped like a tooth.

Pod people.

My friends have been replaced by Pod people. Robots. Zombie doppelgängers from space. The Leftover Squad has been hijacked by evil clones, and we haven't even been given our first mission yet.

OK, rewind that thought. I have no moral objection to people looking nice. I might not be exactly managing it myself, in my baggy jeans and my supergeeky plaits, but that just makes me the poster child for not being fooled by the advertising: it's what's inside that counts, don't judge a book, etc. It's what comes with the extra layers of lipgloss and perfume that's spooking me. Ludo finally lets go of my wrist, but only to do a quick hitch-and-jiggle on her bra, tugging her vest top down a notch as she eyes the boys. Dai's telling me some story about lost luggage on the way to Madagascar, but the whole time he's looking around, eyes sliding up and down, approving and disapproving. Even Fili is tinkering with her millions of long dark braids, eyelashes fluttering shyly as Gothboy tries on her favourite ring with the spider on it.

It's catching. Everyone's doing it. I don't think there's a person in the room actually enjoying themselves: they're too busy checking each other out.

Not me, though. The eyes hit, connect, and slide on by.

Maybe my fledgling detective geekiness is not so attractive. Maybe I've got the casting for the Leftover Squad all wrong. I'm the comedy sidekick who falls in poo. The talking dog. The redshirt who gets killed off in episode 4, and no one really minds.

"This is SO awesome," whispers Ludo loudly in my ear.

OAR.

SUM.

I nog: a nod and a shrug, both at once.

Half an hour later, with the sky dark outside and nothing but MTV on the giant TV to light the room, I realize I'm not dealing with zombie robot doppelgängers. It's the love potion episode. Every TV show has it sooner or later. Magic spell, monster bite, something in the water; romantic kryptonite that makes people lick faces with people they shouldn't. Mycroft Christie ended up snogging a vampire, an evil old lady who trained exploding hamsters to break into banks, and Jori Song (twice) while under the influence of bad mojo. Hilarious consequences generally ensue.

It's not so entertaining when you're in the middle of it.

OK, there's not exactly a Roman orgy happening. People are still wearing clothes, so far as I can tell from the flicker of the TV. It's pre-watershed, family-friendly, PG13. But everywhere I look, it's going on. Tongues and hands and giggles in corners. Oliver Bass is proving how over Anna-Louise he is by sticking his tongue down Miyu's throat. Scheherezade is sitting on Jo-Jo's lap, arms draped over his shoulders. Brendan Wilson is sliding a hand up the new Blonde girl's thigh, while she coyly smiles and fiddles with the hem of her skirt.

I hear Fili's laugh over the music, and see her curled up and cosy with her boy twin, holding hands, shoulders pressed together. I go to nudge Ludo, and realize she's otherwise occupied, the peroxide-haired pierced newbie guy's mouth on hers, his hand resting, as if by total accident, on her boob. I squint my left eye closed, trying not to look, but I can still hear a vague slurpy

noise. I turn to grab Dai, but the seat next to me is empty. I finally spot him in the corner near the door, dancing with Henry Kim and looking like he's won the lottery (which he kind of has, in Finch Gay Quarter terms; Henry Kim is famously the triple threat of cute, rich and smart, and Dai has been lusting from afar as long as I've known him).

The Coat suddenly feels too appropriate, in all the wrong ways. I'm an accidental perv, trapped here staring at a roomful of people getting it on, because there's not really anywhere else to look. The only other person in the room who isn't coupling up (or trying to) is Model Yuliya, who is yawning over her can of Diet Coke and flicking through a magazine.

I check my watch. I begged and pleaded until the Mothership promised I could stay until nine-thirty tonight. It's only just after eight.

I remember my bubble-wrap bag's at my feet. Betsy lent me an Agatha Christie novel, so I could practise my detecting skills. Maybe now would be a good time to whip out Agatha and read?

OK, that's *definitely* not the strangely attractive kind of geekiness.

I could go and find Dad Man, in his little cubbyhole of an office. The Mothership might have finished already, setting up down at the pool; she could leave early, take me back down the hill to my poky little attic bedroom. I could watch the *Mycroft Christie Investigates* season 3 finale again, in bed, with that Snickers bar that I sneaked into the shopping trolley while the Mothership was fussing over whether bananas counted as Amber on her Traffic Light diet regime.

I reach down for my bag to get my phone, and when I come back up, the seat next to me is no longer empty. Etienne Gracey. He's a Shroom, or he was: one of the Lower School bands, though he must be Upper School now. They played at the End of Year Ball. He sang.

"You're Heidi, yeah?" he says, shouting, over the music. He's

leaning in very close.

“Etienne, right?”

He smiles, nodding. I can see a little frost of stubble on his chin and his upper lip, glowing blue then pink in the video light. I feel something touch my back, and try not to jump. It’s his arm, sliding along the back of the sofa.

“Let me get you a drink,” he says, and the arm disappears from my back.

“Oh my God, Heidi!” whispers Ludo in my ear, apparently coming up for air. “You are SO lucky! He’s like so TOTALLY gorgeous.”

I suppose he is. I mean, he’s not as pretty as Little Leaf Teddy. Not anywhere near as pretty as Mycroft Christie. But he’s sort of a Finch pin-up. He’s dated Scheherezade. And now he’s settling back on to the couch next to me, pressing a can of Coke into my hand and sliding his arm back into position.

Ludo’s elbow jabbing me excitedly in the rib area is not helping me to get my brain around this scenario, but Peroxide Guy distracts her again with a little more casual hand/boob interfacing, and it’s like we’re alone together, me and Etienne.

*Heidi and Etienne.*

Is this how it works, then? You just kind of sit there, and wait for some boy to turn up and kiss you? I’ve been serving cups of tea to nice old ladies all summer; this all feels ultra-weird. But I suppose it’s OK. It’ll get it out of the way. I’m not fourteen anymore. I’m fifteen. This is what fifteen-year-olds do.

I take a sip out of my can, and try not to cough as the whatever-it-is goes down. I mumble, “Thanks,” tilting the can at him and hoping he won’t notice me not drinking the rest.

Etienne just nods, bobbing his head slightly as the music changes. Madonna thrusts about in her pants, in a not-especially-sexy kind of way.

Should I drink some more, in case my mouth tastes of anything weird? Because Etienne’s going to kiss me. I think. I wonder if

he'll feel prickly. I suppose he is quite pretty, up close.

Maybe you don't just sit there and wait? I didn't see anyone else having trouble getting to the kissing part of the evening, but I'm definitely doing something wrong. Talking, maybe? Are we supposed to that first?

"So ... any new Shrooms songs since last year?"

"Shrooms? We split. Creative differences, you know? I'm working on some solo material now, though." He snarls at the TV screen. "Real music, y'know?"

"Mhmm," I say into my can. "I'd love to hear it. Sometime. If you'd like?"

"Yeah?" He keeps bobbing his head. "Cool."

The ultra-weird keeps on growing. I think I just asked him on a date, sort of. This is not standard behaviour. This is not Heidi. There actually really truly is love potion floating in the air, making everyone moronic, and I am not immune after all.

"So, your dad is, like, the security guy at night, yeah?"

"Night porter, yep." I try a goofy shrug. "Kind of embarrassing."

"What? Oh, yeah, I guess. Anyway, me and the guys were wondering: could you, like, distract him tonight or something?"

I look up, and see "the guys" hovering behind Etienne, looking hopeful. Big looming Upper Schoolers from Lake: Dave something, Jules Harper, some guy I don't know at all.

"The *real* McCartney party's supposed to be up in Toni's room in Stables, only she says your dad was like patrolling all over down there, so we ended up down here with the kiddies in Baby House." He waves his can at the room, eyerolling. "No offence."

I swallow a big gulp, and taste the whatever-it-is, sticky on my teeth.

"No offence, yep," I mumble.

"So, could you, like, go pretend to be ill or something, just to, like, keep him busy or whatever?"

He leans in again, arm still round my shoulder, fingers just

lightly stroking the top of my arm.

“Sure,” I hear myself say. “Whatever.”

“*Awesome.*”

He gives my arm a squeeze, hops off the sofa, and he and “the guys” vanish.

OAK.

HEY.

*Emergency Protocol #4. Ejector seats engaged. Alert, alert, incoming. When I say run, run.*

I fumble for my bag, but Ludo’s amazing ability to get her face snogged off and still see what’s going on next to her is still in place. Her hand closes round my wrist again. I pull away, vaguely shaking my head, and climb over various writhey wriggly arms and legs to get out, out into the corridor.

It’s cool and bright. No sweaty people, no stinky pizza, just a nice ordinary school-like corridor, with a notice board about netball practice times, and when the nurse will be available. The real world, back where I know the rules.

Ludo bangs the door on the unreal world of the common room, and scoots up to dangle off my shoulder, eyes like two fried eggs.

“Oh my God, what WAS that? I mean, WHAT? I mean, OH MY GOD!”

“Ryder, baby, what gives?”

Not-So-Big Dai appears, his face pink, a huge smile on his face, Henry close behind him.

“I KNOW! He was like all over her, and then FOOM, GONE.”

“Etienne Gracey. Heidi, you *turned down* Etienne Gracey. The most uncomplicatedly attractive man on the planet?” Dai remembers Henry lingering at his shoulder. “Sorry. I didn’t mean. . .”

Henry shrugs. “It’s Etienne Gracey. I’m right there with you.”

Ludo grins her tiny pearly grin at me. Then her eyes suddenly

get wider. Huge. Fried eggs times twenty. She starts swatting her hands, slapping her palms against me and Dai like we're on fire, and making little squeaks.

"OH MY GOD. I get it. I totally get it. Don't you get it?"

Dai looks at Henry. They don't get it.

I don't get it either. So much for my stellar detective skills.

"DUH! Only possible explanation? She's totally SEEING someone already."

Dai gasps. Actually gasps.

"No!"

"TOTALLY. Right, Heidi? Right?"

Before I can get a word out, Ludo wraps her arms around my tummy and hugs me so hard I feel my elbows click. Dai joins in, pressing my head into his shirt. Henry wraps a cashmere-clad arm round me, too, even though I don't really know him well enough for hugging, and the three of them squish me even tighter, with Ludo making small "eee" noises and jumping up and down.

"Anything of interest?"

They break off. Fili's leaning on the wall, Gothboy just behind, looking bemused.

Dai beams. "Ryder here has just turned down the tongue services of one Etienne Gracey, on account of having – drumroll please – a secret boyfriend."

Ludo nods her head superfast, mouth wide open.

Fili quirks a brow. "Seriously?"

I look at Ludo, lipstick smeared into a doughnut round her mouth. I look at Dai, Henry's hand resting ever so casually on Dai's belt. I look at Fili, and how close Gothboy is standing, fingers twining in hers.

New season. New line-up. *Leftover Squad: The Boyfriend Years*. No room for Frog Girls here.

Well, honestly, what would you do?