

DOLLY KALASIN

SUGAR



*Sugar*

*Dolly Kalasin*



Copyright © 2024 by Dolly Kalasin.

All rights reserved.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means, including photocopying, recording, or other electronic or mechanical methods, without the prior written permission of the publisher, except as permitted by U.S. copyright law. For permission requests, contact Dolly Kalasin.

The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

Book Cover by Josie Cluney

Editing by Kaye Kemp Book Polishing

Proofreading By Mad Skillz

To the ladies at the old farts cuppa group.  
This one's for you ya smutty sheilas!

# *Contents*

Sugar

1. Sugar

2. Sugar

3. Sugar

4. Sugar

5. Tanner

6. Humphrey.

7. Sugar

8. Anderson

9. Sugar

10. Humphrey.

11. Sugar

12. Anderson

13. Tanner

14. Sugar

15. Anderson

[16. Sugar](#)

[17. Humphrey.](#)

[18. Humphrey.](#)

[19. Sugar](#)

[20. Tanner](#)

[21. Anderson](#)

[22. Tanner](#)

[23. Humphrey.](#)

[24. Sugar](#)

[25. Sugar](#)

[26. Sugar](#)

[27. Sugar](#)

[Sugar](#)

[Silver Springs Pets](#)

[Acknowledgements](#)

[Other Books](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Follow Me](#)

# *Sugar*

*Ten years ago.*

I slow down as the rain gets heavier. The sky had been clear when I left the radio station, but just as I turned onto the main road, the rain started without warning. I am soaked through and cold. Any heat I generate while pedaling is snatched away by the rain and wind. I'm glad I paid that little bit extra to get good quality tires and lights for my bicycle. But it's so dark and gloomy that the beam from my headlamp barely lights up the road in front of me. Normally, I'd move under the trees for shelter, but I'm running late.

Mr. Jeffries kept me back to discuss the project he wants me to undertake during the summer break. The storage room needs to be sorted and a new catalogue—which lists the songs and what kind of device they are stored on—created. I knew about cassette tapes and vinyl records, but I had never heard of eight-tracks before. It's a big job, and it'll fill the extra hours, so I'll have a full-time job over the holidays.

I knew when I left that I would have to hurry to get home in time. But the rain is making arriving before Mom and Spice leave for the airport more and more unlikely.

The rain suddenly lights up, and a horn blares behind me. I speed up and swerve to the edge of the road. The car passes,

and something hits me. I'm torn from my bike, and I fly through the relentless rain. I land on the grass and roll, coming to a stop just under the cover of a tree. As I stare at the pine above me, trying to catch my breath, I hear the squeal of brakes and the crunch of tortured metal. I sit up and whip my head to the road. There is another set of headlights. They stay still for a moment, then the car speeds down the road. As the car disappears, the edge of the rainstorm passes over me and the bright summer sun shines down once more.

I climb to my feet and brush pine needles from my clothes. I feel a little tender all over, but none of it is the pain of a broken bone. Taking a deep breath, I wince and lift my shirt. I can just see the edge of a red patch on my back. That will probably bruise. I look back at the road. What hit me? I am sure the car had gone past; I saw the taillights. Maybe I slipped and fell. I frown. That makes no sense. Even if I hit an extra slippery spot, I would have fallen closer to the road. Instead, I am all the way over under the trees, and I only have bumps and possible bruises. It doesn't add up. It's just not right.

Shaking my head, I gingerly walk back to the road. My bike is lying in the middle of the pavement. The frame is twisted, and the front wheel is bent at an angle. I drag it to the side of the road and plonk down on the grass. I hug myself and breathe deep shuddering breaths as tears roll down my face. It's not fair! It's just not fair! I was being good! I was following the road, not cutting through the woods, like Mom told me to. Now my bike's destroyed, I hurt, and I'm not going to see Spice before she leaves. I want to see Spice!

Stupid rain. Stupid cars. Stupid... everything! Brushing away my tears, I stand and wipe my nose on my sleeve. Heaving my bike upright, I push it forward a little. There is a jerk from the bend in the front wheel. If I lift the front end, I can drag it home. Moving to the very edge of the road, I start walking.

Rounding a bend, I see a cardboard box sagging on the side of the road. Laying my bike down, I squat beside it and open the flaps, revealing two small gray animals. They are huddled together, shivering, their fur damp. I pick them up carefully. They aren't kittens, and the dark markings on their little faces



are wrong for racoons. The larger one wraps its tail around my hand and looks at me, while the smaller one huddles tightly against its side. They have big eyes and crinkly sides, like an excess of skin. Maybe they're some sort of possum.

"Hey, little ones," I coo at them.

The one looking at me tilts its head and gives a little chirrup.

"Yeah, we're all a bit cold and wet, aren't we?"

Rocking back on my heels, I consider my options. I have to take them back into town. If I leave them here, they could fall victim to one of the many predators in the area. If I carry them, I won't be able to handle my bike. I need my hands free and a way to carry them securely. I could put them in my helmet, which is hanging off the handlebars, but they might fall out. The pockets of my jeans are too small, which leaves my shirt. Putting them in my lap, I pull up the hem and tie a knot just under my bra. It makes a little pouch, and I tuck them in.

"You two should be safe in there."

The little creatures stare at me with an intensity that is a little unnerving.

"I'll take you home and get you warmed up, then we'll figure out what to do."

They stare a little more, then it looks like the big one nods, and they curl up together. I fold up the box, put it on the bag rack of my bike, and set off once more. I hate to say it, but I need to get a new bike, the damage is too much to fix. Maybe Seth will let me borrow his old one. He'll probably ask for something ridiculous in return, even though his bike has been sitting in the shed gathering dust since he got a car. As long as my brother doesn't ask for a favor to be redeemed at a later date, it won't be too humiliating. The crunch of tires and the soft purr of an engine pulling up beside me draws me from my thoughts.

"Sugar! What the hell happened to your bike?"

Speak of the devil... My brother, Seth, leans out the driver's window of his best friend's blue truck. There are tiny flecks of color in his blonde hair.

“It got run over.”

“Shit!” He gets out and grabs my arms, looking me up and down. “Were you hurt?”

“No, I fell off just before it happened.”

“You’re a mess, Sugar.” Seth’s best friend, Anderson, says, coming around the front of his vehicle.

He is tall and muscular, the captain of the hockey team, and has dimples when he smiles. All the popular girls at school swoon dramatically when he directs his attention at them, and the rest of the female population loses the ability to talk. To me, however, he is annoying, and the temptation to punch him is always strong.

“Nice tum-tum, though.”

“Fuck’s sake, Andy.” Seth pulls off his jersey and shoves it over my head. “Keep your eyes off my sister.”

I release my bike handles and wriggle my arms through the sleeves. It’s covered in splatters of color that look suspiciously like paint. Seth lifts my bike.

“Oy! Hang on.” Andy jumps up into the truck tray and shakes out a tarp. “Bike on the tarp so you don’t scratch the paint.”

I lean on the rim of the tray as Seth passes Andy my bike. A pile of objects in the corner catches my eye. Guns, cylinders, and protective gear, all with splashes of color. I smirk as Seth shoos me into the cab of the truck. I have a bargaining chip now. Andy pushes me over to the middle seat and buckles me in. I watch him from the corner of my eye as he leans against the window. That was weird. Seth clears his throat and puts the car in gear. I wait while he shifts smoothly through the gears.

“Paintball.” I roll the word, drawing it out and savoring the power it gives me.

Seth jerks back and stares at me. I lift my chin.

“I might have selective memory loss if you fix up your bike and let me use it.”

“Oooh.” Andy sits up and leans an elbow on the dash. “Bold opening gambit. How will you respond?”

“Do my dishes for a week, and I won’t tell Dad that you body-swapped with Spice so she could go to Howard’s party when she was grounded.”

“Forget about that, and I won’t tell Dad that you’re driving Andy’s truck.”

“Wait, go back to the body-swap with Spice thing,” Andy interjects.

I roll my eyes and turn to face him. “What part of identical twins is too hard for your puck-sized brain to understand?”

I can see the metaphorical hamster spinning the wheel of Andy’s brain. Then he narrows his eyes. Seth chuckles and holds out a fist. I bump it.

“Not cool, Sugar baby. Not cool.”

I smirk at Andy and flick the underside of my nose with my thumb. Andy huffs and crosses his arms, then slumps against the door.

“Well done, Padawan.” Seth nudges me with his elbow. “You feeling forgetful? I’ll take you to work tomorrow and get the stuff to fix my bike.”

“Deal.”

I lean back in my seat and bask in the feeling of triumph as the scenery outside goes from trees to homes. I’d won a point over Andy, and Seth was proud of me. It might not seem like much to others, but I often felt like I fade into the background behind Seth and Spice. They both achieve so much that I take joy in the little things. I’m not treated any differently by my family, but other people forget about me because my siblings shine so brightly.

I feel movement in my shirt and peek down. The two little creatures are curled up together between my breasts. I’ll take them to the vet first thing tomorrow. Hopefully, I’ll be allowed to keep them as pets. It feels very important, like it’s something I need to do.

# *Sugar*

## *Now*

Daisy chirps at me from her mat on the bench. I pass her a slice of apple and cut another. She nibbles it delicately, and I hold up the remaining slice as though I am going to eat it. I pause. Maybe this time I will get to actually eat my apple. In a flash of gray, Atticus lands on my hand and bites into the apple. With a laugh, I put him down beside Daisy and surrender the slice. He can be so predictable. Slicing the rest of the apple, I mix it into my fruit salad. Then I seal the container and tuck it into my bag.

I scrape the scraps into the little bin for compost, then stack the dishes into the dishwasher and start the cycle. I stare out the window at the rectangle of light in the darkness. It is a glittering monochrome wonderland of snow and shadows. There is a chirp from behind me. I shut the blinds and turn. Atticus is looking at me with his head tilted to the side. It is his signature inquisitive head tilt. I pick up my bag and hold my hand out in front of them. Atticus immediately scampers up my arm and perches on my shoulder. Daisy holds the remainder of her apple slice in her mouth and follows him.

They have been like this since the day I found them. Atticus always runs into things first, while Daisy takes her time. Adopting them had been a challenge. First, I had to convince

my father, then I needed to learn everything about caring for them properly. There had been a lot to learn. Caring for a pair of sugar gliders is more complicated than a cat, but they are worth it. Their antics helped cheer me up when Spice went to MIT. I miss my twin, but we are both happy with the paths our lives have taken. I have a comfortable home and my dream job. She has a successful career, a husband, and two cute little boys.

Turning off the light, I pull the kitchen door closed. It is one of the areas I don't want Atticus and Daisy to go into when I'm not home. They have free run of the living area and the spare room, which is technically their room. When the weather is warmer, I open their outdoor area, but it is too cold for that right now. I put them onto the platform of their climbing frame and check the fit of their collars. Daisy has scratched at her new collar; the soft green leather band had originally belonged to Charlie's pet raven. It had fallen off the raven when I met it this morning. I'd been mortified when Daisy had snatched up the collar and hidden. Charlie was so kind and let her keep it.

"You two be good while I am at work."

Atticus chirps, short and sharp.

"I know it's early, but there is snow in the forecast, and I don't want to drive in it if I don't have to. The forecast for tomorrow is clear, so I'll take you out then."

Daisy stands on her hind legs and makes little grabby hands with her front paws. I smile and pick her up. She places her paws on my cheeks and rubs her nose against mine three times. She always places her paws in the same spot, and it's never more or less than three little swipes. When I put her back down, Atticus bumps my hand with his head, and I give him a tiny scratch. They often exhibit behaviors outside of what is considered normal, but they are happy and healthy, so I don't let their little oddities and quirks bother me.

With a final pat for both, I turn and head to the front door. Double checking that the exterior sensor lights are on, I put on my coat and the snood Spice sent me for Christmas. It was thick and warm, a vast improvement on the holey booties she

created when she was pregnant with her first and just learning how to knit.

Turning off the main lights, I leave, locking the door behind me. There is just enough snow on the ground to crunch underfoot as I walk up my path to the shared car park. I live in what used to be the caretaker's cottage of an old Georgian style house which has been converted into units. The sign out front declares boldly that the building is called *Primrose House*. I was fortunate to have the cottage. It is the perfect location, and the people who live in the units are all friendly.

Except Tanner. He is a bit abrupt and has a fondness for one-word answers. It's a pity, because he is very nice to look at. Especially in summer when he helps Carl in the garden, no shirt, bunching muscles, a light sheen of sweat making his skin shimmer. If his personality was a bit more open, I would definitely date him.

Tossing my bag onto the passenger seat, I get in and start up my little four-wheel drive. It is the updated two-door model similar to the old nineties version, which was my first car, and I love it. It isn't as massive as some modern vehicles but still has all the power needed to handle snow and the occasional off-road trip. Pulling out onto the road, I turned towards the center of town. I need to pick up my order from Anthony's Pizza before heading out to the station.

The roads are pretty clear, just the usual evening traffic. Almost two blocks from Anthony's, the traffic slows to a halt. We all sit there waiting for a while, then a few people ahead of me make a U-turn. I haven't seen any traffic coming from the other direction, which doesn't bode well. Seeing a free parking spot, I pull over. It won't take long to walk. Putting on my earphones, I select a playlist and tuck my music player into my pocket. May as well do some work while I walk.

Listening to music may sound like an easy job, but I have to schedule enough tunes to fill my six-hour shift. It isn't just music, though. I have a checklist of things to do while on air to entertain and engage my audience. But the most time-consuming part of my preparation is scheduling music, a job that is easier with this music player. It looks like an ordinary

iPod, but Ginger repurposed it so I can sort tunes into folders. She is a whizz with technology, and this is the best thing she has done for me.

I find the cause of the traffic jam at the next intersection. Two cars have stopped in the middle of the intersection. There doesn't seem to be much damage, but the drivers are gesturing wildly, and I can hear their voices over my music. Snow starts to drift down as I cross the road. There are already a lot of people standing around, and my order will be ready for pickup soon. Tonight, I'm treating myself to a garlic cheese pizza. Garlic bread is good, but this pizza is divine. I plan to enjoy a few slices while it is piping hot, but the rest will be for my lunch break. Even reheated, it is delicious. George says it's because he cooks it with love; but it's not just love that makes Anthony's the best pizza in town.

Stopping, I pull out my music player and send a song to the trash. I have not, and I will never, play any of that artist's music on my show. It isn't personal; I just don't like him. Tucking my music player back into my pocket, I look up and freeze. My heart beats wildly while my brain screams at me to run. A massive white shape looms in the snow. Closing my eyes, I take a few calming breaths. My eyes must be playing tricks. There are no Yetis in Silver Springs. Yetis are just a myth. Opening my eyes, I share an awkward smile with Mike. Because that's who it is: Mike. He's just a big guy wearing a white, shaggy, full-body fur suit. His black eyes glitter, and he winks as he passes me.

Shaking my head at myself, I continue, and before long, I'm pushing open the door to Anthony's Pizza. Taking off my headphones, I fold them and tuck them into my pocket with my music player. A harried-looking waitress hands over my order and hurries over to a man who has his hand raised and is clicking his fingers. I drop a twenty in the tip jar. Back outside, I crack the lid open and take a deep breath, inhaling the mouthwatering smell of cheesy garlic goodness. I snap the lid shut and hurry back towards my car.

“Sugar!”

I spin back to the road. A blond guy leans out the window of a passing car, waving frantically at me. I wave back. I think it was Moe, one of the band members who gave me a sample tape yesterday. Their music was delightfully varied, and I planned to open my show with one of their tunes tomorrow. Turning back, I walk into a wall. Something lukewarm splashes across my chest and under my chin, and I stumble back.



# Sugar

My backwards momentum is halted, and I look up into eyes so dark they are almost black.

“I’m so sorry. Are you all right, Pet?”

Holy hells, that voice is deep, rich, and rumbles like one of my favorite audiobook narrators. He frowns, his eyes searching my face.

“Pet?”

I mentally give myself a good hard shake and dislodge the over-riding thought of *yum*.

“I’m okay, just a little...” I look down my front. Liquid runs down my jacket. It smells like coffee.

“Stunned, surprised?”

I looked back up at him with a tiny smile. “Damp.”

His frown disappears, and he smiles. The double entendre of that single innocent word becomes an understatement. That smile is all manner of panty-melting, swoon-worthy danger. He’s swaddled up in a puffer jacket with a scarf and beanie, so all I can see is his face, which is framed by a short scruffy

black beard and those dark eyes. I could lose myself in those eyes.

“Oh.” He steps back and lets go of me. “You dropped your pizza.”

“What?” I look down. The box is lying in the snow, with my pizza scattered beside it. “Oh no!”

I drop to my knees. Please, please be okay. I flip open the box, the few pieces left in it are upside down. I sniff, my eyes watering as I stare at my lunch, my treat. It’s ruined. The man places a hand on my shoulder as he crouches beside me. He picks up the box and rips it in half, passing me the side with the pieces still on it. He picks up the pieces from the ground, placing them in his part of the box, then folds it in half. Placing a hand under my elbow, he helps me stand. I find myself looking up and up. Apparently, he was leaning over before, because now he towers over me.

“My place is just around the corner. Come get cleaned up, and I’ll order you another pizza.”

“No, it’s all right.” Sniff. “It was just an indulgence.”

He gives me a look I can’t decipher.

“Come on.”

His hand tightens on my elbow, and he starts walking. Given the choice between going with him and potentially falling over as I extract myself from his grip, I do a little hop skip and walk next to him.

“Where are we going?”

“My place.”

“Okay.” I look up at him.

He is scanning the area as he walks. It was either very Kevin Costner-bodyguard-ish or sketchy as all hell.

“The reason I earned the nickname Nutcracker has nothing to do with ballet.”

He stops abruptly and looks down at me, his dark eyebrows scrunched together again, creating an adorable little furrow.

“What?”

“Just warning you, in case you’re, you know, planning something nefarious.”

His lips move. Since my first mentor hammered the skill of lipreading into me, I know he is repeating what I just said. Lipreading in a radio station was actually very useful with the soundproof windows. Snatching my part of the pizza box, he walks over to the nearest rubbish bin and throws it all in. He stalks back to me. It isn’t fear that causes my breath to catch. It certainly isn’t fear that causes the whimper to escape as he looms over me.

“There. Something nefarious done.”

“Ugh! A pizza crime.” I stamp my foot and stick my bottom lip out. “How could you?”

He chuckles and squishes my lip with his thumb. It is a glorious sound. His hand drops from my face, and he grabs my hand, then pulls me down the sidewalk. Yep, I’ve literally just met him, which raises all sorts of logical objections, but my libido is louder at the moment. It’s screaming tall, dark, and handsome, with a panty-melting voice. I want to see what happens next. Hopefully curiosity gets this cat all the cream. If not, I can always kick him in the balls and run away.

“Here.”

He stops at the door beside the music shop and unlocks it. Opening the door, he gestures for me to go first. At the top of the staircase, he leans over me and opens the interior door, revealing a light and spacious area with clean but mismatched furniture. He disappears through one of the doorways, and I unbutton my jacket and wander over to the table.

Reappearing, he presses a damp cloth into my hand, then steps back and slaps his palm to his forehead before hurrying back to the other room.

Taking off my jacket and snood, I lay them on the table. The jacket will be easy to wipe down, but I need to soak the snood and rinse it thoroughly. I can do that at work. I wipe the coffee from my face and chin with the cloth, then undo the top

buttons of my shirt so I can clean my skin where the coffee dribbled beneath my clothes.

Hearing a strangled sort of noise, I look up. He stands in the doorway, a towel clenched in his hand, his gaze fixed on my hand holding the cloth. I smile and drag the cloth slowly over the curve of my breast and down the valley between. I flush as his eyes follow the path of the cloth. I breathe out shakily, trying to calm the butterflies fluttering in my stomach.

He swallows audibly. "Pet."

A thrill runs through me at the strangled quality of his voice, yet he holds himself back. I wonder what it would take for him to break. I move the cloth back up and over my other breast. He drops the towel and closes the distance between us in seconds. He pulls the cloth from my hand, drops it, then fumbles with my buttons. I shiver, then stop. Wait. He is doing them up.

"You need to go, Pet. For your sake, you need to go."

"For my sake?"

"Yes."

"What happens if I don't?"

"If you don't..." He reaches a hand up to my face but pulls away before he touches me. Grabbing my jacket and snood, he thrusts them at me. "Fuck, I thought I could control myself. Now go."

Spinning me around, he pushes me towards the door. I stumble a few steps at the suddenness of the movement. There has been mention of nefarious things, and the whole idea sounds good to me, but if this is him putting the brakes on, then I will go with dignity. Stopping at the door, I place my hand on the handle and look back at him over my shoulder. He is still standing at the table, watching me intently.

"I won't be gentle, Pet."

I turn back to the door and hesitate. That sounded like a warning. A warning is concern that I can't handle what he has to give. I move my hand from the door handle to the dead bolt

above it and turn the knob. Locking the door. It isn't up to him to decide what I can handle. Turning, I rest against the door. He strides to me, his long legs devouring the distance between us, and leans over me, one hand braced on the door. The air vibrates with tension. I lock my knees and tilt my head back. Each rapid inhale fills my lungs with his warm earth after rain smell.

"I don't plan on using protection, Pet." He pauses, his eyes searching mine. "Last chance to back out."

"What, you scared you're not good enough to make me scream your name?" I have no idea where that came from. The words just blurt out by themselves.

His eyes widen slightly, then settle into a predatory gleam. A slow smile curves his lips. He runs a finger down the side of my throat, and when he speaks, there is a delicious low rumble in his voice.

"Oh, Pet. You have no idea."

Holy hell in a handbasket. Sploosh and double sploosh. I don't know if this is Dom, Daddy, Alpha, or whatever people call these vibes he's putting off right now, but sign me up.

# Sugar

“Say stop or no and I will stop. Understand?”

“Yes.”

With slow, deliberate movements, he pops open the buttons of my shirt one at a time, his eyes never leaving mine. Sliding his fingers under my waistband, he slowly lowers both my pants and himself. His eyes don't leave mine until he is on his knees and my pants are around my ankles. Then his eyes dropped to my panties, and he leans forward.

“Stop.”

He immediately shifts back and looks up at me.

I smile sweetly. “Just checking.”

He growls, a deep rumble that goes straight to my clit. Grabbing my bra between my breasts, he pulls me forward as he stands, draping me over his shoulders. No one has ever carried me before; no one has ever moved this slowly before. I want. I *need*. I'm a horny mess, and I have no idea why I sassed him. He tosses me down onto a bed, then crouches over me and places a finger over my lips.

“You testing me, Pet?”

I go to answer, but he pinches my lips together.

“*Stop* is only for if you really mean it. From now on, you are not to make a noise. The tiniest sound and I stop for good. Understood?”

Eyes wide, I nod. Releasing my lips, he kisses me. His lips are soft and warm, completely at odds with the hard glint in his eyes. I chase him as he pulls away, but he keeps me in place with a hand between my breasts. He stands at the end of the bed and removes my boots with slow, deliberate movements. I want to scream for him to hurry up, but that would be noise. Instead, I clamp my lips together and try to convey the message with my eyes.

When my boots and pants are off, he reaches forward and grabs my hips, swiftly pulling me towards the edge of the bed. A giggle escapes me. I slam my hands over my mouth, staring at him with wide eyes. He quirks an eyebrow. Reaching out, he pulls my bra down and skims his fingers over the soft skin, coming close but never touching where I want him to. Plucking at the top of my panties, he hums. They’re not sexy in any way; I’m just wearing my comfy cotton ones.

Using both hands, he lifts my butt and removes my panties, sliding his hands down my legs. Once they are off, he spreads my legs and kneels at the edge of the bed. He looks at my dripping pussy and licks his lips, then rubs a thumb along the apex of my thigh.

“So wet for me, Pet. Is the anticipation getting to you, making you desperate for my touch?”

I nod desperately. He lifts his hand and sucks the glistening fluid off.

“So delicious. Now be a good girl, and remember, no noise.”

My whole body sighs with relief as he disappears between my legs. I finally get attention where I want it. The firm pressure of his tongue is bliss as he explores my entrance. He drags his tongue up to my clit and circles it, and I have to hold back a whimper. His eyes move to mine, then he presses down hard, raking his tongue over my clit. A desperate mewl that I barely

smother escapes as sensation rips through me. I never knew, or even imagined, that I could be primed and ready to shatter with so little touch.

My back arches as he slides his fingers inside me, prodding and exploring my inner walls until he hits that spot. I clamp my teeth on my bottom lip to stay silent. Lifting his head, he smirks and pulls my lip free.

“Don’t you damage those luscious lips, Pet.”

Without breaking eye contact, he pumps his hand in and out a few times, brushing against that sensitive spot. Gritting my teeth, I try to ignore the sensations he is drawing from me as he strokes my G-spot again and again. He lowers himself back down, the warm brush of his breath flowing over my clit moments before the firm pressure returns. His eyes remain fixed on mine while his tongue circles, flicks, and tortures me with pleasure in harmony with the unrelenting thrusting of his hand over and over, strumming that hidden bundle of nerves.

I wriggle and writhe, squirming to escape or lessen the building pressure. Draping an arm over my hips, he pins me down and continues to drive me higher and higher. I flail, then grip the bed covers. I’m so close. The precipice is right there. I drag the bedcovers over my face. A keening wail builds within me. A little more, a touch, a nudge is all it will take. I don’t know if I can keep silent any longer. His warmth disappears, and all stimulation stops. I frown and pull the covers away from my face. He is standing beside the bed, not touching me. Why did he stop? I’m sure I haven’t made a noise.

“Look at you, Pet, all flushed and needy. You’ve been so good and silent.”

I nod, my chest heaving as I prop myself up on my elbows. He is still dressed. How is he still dressed? Grabbing the back of his shirt, he pulls it over his head, then undoes his pants, practically ripping them from his body. His cock bobs with its sudden freedom, and I find myself unable to look away. It is so full and erect and big, really big. He crawls onto the bed and up my body, spreading my legs with his knees. I jam a hand into his chest.



“Stop!”

He sits back on his heels. I look from his cock to his face and back again.

“Umm... I’ve never.”

“Are you a virgin?”

“No! It’s just...” I point to his cock. “Compared to you, the others had micro peens.”

“Do you want me to stop?”

“No! Just... Don’t break me, okay?”

“Oh, I intend to break you, Pet, but I won’t harm you.” Leaning forward, he runs a hand down my face, rubbing his thumb over my lips. “I’ll go slow, and you make all the noise you want.”

I nod and watch as he positions himself between my legs. He runs the head of his cock up and down, coating it with my slick. I moan softly, then he notches himself at my entrance. Rocking gently, he presses into me. The sting of the stretch is offset by the gentle circling pleasure of his thumb on my clit, rebuilding the height of sensation as he eases into me.

“Look at you, Pet. Your little pussy stretches so well, sucking me in.”

“Fuuuu—” The word drifts into unintelligible sounds as he deepens his rolling thrusts.

My hips move in time with his, causing extra friction on my clit. He hits a spot deep inside, and pleasure crashes through me with savage intensity.

“That’s it. Such a good girl taking all of me.”

His hands run up and down my legs, then he pulls them together and hooks my ankles over his left shoulder. He draws himself in and out with long, slow strokes, then kisses my ankle and slides a hand down my leg. Shivers trace over my skin as he massages my breast. Pressure builds in my core, and I grasp his arms, dragging my ankles into his shoulder.

“More!”

“No.”

I buck into him.

“Damn it, Pet! I’m trying to—Fuck it.”

Moving one of my legs to his right shoulder, he falls forward, opening me up as he turns me into a pretzel beneath him. All gentleness disappears. He pounds me into the bed, striking deep within me. I claw at his back, grasping for something to ground me. Sensations flare through me, winding tighter as he fucks into me harder and harder. The band snaps, and my orgasm crashes through me. My scream is silent. He grimaces, then throws his head back.

Everything goes white, then black.

“Pet.”

The word floats around me.

“Pet.”

This one is a bit louder and sharper. I crack an eye open. Tall-Dark-and-Handsome is running a hand through his hair. I open both eyes and smile. He sighs and smiles shakily.

“Are you okay? You passed out for a moment there.”

I lift my arm a little. It feels heavy, giggling I let it flop back to the bed. Never have I ever come that hard before.

“I feel like a puddle of squooshyness.”

He smiles, just one side of his lips quirking up. I feel all wibbly about it. He disappears, then reappears, holding up a buzzing thing where I can see it.

“What does *half hour alarm* mean?”

I blink lazily, then my brain comes back online like I’ve been hit with a bucket of cold water.

“Work!” Gritting my teeth, I force my body to move.

“Let me clean you up.” He presses me back onto the bed. “Unless you want to go with my cum dripping out of you. I wouldn’t mind, but it’s your choice.”

My breath catches, and I look at the cloth he is holding. I don't have time to shower, but I don't want to go to work smelling of sex.

"Please, clean me."

"With pleasure."

I can feel the swift, sure strokes of the cloth but the part of my brain that processes sensation must still be offline. When he is done, he picks me up and sits me on the edge of the bed. Kneeling, he pulls my bra back into place, then picks up my panties from the pile of my clothes and dresses me.

"What sort of job makes a pretty girl like you work at night?"

"My dream job." It feels oddly intimate to have him dressing me, like after-sex snuggles but more. "I like working nights. It's quiet, no one steals my lunch, and the knobheads who expect me to make their coffee 'coz I'm a woman are curled up in their beds far, far away from me."

My feet twitch involuntarily as he puts on my socks, then boots. Standing me up, he pulls my bottoms the rest of the way up, smoothing my shirt down before tucking it into my pants. He stands and hands me my phone. A glance tells me that I only have about twenty minutes before I'll be running late. He cups my cheek, lifting my head slightly.

"Meet me tomorrow. Go on a date with me."

"Umm... What's your name?"

"Humphrey."

Slapping a hand over my mouth, I giggle. His eyebrow goes up.

"That's such an old man's name."

"Oh really? Can an old man do this?"

He lunges for me. I duck under his arms and run out of the room. Grabbing my coat, I glance back and see him coming for me, with a wide smile as he stalks towards me. I run for the door, giggling. I unlock the deadbolt and run down the stairs.

Just as I reach the bottom door, he wraps his arm around me, lifting me off my feet.

“Repeat after me: Humphrey is a sexy, virile young man.”

“Humphrey is a sexy, virile young man.”

He lowers me back down. I haven't had this much fun in a long time. I definitely want to meet up with him again and see what happens next.

“Anthony's Pizza. Meet me at eight.”

“It's a date.”

Opening the door, he gives me a tiny push. Stepping out into the falling snow, I turn, hoping for a kiss goodbye, but he is already shutting the door. Disappointment fills me, then I chuckle and run back to my car. He was still naked.

# *Sugar*

I turn off the engine and let out a sigh of relief. It's good to be home again. After leaving Humphrey's place, I had just made it to work on time. A late-night delivery from O'Malley's had saved me from a dinner of instant noodles and stale chips from the staff pantry. James had grumbled about driving in the snow, but a bit of Flossy Fox charm and a good tip had earned me a smile.

Pulling my snood over my head, I stretch it out and pull another twist over. It rests snugly against my neck, and I lift the edge to cover my mouth and nose, adjusting it slightly so the cable pattern is comfortable. Spice was so proud of this design. The little Xs and Os cabled along the edge create a perfect ridge over my nose. It still smells a bit like coffee from last night. Pulling on my gloves, I grab my bag and brace myself before opening the car door. My feet sink into the few inches of snow that fell overnight. With one hand braced on my car, I make my way around to the pathway to my unit. I've been caught unawares by patches of ice under the snow in the parking lot before.

“Morning, Miss Sugar.”

Turning, I saw Carl, the caretaker of Primrose House. He is in his seventies but so fit and healthy I don't need to worry about the snow shovel he holds.

"Morning, Carl."

"Is everything all right, Miss Sugar? You're back early this morning."

"There's a staff meeting later today. I need a nap before then."

"Ah, the joys of night shift. Sleep well."

Carl taps the edge of his beanie, then starts clearing the pathway to the rear of the house. There is a loud merrp, then a gray spotted cat bounds over the snow towards me. It is Me, Tanner's cat. He comes to a stop and stands on his hind legs, reaching up with his front paws. I pick him up, and he snuggles into me, rubbing his head under my chin. Me is an Egyptian Mau; even with his winter coat, this weather is too cold for him to be outside for very long.

"Hey, Me. What are you doing out?"

I check his paws for ice, running my thumb over his little squish beans while he nuzzles into the underside of my chin.

"You need to watch these little toes of yours in the cold."

I scratch him under the chin, then put him down. He looks up at me with the cat equivalent of utter betrayal and heartbreak.

"Go home to your slave," I say with a laugh as I walk down the path. "Tell him all about it."

Me lets out a pitiful yowl and twines around my ankles. I pick him up, and he licks my chin.

"No, go home."

I set him down beside the path and push him gently towards his place. I only ever give him attention outside. I never allow him into my home with Daisy and Atticus. Not when he might prove a danger to them because of his hunting instincts. Glancing back before I open my door, I see him walking, tail in the air, towards Tanner's unit. Shutting the door behind me,

I toe off my shoes, kick them against the wall, and hang my jacket on its hook.

“Daisy, Atticus, I’m home.”

Pulling the snood off, I wander into the tiny laundry off to the side of my kitchen, near the back door and toss it into the washing machine. Grabbing whatever is in the laundry hamper, I toss it in to make up a load, add the detergent, and start a wool wash cycle. An angry barking comes from the doorway. Daisy is sitting on the platform glaring at me, just like she always does when she sees me doing laundry.

“Wool wash for the woolen thing, Daisy. Spice threatened all sorts of horrors if I shrink another one.”

Shutting the door behind me, I hold up my hand, but she turns her back to me. I shrug. She’s like this every time I do laundry. Grabbing a pen, I write a reminder on the fridge to dry the laundry, then go looking for Atticus. I find him lying on his back, little feet in the air, next to the food bowls. His little chest moves up and down, so I tap his chin.

“Are you being dramatic, cheeky boy?”

No response.

“Oh dear, what am I going to do with all that jam then?”

He flips over with a squeak and jumps on me, running up to my shoulder. Daisy lands on my shoulder as I walk past her on the way into the kitchen. I take a jar out of the fridge and dip two tiny spoons in, one spoon each, both small enough to be a perfect serve of jam. They jump down and wait while I take the spoons out of the jar and place them on their plate. Leaning on the bench, I watch as they lick their spoons, nibbling on the little chunks of fruit I left in when I made it.

“We won’t be going out this morning. I need to have a quick nap. There is a staff meeting today. Everyone has to be there because they’re introducing the new manager.”

Atticus flicks an ear, and I interpret it as him listening even though he’s fully focused on the jam.

“Apparently, it’s the grandson of the station owner. I wonder if he even knows anything about running a radio station or if it’s just a case of nepotism at its finest. Either way, my show should be safe. My stats are good, and Jeffries assured me he would tell the new guy to leave my show alone.”

There is a knock on the door. I push away from the bench as Atticus and Daisy look towards the front door, then turn back to their jam.

“I wonder who that could be.”

Opening the door, I catch a glimpse of Tanner, then a bunch of flowers is shoved in my face.



## *Tanner*

This is ridiculous, absolutely one hundred percent ridiculous. I just need to take a dozen or so steps and knock on the door. Then, when she opens the door, hand over the flowers and ask her on a date. Easy, simple. I've done it in the past; never once have I hesitated. But since I met Sugar, I haven't managed to knock on her door before chickening out. The times when I have seen her at the mailboxes or in the parking lot, I have spoken with her. Well, I've tried. I am usually charming and well-spoken, but whenever she is close to me, it's like all knowledge of language just flies from my mind.

Sugar isn't like the other girls I've picked up in the past. Sugar is my mate.

I always had grand dreams of finding my mate. We would instantly recognize each other and have a magnificent tale to tell our many children. Instead, I had been stunned by her smile and stammered out... something. Since then, I've learned that she is human, and the wards protecting the town keep her ignorant of the magical world. I need to woo her, and when I think she is ready, tell her about magic. I'll have to tell her that the cat she thinks is my pet called Me is actually my shifted form. Earlier, when she was petting me, it took all my

self-control not to shift and wrap my arms around her. I haven't seen her for a few days, and I barely controlled my desire for her.

There is a loud harrumph from behind me. Turning, I see Carl leaning against Sugar's car with his arms crossed.

"You're overthinking it, boy. Walk up to that door, and when she opens it, tell her."

"I can't do that. She's human. She doesn't know about fated mates."

"Oh boohoo, so sad." He straightens and approaches, using the snow shovel like a walking stick I know he doesn't need. "You wishy washy around for too long and you'll lose her. That woman in there is a treasure."

Spinning me around to face her little cottage, he pushes me towards her door.

"Man up and claim her."

Straightening my shoulders, I march to her door and knock loudly. Holding the flowers in front of me with two hands, I wait. Maybe I should hold them out, so they are the first thing she sees. I do so, but it feels wrong. Pulling them back, I hear the door opening and see Sugar standing there. I thrust the flowers forwards, then yank them back. I almost hit her with them. Fuck, she's looking at me weirdly. I'm stuffing this up completely. Dropping the flowers, I step forward, grab her face, then kiss her.

She stiffens, then melts against me. Her lips move, and she tugs on my shirt, pulling me closer. The slam of a door causes me to release her and look around. I am in her house, not exactly sure how I got in here, but I am. There's a tug on my shirt, and I look down at Sugar. She has a fistful of my shirt, and she's using it to pull me back down to her level.

"Kiss me again."

I capture her lips again because only a fool would ignore such a breathless demand. A sense of rightness and peace settles over me as we kiss. Heat and need rise as she opens to me, her hands move to my head and back as she pulls me closer.

Sliding my hands down her sides, I grab under her butt and lift. Her legs wrap around me.

This new angle makes it easier to devour her. I want to claim her, to kiss every part of her body.

I moan as she flexes, the hot friction against my swollen cock both a pleasure and a pain. She's my mate, and I'll show her how much she means to me every day. Bracing against the wall, I grind into her covered pussy, wanting—no, needing—to fill her with my seed every day and night, so a part of me is always inside her. Releasing her lips, I kiss my way down her neck, inhaling her scent, tasting and nibbling her soft skin. Grinding against her as she writhes in my arms.

“Oh, god, yes!” The desperate cry leaves her lips, and she shatters, riding out the waves of her pleasure against me.

Pulling away, I look down at her bliss. She looks up at me with the most beautiful smile. I hum with the knowledge that I caused that. I gave her that bliss and satisfaction. She pushes against my chest, and I step back, holding her steady as she stands. With a glint in her eye, she undoes my pants and pulls them down just enough to release my cock.

She wraps her hand around it, sliding her grip up and down as she sinks to her knees. I watch in awe as her tongue flicks from between her lips and licks the drops of pre-cum oozing from the head. Fire burns through me, and I cry out. My hips jerk, and ropes of cum splash onto her face. Lunging forward, she wraps her lips around me. My cock disappears into her mouth as she sucks, milking every drop from me. I shake as she slowly draws back, squeezing as she pulls away. With a final flick of her tongue against the tip, she lets my cock fall from her lips. I watch, mesmerized, as she sits back on her heels and swipes my cum from her face, sucking it off her finger and watching me with a Cheshire cat grin.

“What's your recovery time like?”

“Wha... Um...”

The loud crash of breaking glass comes from one of the other rooms. Sugar scrambles to her feet. I stare after her as my

brain catches up, then tuck myself away and zip up my pants as I follow her. She almost crashes into me as she hustles back through the doorway she went through, but I manage to dodge out of the way. She places a gray fuzzy bundle on the odd-looking cat tree and points a finger at it.

“Stay!” Turning, she sees me standing by the door and smiles sadly. “I’m so sorry, Tanner. They knocked down the jar. There’s jam all over the floor, and I gotta clean it up.”

“It’s okay.” I brush her hair away from her face. “Can I help?”

She beams up at me and nods. I glance over at the cat tree, where two little faces look at me. That’s who she meant by *they*. Shaking my head, I follow her into the kitchen and help clean up the sticky mess.

# *Humphrey*

According to the GPS, I reached my destination back at the start of the driveway. That was a quarter mile behind me, and I still couldn't see the building. At least it was well maintained. The paved surface was a little wider than a single lane, with wide gravel verges that could be used when a car is coming the other way. Up ahead, I could see a curve and bit of a hill. I needed a change of pace, and just the commute from the apartment in Silver Springs was a change. Instead of bumper-to-bumper traffic and a crush of humanity, there was space, so much space. It was nice but also unnerving, just another thing that I'll get used to in time.

Coming here had been Grandmother's idea. She had voiced concerns about my health during my weekly visit. Instead of brushing them aside, I told her everything. How I've been greeting the day with dread, as my father passes more responsibility to me. How he pressures me to conform to his expectations and management style. How I've felt like my soul is being crushed and there's never any time for doing the things I enjoy.

Grandmother told me about this little radio station she owned which was far away from the big city. The manager was

considering retirement, and if I wanted it, the position was mine. It wouldn't be the same as running my father's corporate empire, but Grandmother assured me there were enough similarities that, with some adjustment, I would be fine. She had two pieces of parting advice: listen to the people and keep an open mind.

WSSR Silver Springs Radio was an old station. The interior of the buildings was updated about twenty years ago, but the broadcasting equipment was upgraded recently. In total, there are less than twenty staff members. Interestingly, they are a mix of species. The majority are shifters and witches, but there are a few humans and other species, including a single vampire. According to what I read, the humans have no idea that their workplace, or even their town, is filled with paranormal beings.

Cresting the hill, I see the station. It still has the original art deco architecture, with the transmission tower off to the side in a fenced enclosure. Parking in one of the empty spots, I straighten my tie, collar, and hair, then grab my briefcase. I get out of the car and button up my suit jacket as I walk to the entrance. I pause just before the door, where a bike rack sits off to the side. Someone has parked a motorbike there. Making my way inside, I look around as I approach the reception desk. The walls are covered in photographs of the building through the ages, and there is a selection of certificates from various organizations. The wall behind the desk is covered in framed albums and posters, all of which are signed.

The background music stops, and I can hear the presenters bantering about their programming. The receptionist is a young man, dressed in casual but tidy clothes. He looks up with a smile when I place my briefcase on the desk.

“Good morning, sir. How can I help you today?”

“I have a meeting with Alexander Jeffries.”

“Ah.” Turning to his computer, he clicks the mouse a few times, then searches the screen with the end of his pen. “Do, do, doo. Mr. H. Atkins?”

I nod, and he pushes away from the desk.

“If you’ll follow me, Mr. Jeffries’s office is this way.”

Stepping out from behind the desk, he leads the way to the side door with big leafy green pot plants on either side. He reaches behind one of the big leafy green plants. There is a beep, and he pushes the door open. We enter a wide hallway. It’s painted eggshell blue over the cream paneling that lines the bottom half of the walls. There are no pictures on the walls, but it has a calm, welcoming feel. My guide knocks on a door to the right and opens it.

“Mr. Atkins is here.”

He motions for me to go in. An old man stands up behind a desk as I enter. His deep ebony skin looks time worn, and his salt-and-pepper hair is more salt than pepper. He comes out from behind the desk, meeting me in the middle of the room, and holds out his hand. I shake it. His grip is firm but not overpowering, the shake short and succinct. The sort of handshake I’ve come to associate with confident, competent people.

“Humphrey Atkins, my, my, haven’t you grown.” He points to a sitting area with a couch and armchairs around a coffee table. There’s a small stack of papers on the table. “Come, sit.”

I sit on the couch, and he sinks into one of the armchairs with a hum of appreciation.

“Have we met before, sir?”

“Psh, just call me Jeffries. Most of the staff do. You wouldn’t remember meeting me. Merida brought you with her when she visited one time. You were knee high to a grasshopper and bright as a button.” He slaps his knees and leans forward. “Right. Let’s get straight to the guts of it, shall we?”

I nod and pull a notebook and pen from my briefcase.

“The station is old, but we’ve found ways to stay relevant and competitive with all the streaming and You-Tubey things. All the bookkeeping is up to date—made sure of that when I heard you were coming.” He passes me a folded sheet of paper from the top of the pile. “This is all the computer passwords.”

I glance at it and put it in my briefcase.

“I don’t know how much you know about radio stations, but there is a whole section of the filing cabinet with all the legal and technical stuff. And there are good people here who can help you. Speaking of people...” He picks up the rest of the papers and passes some over to me. I glance through them. Each page is a summary of a staff member with a photo and their current duties. “These are the volunteer workers. These two are a bit old and dusty, but them old folks like their program. Some of the volunteers can be a bit argumentative and entitled, but that’s your problem now.”

I arch an eyebrow, and he chuckles, passing me another paper.

“Just like Merida, Jimmy, here, is long in the tooth, but he’s a really good trainer and mentor. Try to keep him as long as you can. Now for the folks we pay. Neville at reception. He’s saving up for college, starts next year. Ginger and Smeg, they’re the technology people. Ginger’s a tech mage. Smeg’s training her up to take over. Then you have Dwayne. He wears a couple of different hats.”

He passes me a paper each time he names someone.

“And here are the rest of them. These ones are the voices people know and love.” He drops the rest of the stack on top of the one in my hands. “You familiarize yourself with all that. I’m going to pack up my stuff.”

I look up at him, surprised that he is packing his belongings. I was informed he would stay on a few days for a smooth transition of power.

“Yeah, that’s the bad news, kid. I’m leaving after the staff meeting. My granddaughter’s baby came early, so I’m off to Montana today. Meeting’s in about fifteen minutes.”

Standing, he wanders back over to the desk, picking up a few things on the way. It is disappointing that he is leaving today. I was hoping to learn as much as I could from him in the first week. It will be all right, though. Being flexible and adapting to sudden changes is something I’ve learned well. I turn my attention to the papers, placing them on the table in a neat stack. I read through them one at a time. I memorized the names and faces of each person, skimming over the rest of the



details. A note at the bottom of the page for Carmel catches my attention.

“Jeffries?” I turn to look at him as I speak.

“Yup.”

“It says here ‘Don’t pair Carmel with Sugar.’”

“Ah, yeah.” He runs a hand through his hair. “Carmel is jealous of Sugar, wants what Sugar’s got, but she doesn’t have the experience or skills yet. She has potential, so I’ve kept her on and paired her up with Jimmy and ZarZa. She’s doing well, but being new, she’ll probably test you.”

“Right. Thanks for the warning.”

I turn back to the papers. I expect that a lot of them will test me. I’m new, and I’ve observed a certain amount of pushback from lower-level employees in my father’s company. Picking up the last page, I freeze. Under the name Sugar Monroe is a smiling picture of my *Hertis Rote*. I run a finger over the photo as memories from last night escape their box and play through my mind. My sassy little pet, a completely unexpected meeting, the fire and dynamite which ignites my soul. And she is my employee. Her species is listed as human. That isn’t a problem. It just means things will go a little slower.

“Humphrey, time for the meeting.”

Standing, I drop Sugar’s profile onto the table and follow Jeffries down the hallway to a large room. It’s full of people chatting with each other. Jeffries sticks two fingers in his mouth and whistles loudly. Everyone stops talking and turns to face us.

“Everyone, this is Humphrey Atkins. He is your new station manager, effective immediately. So best foot forward and show him what makes this station great.” Jeffries puts a hand on my shoulder.

“Good luck, kid,” he murmurs, then leaves the room.

With my best businessman’s impassive look firmly in place, I scan the room. Everyone is watching me. Most are either skeptical or curious, some are neutral, and one is hostile. I am

pleased that I recall each name as I pass their face. I don't see Sugar in the room.

"It's a pleasure to meet you all. I look forward to getting to know you and observing your work." I spot two people closest to the door shifting in their seats. "I know some of you have places to be, so thank you for coming. I'll let you get back to your day."

I step away from the door, and the two who were fidgeting hustle past me with a nod. Others filter out the door after a brief greeting. Then I see her. She's sitting on a bench at the back of the room, staring at me with wide eyes, her face devoid of color. I start towards her, but the two older men Jeffries described as old and dusty greet me enthusiastically. When I get the chance to look for her again, she is gone.

Extracting myself from the room, I return to the office and walk behind the desk, trailing my hand over it. It's a solid desk with obvious signs of age. There is a computer to one side, and sitting on the keyboard is a folded paper with my name in bold handwriting across the center. Picking it up, I sit down in my new chair and open it.

*One last thing, kid. You need to write a letter introducing yourself to Evanora. She's the witch who rules the woods in these parts. Generally, she leaves the station alone, but don't risk her wrath. Post the letter into the pigeonhole with her name on it, and you should be golden.*

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I heave a sigh. Of course, there is a witch in the woods. It's a cliché, but the old powerful ones get fed up with people and find an isolated place to live. It will be interesting to see how she reacts when I notify her of who I am. As a gargoyle, I instinctively guard people and places. The radio station is now under my protection.

# *Sugar*

Stepping onto the ice, I settle into a relaxed glide. It was a gamble that I won tonight. I am the only person here at the start of the adults-only skate. I'm not sure why it happens exactly, but some days it just does. I'll be able to relax and enjoy being on the ice. I don't mind skating with others, but it's nice not to stress over other skaters and the safety of Atticus and Daisy. I can simply enjoy the bliss on their little faces as they raise their noses into the breeze my movement creates.

A little chirp prompts me to look down. It's what I call Atticus's encouraging chirp. His little gray head peeks out of the opening in my jacket. As I watch, Daisy pokes her head out as well. Looking back up, I see the goal line approaching. Now is the time to decide if I'll follow the wall or make lazy ovals. I choose ovals and glide around the turn. I relax into the simple pleasure of gliding across the ice, and the major events of the day play through my mind.

Tanner kissed me, a toe-curling, foot-popping kiss. We'd done a lot more than kiss, and then, just when things were getting super-heated. Boom! No one has ever come the moment I touched them before. Of course, because nothing in my love

life is ever simple, Atticus and Daisy had smashed the jam jar. It still feels a bit unreal; I've been crushing on him for months, and I thought my feelings were one sided. I get more affection from his pet cat. But I was wrong. I'm happy to be wrong. And hot damn, I wish the morning had played out differently.

A sharp bark has me looking down again. Atticus and Daisy are looking up at me. They look forward, then back at me again. I nod, and they snuggle together. They want me to go faster. Digging in, I increase my speed, and once I settle into a comfortable pace, I pull out the biggest brain bomb of today.

The new manager of the station, Humphrey Atkins, grandson of the owner. He looked different in his perfectly tailored suit, suave and sexy, with his black hair swept back at an angle and his beard trimmed so neatly. He was the tall, dark, and handsome man who rocked my world before work last night. No matter how much I want to, I can't have anything but a professional relationship with my boss. The pitter patter of my heart when I see or think of him can't matter. The way his voice turns my knees to jello can't matter. The fact we are meant to be on a date right now can't matter.

He is my boss.

Somehow, I have to wrap up my memories of last night and lock them away until they are forgotten. What did I do for the universe to dangle two hot men before me in the space of twenty-four hours, just to snatch them away?

“Tag.”

Something bumps my arm, and another skater shoots past me. I frown at the skater getting farther ahead of me and glance down at Atticus and Daisy. They've disappeared back into their pouch. I sigh and slow down. One more person on the ice and soon it will become dozens. After a few slow laps to cool down, I'll leave. The skater passes me again, then spins around and starts skating backwards. He moves with the ease of someone who knows what he's doing.

I frown. There's something familiar about him. His brown hair is cropped short on the sides and long on top. The fuzz on his

face isn't long enough to be classified as a beard. His brown eyes twinkle with mirth, and his smile grows wider and wider.

"Anderson?"

"That's right, Sugar baby, and look at you all grown up."

Anderson James. I spent a lot of time around him as a child because he used to be my brother's best friend. It should feel weird or gross to have him looking at me so appreciatively, but I'm not going to lie, it's a bit exciting. I glance over his shoulder and wonder what his situational awareness is like.

"You know, it's sensible to face the way you're skating."

"But if I do that, how am I supposed to see your beautiful face?"

I roll my eyes. That was high school-level lame.

"If you're looking at me, you won't see the hazards."

"We're alone on the ice, Sugar."

I smirk, then turn sharply, grinning at the thud behind me. It was the sweet, satisfying sound of him hitting the wall. He may be older and hunkier than when he left Silver Springs, but he's still so easy to fool.

"That was sneaky, Sugar."

"I did warn you."

"True. Guess you haven't changed that much then."

"Oh, I've changed plenty. What about you?"

"Yep, I've changed. Look, I've got muscles here, and here, and here." He poked a different area of his body with each *here*, then grabbed his ass with both hands. "And did you see my ass? It's the tightest set of glutes you'll ever get your hands on."

"What makes you think I want to touch your ass?"

"Well..." He swings around to skate backwards in front of me again. "Your ass is pretty cute. I thought maybe, you touch mine, I can touch yours." He wiggles his eyebrows.

I laugh. It escapes before I can stop it. I swing to the edge of the rink as we approach the exit closest to the bench where I left my shoes. He circles around behind me as I grab the top of the exit.

“You leaving?”

“Yes.” Stepping off the ice, I nod towards the entrance where a group of people just entered. “It can get a bit crowded.”

He steps off the ice and sits on the bench beside me, tugging his skates off as I remove mine.

“You don’t have to stop because I have.”

“I can skate another time, Sugar.” He plucks the towel from my hand and wipes the blades of his skates. “Right now, I wanna catch up with you.”

Warmth washes over me, and I duck my head to put on my boots. His face appears in front of mine, and he touches a finger to the corner of my mouth.

“Is that smile for me, Sugar?”

“No.” I push him away and stand, snapping the covers onto my skate blades before swinging them over my shoulder. “Why would I smile for you?”

“Because I’m the handsomest, cleverest, most attractive man you know.”

“I see the ego hasn’t changed.” I push past him and head for the exit.

“Hey, wait up.”

I shake my head and wave over my shoulder. He is handsome and easy to be around, but there is always a *but* with Anderson. This time, I’m not sure what it was. I haven’t seen him for years, maybe that was the *but*. Or maybe the *but* was how time has done nothing but improve his looks. McHotness, as my friends and I had called him at school, was now Mc-Smokin’-Wanna-Climb-Him-Like-A-Tree-Hotness. Or an even bigger *but* was the uncertainty of whether his flirty banter is in fun or serious.

“Hey.” Anderson jogs up and falls into step beside me, huffing slightly. “You were supposed to wait.”

“You didn’t say please.” I look up at him coyly through my eyelashes. He swallows, then takes my skates, swinging them over his shoulder with his.

“Hey!”

He leans in close, temptingly close. It’s such an insignificant distance I’d have to travel to touch his lips.

“Now you can’t escape me.”

Before I can respond he straightens and turns. Theo, one of the rink attendants, is standing behind him. He has a slight frown, and his arms are crossed.

“This man bothering you, Sugar?”

“No, he’s just an old friend being an ass. Thanks for checking, though.”

Theo walks back to the doors. He frowns at Anderson as I pass him. Anderson follows me out the door, glancing quickly back at Theo.

“That guy has scary eyes. Let’s go.” He grabs my hand and pulls me into a run.

“Stop!” I laughed. “My car’s the other way.”

He stops abruptly and turns around. Running his hand through his hair, he looks down at me.

“Crazy first date, hey?”

My brain does a record scratch, and I shake my head.

“What makes you think this is a date?”

“We’re holding hands.” He lifts our joined hands. “That’s first base right there.”

“Friends sometimes hold hands.”

He gasps, and I pull my hand free. Spinning on my heel, I walk back towards my car. The sheer nerve of him to suggest this is a date. He skipped the important step of actually asking

me. I probably would have said yes after clarifying my expectations, but to simply assume is unacceptable.

Anderson appears at my elbow moments later.

“Don’t shut me in the friend zone, Sugar, please.”

“You’re not. You’re in the ‘annoying friend of my brother’ zone.”

“Aww, but, Sugar.” He leans in conspiratorially. “I showed you my dick.”

“Is that what that limp noodle between your legs was?”

He sputters. There was a sharp chirp, and I glance down. Atticus is looking up at me with his front paw raised. I tap it with a finger. Atticus looks over at Anderson, barks, then snuggles back into the pouch.

“Did you just high five your sugar glider?”

“Yep.”

“That’s not normal.”

He glares at the front of my jacket. I shrug and keep walking.

“Anyway, I’ll have you know Sugar, my dick is a lot more impressive now that I’ve gone through puberty.”

“Hmm, did I really want to know that?”

“Of course. How else can you be sure that I can satisfy your needs?”

Unsure how to respond, I fish out my car keys. My car is only two spots away, and I silently cover that distance. Opening the passenger door, I unclip Atticus and Daisy’s pouch and place it in the travel nest box, peeking inside to see them snuggled up together. Shutting the door, I turned and startle. Anderson is right there, leaning over me with one hand resting on the edge of my car roof, his brows drawn together as he studies me. I sigh and cross my arms.

“Anderson, I won’t be one of your seven-day girls.”

He steps back, eyes wide, then he sighs, rubs his hand over his face, and visibly deflates.



“Of course not. I’m not the idiot I was back then. I’ve grown up.”

“Really?” I arch an eyebrow. It’s difficult to believe, given his behavior so far.

“Yes. My coach in college laid down the law. I had to shape up, or he’d kick me out. I learned a lot from him, including how to balance dumbassery with sensible adulthood.” He ran the back of his hand down my cheek and rested his thumb under my chin. “What I feel when I look at you, Sugar... You could be my forever. If you want.”

My heart skips a beat or million.

“Can I kiss you, Sugar?”

## Anderson

Sugar looks up at me, her brown eyes blown wide. I can see the uncertainty and indecision. She had just cause to be wary and skeptical. I used to be an immature idiot who thought having a new girl each week was cool, but I'm not that person now. I've grown up and matured since I left Silver Springs. I exercised a lot of self-control when I saw her flying around the rink. Throwing her over my shoulder and hiding away in a den until she was well and truly claimed would have freaked her out. She is human and throwing her into the proverbial deep end of being a shifter's mate won't have the result I want.

"Yes."

I breathe a sigh of relief at that tiny word spoken so softly. Leaning down, I move my hand to the side of her neck and touch my lips lightly to hers. They are so soft. I want more but pull away, keeping it to a simple, chaste kiss. Her eyes open slowly, and she frowns.

"Is that all?"

"For now, sweetling."

She rolls her eyes at the endearment, and I run my thumb along her jaw.

“Let me take you to dinner.”

“I can’t”

“Oh?”

“I have a few things to get done, then I need to get ready for work.”

“You work nights?”

“Yep.”

She pops the P and tilts her chin up. How many people have taken issue with her working nights for her to develop an immediate defensive reaction like this?

“Can I buy you breakfast, then?”

It takes a moment for my response to register, then she smiles.

“I finish at seven.”

“I can pick you up. Where do you work?” I’ll have to borrow Tanner’s car, but I’m sure there will be no problem when I explain everything to him.

“Or how about you meet me at Yes Now, Bob’s at half past seven?”

“Do they have waffles?”

“Of course.” She ducks out from under my arm and darts around to the driver’s door.

“It’s a date then.”

She pauses, then smirks and gets into the car. When she starts the engine, I tap on the window and hold up her skates. She rolls her eyes and presses a button to lower the window.

“You forgot these.” I put lift both pairs of skates through the window and lower them to the floor in front of the seat. “I’ll get my skates off you at breakfast tomorrow.”

Her eyes go wide as she looks from them to me. Sugar knows how much my skates mean to me and that by letting her look after them, I am trusting her with my most treasured possession. I give her an air kiss, then step back and watch as

she shakes her head quickly. Putting the car in gear, she pulls out of the spot and flips me the bird before driving off.

I chuckle. Some things haven't changed.

Watching her drive away, I realize I've made an error and kick myself. I should have asked her for a lift to Tanner's place. Pulling out my phone, I do a quick search and download the app for Toy Taxi. They sound fun, and the ratings are excellent. I wander back to the entrance as the app loads, then lean against the wall and order a ride. The guy at the door gives me the side eye as I wait. As annoying as it was to have him butt in earlier, I'm glad Sugar has people looking out for her. My phone pings. It's a notification that my ride is here. Looking up, I spot a giant tube floating to a stop in front of me. I eye it skeptically. It looks a bit like a rocket, but the bulbous shape at the pointed end is wrong.

Wait a second... Oh, hell no! No, no, no, no! It's a giant fucking cock! I edge away, but it follows me, maintaining the same distance. There's a snigger behind me. Turning, I catch the guy at the door looking away. I dash to the other side of the doorway. When I stop, it's still there, hovering in front of me. I glance over at the guy at the door again. He has the biggest, smuggest grin on his face. He makes the shooing motion with his hand, like people riding giant cocks happens every day.

Putting a hand on top of it, I push down experimentally. It feels solid. I swing a leg over, cringing as I sit on it. At least I've been gone long enough that most people won't recognize me. It takes off, and I give an undignified squeak and fling myself forward. Wrapping my arms and legs around the shaft, I squeeze my eyes shut and cling to the flying dong for dear life. This is wrong, so very wrong. When the sensation of movement stops, I crack open a single eye. Before me is Tanner's front door. Releasing my death grip, I slide off and watch from my ass on the pavement as the giant airborne dildo flies away. Pulling out my phone, I delete the app. Never a-fucking-gain.

Rolling to my feet, I head inside. Hopefully, no one saw that. I consider discussing with Tanner about how on earth people could think a taxi like that is okay but decide not to. He'd

probably just laugh. I have news that is a million times better to share with him.

Flopping down on the couch, I sigh, long and loud. Tanner looks up from his crossword with a frown. There is no way his grumpiness is going to dampen my bliss. I met my mate. And I kissed her. She smelled and tasted of cherries and custard, like that sour cherry strudel from the little German bakery near the dorms. My mate. We had a bit of fun and flirty banter, but when her lips met mine, it felt like I was floating and ten feet tall at the same time. A heavenly chorus sang “Hallelujah.” That bit may have only been in my head, though.

Sugar, fucking, Monroe. My childhood best friend’s annoying little sister. I’m glad I was too dumb to realize the connection between us back then. She is all woman now, with curves and grace and a mysterious smile to drive me insane. I huff a laugh. Seth will probably kill me. He’d been adamant that I stay away from his sisters. So, yeah, he’s definitely going to kill me.

“Fine!” Tanner smacks his pencil down on the table. “Spill it, you smug bastard.”

“I met my mate. She’s gorgeous and feisty, and her kiss... Mmhmm, pure sin.”

“Good for you.”

I sit forward and study Tanner. He just reacted to the best news of my life as though I just told him I could piss standing up. He frowns so hard that deep furrows form between his eyebrows. His jaw clenches, and every so often, he huffs when he exhales. Pushing off the couch, I stride to the table, swing a chair around, and straddle it, planting my elbows on the table.

““Sup with you?”

He glares at me, so I put a finger on his crossword book and drag it across the table towards me.

“Come on, buddy ol’ pal. What’s shoved that stick up your ass?”

I meet his glare with a smirk. He has never won a staring contest with me. I cheat. I silently count to twenty, then slowly

cross my eyes. He throws his pencil at me, and I catch it.

“So immature, Andy.”

“What’s bothering you, Tanner?” I pause as something occurs to me. “Are you jealous?”

“No!”

“Then what’s bothering you?”

He sighs and scrubs his face with his hands.

“I screwed up with my mate today.”

“You met yours today, too? That’s awesome.” I hold out a fist for him to bump, but he ignores it.

“I met her the day I moved here.”

“What?” I lower my fist in confusion. “You never said anything.”

“I did. Remember the story I told you about the prettiest girl in Silver Springs?”

“The one who thinks your shifted form is your pet cat?”

“That’s the one.”

“I love that story.” I smile. It was such an epic fail. “Wait, if you’ve known her this long, how come you’re not shacked up?”

“Because whenever I’m near her, I’m like... like a teen with his first crush. My mind goes blank. I’m either speechless, or I babble. I get things for her and end up leaving them on her doorstep while I run away. Today, she opened the door before I lost my nerve. My carefully planned speech vanished.”

I sit in silence. I have no idea what to say. The behavior he’s describing is definitely out of character for him. He slumps in his seat, staring at nothing while he makes tiny rips in the page edge of his crossword book.

“Then what happened?”

“I kissed her. I just... I just kissed her.”

“What did she do?” I lean forward. This could be his mistake. Most girls liked to be asked before you kissed them.

“She—” He takes a deep breath. “She kissed me back.”

“Yes! That’s a good thing.”

“I know. It was amazing. Right up until I had a manslip.”

“Wait!” I hold up my hand as I wrap my head around what he just said. “You’re the king of control. Ya telling me, seriously, you blew your load early.”

He sighs and looks down at the table. “Yep.”

“Fuuck, what’d she do?”

“She was fine with it, but then one of her gliders knocked a jar off the bench, and it killed the mood.”

“Bummer.” Having something kill the mood after a manslip was horrid. “Wait. What do you mean, gliders?”

“Sugar gliders. She has two pet sugar gliders. They have weird names, too. Um... There’s Daisy and, umm...”

“Atticus.”

“That’s it!” He beams at me.

“Get out of town. Sugar Monroe?”

“Yeah, you know her?”

“Yeah, yeah, I do. She’s my mate.”

He stares at me, his face blank. “You’re kidding, right?”

Gritting my teeth, I shake my head.

“Fucking hell. Look, I saw her first.”

“Technically, I did. I’ve known her since she was three.”

He clenches his jaw and scrubs his hands over his face. Sugar is important. I want nothing more than to keep the rest of the world away from her. But Tanner is my thick and thin. He’s stuck by me and put up with so much shit since my accident. If Sugar is his mate, too, then I would be a shitty friend to deny him a chance with her. Reaching out, I grab his fingers and pull his hands away from his face.

“We’ve shared girls before.”

“What if she’s not into that?”

“Then it’s Sugar’s choice.”

He holds out a fist.

“Yeah, Sugar’s choice.”

I bump his fist.



# *Sugar*

I stick my head into the staffroom. It's empty. That means there are only three other people in the building right now and no one will catch me breaking the no phones rule. Opening my locker, I pull out my phone and call Lizzy. Crossing my fingers, I listen and sigh when it inevitably diverts to her message service.

"Lizzy, pick up your phone. Press pause and put down the controller or whatever. Three guys, kissing me. Call me!"

Tucking my phone back into my bag, I shut my locker and head towards the archive room. Lizzy is either sleeping or lost in whatever game she's playing, but she'll call when she gets the message. I can't say how long it will take if she's busy with a game. But with the details I left, she'll call. We've had hypothetical discussions before about what it would be like to have a group relationship like so many other women in town, and maybe, just maybe, I'm going to get one.

There is light shining from the open doorway of what is now Humphrey's office. Stopping, I peek around the edge. He is bent over one of the many files that litter his desk, his black hair hangs in disarray. He is wearing glasses with black frames. I haven't seen him with glasses before. I wonder what

they look like. I can't tell if they flatter his face from this angle. His head lifts, and I jerk back, leaning against the wall beside the door. I hold my breath, straining to hear the slightest sound of movement.

There is nothing. Exhaling slowly and silently, I relax. He didn't see me. I had hoped he wouldn't be here, that his promised observation would happen another day. A day far in the future when what happened last night was just a distant memory, or maybe never. I have work to do. Work that doesn't involve wanting to brush his silky hair away from his brow. Peeking back around the door frame, I see that he is looking down again and dash past, not stopping until I slip through the door to the archive room.

This is where all the old music is stored. Boxes upon boxes of music that was recorded on the old systems. The contents of each box are meticulously recorded in the folder by the door. Some bright spark once upon a time decided to arrange the shelving by era. It's better than the system used when I started working here, but it means I have to waste time shifting the mobile shelves to get to the LP records. It wouldn't be a problem, but Carmel always makes sure the shelves are closed and locked before she leaves. I've asked her not to do it, but she just pops her gum and keeps doing it. Bitch.

Unlocking the unit, I start spinning the handles. A low rumble fills the room as I get the shelves moving along the track. Sometimes the tracks stick, but as long as I get the shelves moving one at a time, I never have trouble. Stopping at the start of the LP section, I start collecting the albums for tonight's Dusty Songs segment. Dusty Songs are a chance for the listeners to interact with me on air. They choose two numbers, one for the album and the other for the song on the album. I could play the songs from the computer lists, but the equipment still works, and LP has a slightly different sound on air.

Moving through the shelves, I select a mix of albums. I have a completely random process, select a box, then pull out an album without looking. Placing the album on the table, I repeat the process until I have nine LPs. Now for tonight's

feature dusty artist, The Monkees. Running my eyes over the box labels, I find the right one. It sits flush with its neighboring boxes on the top shelf. Reaching up, I can just touch the box with my fingertips. Standing on my tippy toes, I reach, pushing off another shelf with my other hand for that little extra height. It isn't enough to reach the top of the box, but I pluck at the edge, shifting it forward bit by bit.

“Allow me.”

My insides do a happy dance at the sound of Humphrey's rich, rumbling voice. His hand on my wrist feels like a hot brand as he holds it against the shelf above me. I shiver at the sensation of him leaning over me but not quite touching, his breath hot against the side of my head.

“You've been avoiding me, Sugar.”

I am caged in, completely surrounded by him.

“You disappeared after the meeting, didn't show for our date, and just now, you tried to sneak past me.”

“Humphrey.” I test the grip he has on my wrist. It's firm but loose enough that I could pull out of it if I wanted to. “We shouldn't. You're my boss.”

“What if we ignored the shouldn'ts?”

I open my mouth to respond, but no sound comes out. His fingers trail down my arm, then he lifts my wrist and pins it with the other one. My body flushes as heat burns low in my belly. I am hyperaware that he is right here, looming over me in the tight space between the shelves.

“I want to be more than just your boss, Sugar. I want to see where this thing between us will go. But you have to want it too.”

He releases my wrists and moves away. I reach out, grabbing for him.

“Wait.”

He stops. I focus on where my hand grips his shirt. I could let him walk away. I should let it end here. But I can't. I can't let

him leave. Logic says to let go. He's my boss. I have Tanner or Anderson or both. Yet I can't let go.

"Why didn't you kiss me?" I ask the first thing that pops into my head. It seems less dangerous than why I won't let go.

"What?"

"Last night, you didn't kiss me."

"Yes, I did."

"You kissed me during sex, not before or after, so those kisses don't count."

"You wanted me to kiss you?"

Surprised by his question, I look up. His eyebrows are squished together, yet one is raised in a perfect arch.

"Yes."

"No one has ever wanted me to kiss them before. They didn't like kissing."

"I like kissing."

"You do?"

"Yes, from the tiny kisses of a moment to the scorching passion that leaves you weak at the knees. I like it all."

"Hmm." He lifts my chin and leans down. His lips touch mine so lightly, yet a tingle of delight spreads through me. Pulling away, he shakes his head. "No, that won't work."

He drops to his knees, decreasing the height difference between us. Looking up at me, he smiles. His hand slides to the back of my neck, and he pulls my head down so my lips meet his. It's another soft gentle kiss that's over too soon.

"Much better." His lips brush against mine as he speaks.

Closing the tiny distance, I crush my lips against his. If he thinks that was a good kiss, I'll show him a better one. Threading my fingers through his hair, I tilt his head and take advantage of his tiny gasp. The gap between his lips is just big enough for me to touch my tongue to the tip of his. The grip on my neck tightens, and he pulls me away. His pupils are

blown, and the heat in them matches the flame that burns in me. My lips curl into a lazy, contented smile. A growl rumbles from his throat, and he jerks me back to him. It's an uncoordinated mess as our lips move, guided by a desperate heat communicated by lips, teeth, and tongue.

My arms circle his neck, and he wraps his around my waist, drawing me closer. I surrender to his control, following his lead as more of our bodies touch. Our breath mingles as he explores my mouth with his tongue. He pulls me down, so I am straddling his hips, and I grind down against the bulge that nestles so perfectly against my core. His lips trail down my neck, and my mouth falls open. Dropping a hand to his waist, I fumble with his belt.

Stuff the conventions and expectations of society. I want this man. This man who makes me burn with need. Whose dominance makes my pussy weep and beg to be filled instead of my usual painful response. Applying two hands to the situation, I undo his belt and pop the button. His hand covers mine, pulling them away from the zip as he tugs my head back.

“Pet.” His voice is all growly again.

“Please.” I whimper.

“Please, what?”

“Please, I need you.” I rock my hips, and he tugs sharply on my hair.

“You said we shouldn't.”

“But I want.” I bite my lip as I tremble with need. “I want you. I want your cock in me so much it hurts.”

“Really? You want this cock?” Lifting me off his lap, he undoes his zip and shuffles his pants down just enough to free himself. It's just as big as I remember, and I clench my thighs as I nod. “Are you ready, though?”

Reaching out, he pulls down my pants. His gaze fixes on the scrap of lace I impulsively put on today. His hand slides over the damp fabric. He pulls a condom from his pocket, and I pluck it from his fingers and rip it open, then I roll it down his

cock. One day, I am going to see how much of it I can fit in my mouth, but not today. Right now, I need it in me.

“Oh, Pet.”

I feel a tug, then he spins me around. Pushing me down to my hands and knees, he thrusts into me from behind, filling me with one swift stroke. I squeak and brace myself. He moves, thrusting hard and fast as his fingers dig into my hip. Collaring my throat with his hand, he pulls me upright.

“Ride me, Sugar. Ride my giant cock like the sexy goddess you are.”

Flinging an arm behind, I grab hold of him and flex, sliding up and down. I turn my face to him, and he captures my lips with his again. The slow drag of his cock sparks pleasure with each and every movement I make. His hand on my hip presses me down as he thrusts up. My eyes bug, then roll back as he hits that spot deep within.

“Sugar?” Dwayne’s voice breaks through the haze of pleasure, and I freeze. “Sugar, you in here?”

“Mmm, what are you going to do, Sugar?” Humphrey nuzzles my neck, murmuring into my ear. “If he comes in, he will see just how well you stretch around my cock.”

A squeak escapes me instead of coherent words as his cock twitched inside me. I’m still wearing my top, but my legs are spread wide, and we are facing the end of the row. If Dwayne looks in, he’ll see me spread and dripping all over Humphrey’s cock. The idea of being caught and seen is thrilling but not by Dwayne. Maybe Tanner or Anderson, and maybe they could touch me, too. I clench around Humphrey at that idea, and he groans into my shoulder.

“Sugar?” Dwayne sounds like he’s closer. I have to get rid of him quickly before he sees us.

“What is it, Dwayne?”

“Half an hour till you’re on air.”

“I’ll be out soon.” I bite my lip as Humphrey resumes a slow slide in and out of me. Trying to keep my voice normal is

tricky, and now he's making it harder.

"You okay?"

"Don't come closer. Wardrobe malfunction." I squeak again as Humphrey thrusts deep. "I'm being impaled."

"Sugar!" There is a hint of panic in Dwayne's voice, which matches my own as I frantically scramble for something believable.

"Bra! My underwire broke."

"Oh. Okay. I'll just wait for you in the booth."

"Thank you."

Listening intently, I hear the door click shut and sag against Humphry, sighing with relief. He continues to rock into me.

"Well done, Pet." He slides a finger up and down my pussy, teasing where his cock fills me, then drags it back to circle my clit. "Time for your orgasm."

Bearing down hard on that sensitive bundle of nerves and tilting me forward, he presses me against the floor as he drives into me again and again. The cold of the floor is a strong contrast to the heat of my body as he flicks my clit hard in time with his thrusts. Light explodes in my brain as my body quivers violently, clenching as he stutters into me. The warm limpness of satisfaction merges with the bliss of my orgasm as he leans over me. His hands gently run over my hypersensitive skin, grounding me as I come back down to earth.

## *Humphrey*

Dwayne adjusts one of the many slides on the sound desk as I enter the room. He directs a thumbs up at the soundproof window in front of him. Looking through the window, I watch Sugar carefully lift an LP from the turntable and place it back into a sleeve. She slides the sleeve into the cardboard cover, then places it into a rack. This room is different from the others. It has all the modern equipment, but to the side is a bench covered in older equipment. She rolls her chair back to the main desk and runs a finger down a writing pad next to the mouse pad.

“Sugar likes to use the old equipment. She makes what others see as a failing into a feature.” Dwayne glances at me. “Since taking over this timeslot, she has had the freedom to run her airtime her way. I hope you don’t try to change that.”

“I listened to part of this timeslot last night. I don’t like the use of a pre-recorded voice.”

Dwayne holds up his hand and presses a button.

“Thirty seconds.”

Sugar looks up and gives a thumbs up. Her gaze shifts to me, and she smiles shyly, then looks back at her equipment. This



calm and focused professional is very different from the woman who was falling apart around my cock less than an hour ago. Dwayne passes me a set of headphones and starts a countdown from ten. I hold one of the speakers to my ear. Dwayne flips a switch as a chime sounds repeatedly in my ear, then Sugar leans towards her microphone.

“Hello, Night Owls, you’re listening to WSSR Silver Springs Radio. Welcome to the Night Watch. I’m Flossy Fox, and I’m here to chase the doldrums away. I thought I’d read you a little something from Shakespeare. Now, now, Night Owls, don’t think I can’t hear you all groaning. Do you really think I would read you something boring?”

I look at Dwayne. He leans back in his seat, hands on his head, watching me smugly. It isn’t a recording. Sugar’s lips are moving, but instead of her normal voice, a sexy purr caresses my ears. A purr that teases and chastises as she speaks.

“This is a fun little tidbit from Titus Andronicus.

*Demetrius: Villian, what hast thou done?*

*Aaron: That which thou canst not undo.*

*Chiron: Thou hast undone our mother.*

*Aaron: Villian, I have done thy mother.”*

She is silent for a moment.

“That’s right, Night Owls, Shakespeare, a writer worshiped by literature professors everywhere, made a ‘your momma’ joke. Unexpected, wasn’t it? Just like a local band I heard this week. With this rousing Viking battle song, I present you JEM.”

I lower the headphones as a drumbeat replaces her voice.

“What filter does she use?”

“No filter. That voice is all Sugar.”

“All Sugar.” I watch her in wonder. That sinfully sexy voice came from my mate. “She talks like that the whole time?”

“Yep.” He stands up and waves to Sugar before turning to me and gesturing to the door. “Come on.”

“Don’t you need to stay here?”

“No. Sugar runs everything from in there. I just make sure all the sound levels are right and she’s broadcasting. She’ll page me if something is out of whack, or we’ll hear it. The internal speakers always play the station.”

“Does that happen often?”

“No. Sugar’s a pro, and the gear is kept in topnotch condition. Come on.” He puts a hand on my shoulder. “Come see what else I deal with while our little star titillates the faceless masses.”

Taking one last look at Sugar, who is focused on her computer screen, I turn from the window and follow Dwayne into the hallway. A door opens farther down the hall and Alistair appears. He is the host for the timeslot before Sugar’s. He writes something on the board next to the door, then looks up and sees us. He waves and heads down the hall towards the staffroom.

“What exactly is it that you do here, Dwayne?”

“I mix for Sugar and do the cleaning and night security.”

“Jeffries didn’t consider you being a vampire a threat to Sugar?”

“No, I have my blood bunnies, and Jeffries made it clear she was forbidden.” Dwayne looks at what Alistair wrote on the board. “Well, thanks, Al.”

In bold print across the center of the board are two words: I farted. It was the sort of thing my father would have crushed, but I believe in letting my subordinates have room for a little fun. Given how Dwayne rolled his eyes, I assume it is meant in fun.

“Is this what the boards are for?”

“Uh, no, sir. But it’s just a bit of fun.”

“I see.” Keeping my face impassive, I clasp my hands behind my back and start walking again.

“Mr. Atkins, can I be frank with you?”

“Go ahead.”

“You know vampires have enhanced hearing, right?”

“I am aware of that fact.”

“Then you would be aware that I know the reason Sugar was hiding in the archive room was not because of a broken bra.”

Stopping, I slowly turn to face him. In the heat of the moment, I hadn't been thinking about anything but Sugar. It never occurred to me what people might hear or smell.

“Your point?”

“Sugar is a big girl. If what happened was her free choice, then it's none of my business. But if I find out you coerced her in any way, or you hurt her, I will make it my business. Understood?”

“Understood. But know this. Sugar is my *Hertis Rote*. My mate, as shifters say. Her wellbeing is my highest priority, and if anyone hurts her, I will rain terror down upon them beyond anything they can imagine.”

Dwayne tips his chin up.

“You got the stones to back that up?”

Pfft, stones. The irony. Glancing around to ensure the hallway is free, I change my form. Dwayne flattens himself against the opposite wall as my wings flex and my tail lashes behind me.

“Holy fricken frick! Your kind still exists!”

“That we do.” I shift back to human form. “Unless there is anything else, I have work to do, and so do you.”

Dwayne nods, and I turn on my heel and head towards my new office. I pull off the remnants of my shredded shirt. While dramatic shifting while clothed can get expensive, the only thing that ever survives are my trousers, and that is because I have them tailored specifically to accommodate a shift. No amount of tailoring would save a shirt. I had tried a shirt spelled to adapt to my shift, and it had felt weird and wrong.

Sitting down at my desk, I pick up my briefcase, open the magic pocket, take out a new shirt, and put it on. I look

forward to the day when I can show Sugar my other form. It is magnificent, and I will take her flying. But for now, I have to write a letter to the witch. It is the last thing on my list for today. Leaning back in my seat, I smile as Sugar's voice purrs out of the speakers. My *Hertis Rote*, the root of my heart. I love her already.

# *Sugar*

I stop and look into Humphrey's office. I feel good about my show, but I'm interested in hearing what he thinks. I'll have to wait. The little two-seat couch is overflowing with a sleeping Humphrey. His legs hang off the end and one arm is slung over his face. Tip toeing into the room, I pick up the throw rug from the floor and drape it over him. I softly kiss his brow and sneak from the room. I feel lighter as I walk to the break room. No firm decisions were made last night, but a direction was chosen. It wasn't the logical decision, but the heart is never logical. Entering the break room, I catch Ginger straddling Dwayne in the armchair. Their lips are locked, and they're devouring each other.

"Get a room, you two." I open my locker and pull my bag out.

"What, like you did last night?"

I froze. He can't mean... There is no way he can know. Turning slowly, I see Dwayne whispering to Ginger. She sits up straight and looks at me with wide eyes.

"No! Sugar wouldn't do that."

I shut the door of my locker and fumble with the padlock. I try to hide the heat rising in my cheeks as I yank out the key and

snap the lock shut. There is a giggle behind me, and clutching my bag to my chest, I flee the room. I dodge around someone in the hallway and fling open the door to the lobby. Someone calls my name behind me, but I ignore it. I hear my name called again as I push open the front door, but I can't wait like he wants me to. I have to get out. I need air so I can breathe again.

The cold morning air is a fresh punch to the lungs as I run down the path to where my car is parked. Flailing blindly in my bag, I find my keys at the very bottom, under everything else. Opening my door, I toss my bag across to the passenger seat.

“Sugar!”

Iron bands wrap around my arms, then I am pulled from my car and crushed against a hard chest. I stiffen, ready to fight, but the comforting aroma of hot earth after rain penetrates my panic. Humphrey. Grabbing his shirt, I nuzzle into the safety of his embrace. He strokes the back of my head and holds me.

“Oh, Pet, what happened?”

“He knows. He shouldn't know, but he knows. It's all gone wrong.”

“Hey, slow down.” He lifts my chin, so I have to look at him.

“Sugar, who knows what?”

“Dwayne. He knows about last night, about us. Work and love separate. That's what Mamma said. Work and love separate always.”

“Sugar, it's all right. You're my mate.”

I jerk backwards. His mate? That's all I meant to him?

“Friends with benefits is all I am to you? I thought—” I slam my mouth shut before I say anything to further embarrass myself and push away from him.

“That's not what I meant.” He lets go of me and cups my face with both his hands, thumbs caressing my cheeks, brushing away the silent tears that are escaping. “I mean mate, as in my soulmate, my other half. The reason my heart continues to

beat. My sunshine, my starlight, the only one who completes me. The one without whom my world, my existence, has no meaning.”

“Wha—?”

“You’re my forever person, Sugar.”

“How can you say that? We’ve only known each other for a day.”

“My kind knows the first time we meet.”

“Your kind?” I shake my head. Of course rich people think they’re different.

“Gargoyles.”

My brain feels like it just skipped something. “Gardeners?”

“No, Sugar, gargoyles. I am a gargoyle.”

My eyes widen as Humphrey’s skin turns black, and tusks protrude from behind his lower lip. His face changes, becoming hard planes, and he grows taller. His shirt splits open, revealing an expanse of hard black muscle. Horns appear on his head, and there is a set of wings behind him. Leathery wings with a hook at the top of each one.

My mind screams one word.

*RUN!*

So I do.

## *Anderson*

I stretched out into a run, muscles rippling and all four paws thudding through the snow. Out here in lynx form, I could relax and enjoy the moment I was in. I could cast off the things that weighed my mind down and the ever-present knowledge in the back of my mind that in a single moment, the decisions of a stranger destroyed the future I had planned. In lynx form, it's easier because I process the world through senses that operate differently. After my initial burst of energy, I slow to a more sedate but maintainable pace. Even like this. I'm not as free as I had been. I have to be mindful not to overstress my hip. I know I'm lucky. Lucky to be alive, lucky I had good doctors, and lucky I've regained the use of my leg.

I don't remember the accident. One moment I was crossing the road, the next I was waking up in the hospital. They told me I was hit by a car and knocked into a ditch at the side of the road. It was several hours before anyone found me, and even then, it was pure luck that they did. Unfortunately, my body had begun healing itself. My shifter healing just healed; it couldn't put things where they were meant to be, so some things healed wrong. The healers had done their best, but even with help from the specialist my father hired, some things were best left alone.



The physiotherapist gave me a bunch of strengthening exercises and taught me how to take care of my injury. Unless I push myself too hard, I'm as capable as anyone else. But I'll never play ice hockey at the elite level again. I'm still coming to terms with that and have no idea what I'm going to do now. My whole life has been wrapped around ice hockey for so long that without it, I'm lost.

This morning, for the first time since the accident, I woke with a smile, and I'm sure it's because of Sugar. She is my silver lining. I still have to do all the continuing therapies and figure out what I'm going to do with my life now. But my days will be better because Sugar is in them. I'm sure I can win her heart in no time at all just by being my charming self. Sharing her with Tanner, that is no biggie; in fact, it's perfect. I'll have my best bro and get the girl.

An owl swoops low over me, silent and ghostlike until it gives a mournful hoot. Changing direction, I follow it. Sugar used to collect feathers. Maybe it'll lead me back to its roost, or maybe I can catch it and pluck a few for her. Then I can show her what a great hunter I am, prove with a few feathers how well I can provide for her. She'll hug me and kiss me and maybe even scratch that spot that makes my lynx form lose all motor function. I skid to a stop. Snow flies up and settles over me.

Sugar is human. She doesn't know about magic or shifters. How am I going to tell her? More importantly, how will I make it stick in her mind? I've seen it often enough with all the Monroes, that blank look as the town wards take effect and wipe their minds of whatever magical thing they'd witnessed, or substitute something magical with something ordinary. Maybe Tanner has an idea. He's better at thinking about things from every angle and guessing the outcomes. He can come up with a way to tell Sugar.

Turning back towards the radio station, I settle back into the easy pace. I'll get there and wait for Sugar to finish work. I'll pretend I've been out for a morning walk, and she'll be too smart to believe me. We'll have breakfast, talk, maybe kiss a bit. Maybe more than a bit, if I'm lucky. Convince her to go

out with me again, then... fuck! Then I'll have to figure out how to tell Seth I'm dating his baby sister. It's possible that he won't be as anal about the whole idea now that we're all adults.

Stepping out from under the tree line, I trot through the clearing that surrounds the radio station. The parking lot is off to the side of the building, so I angle towards it. She hasn't told me where she works, but after listening to the radio last night, I figured it out. The different voice would fool a lot of people, but I spent hours listening to her rehearsing for her part as a temptress in her junior high drama production. I wonder if I can convince her to get a more mature version of the costume she wore.

“Sugar!”

I still, ears forward, and look in the direction of the voice. Sugar is running, and a guy is chasing behind her. With a low growl, I stalk towards them. If he hurts her, he will pay. He grabs her and hugs her. I sit and watch them. He is comforting her, and she isn't nutting him. I can't hear what they're saying, so I edge closer. I slink around cars and dart under the bushes at the edge of the parking lot, so they don't see me. I hug the ground, peeking out as I eavesdrop. I don't catch what he says exactly, but Sugar's face does that little blank thing, so it must have been something about the supernatural world.

The guy changes, he sort of morphs. He gets bigger, grows wings and horns, and a twitching tail. A long tail. Bastard! Sugar's eyes go wide as she stares up at the midnight black demonish thing. It's not pure black. There are spindly white lines randomly spread all over the thing. She jumps into her car. It roars to life and disappears down the road. I need to catch her. She pulled out so recklessly. But there is that thing here still. Should I attack it, so it doesn't follow her, or race after Sugar. A vampire thuds into the side of the whatever the fuck this thing is, knocking it off its feet.

I leap from my hiding place and race down the road, cutting through the woods to try to catch up with Sugar. I catch a glimpse of her taillights turning towards town and turn into the woods. Pushing myself as fast as I can, I will never catch a car,

but maybe I can get to her place before she does. Whatever that thing was, it might be enough to lodge in her brain, awakening her to the magic around her. Tanner needs to know. We need to make sure she is okay, and if necessary, help her accept magic.

## *Tanner*

I drain my coffee and put the cup in the sink. It's full of all my breakfast dishes. Anderson disappeared earlier, probably to meet up with Sugar, so he can wash the dishes when he gets back. It still blows my mind that he's Sugar's mate as well. We've been friends since college when his coach moved him from the frat house to my dorm room. The cheeky dumbass jock pulled himself together and wormed his way past my disdain. And now we have the same mate.

His maturity level has increased to a certain degree, but I doubt he will ever fully grow up. He'll always be one of those guys who sees the fun first. It's a good thing I already know him, or I wouldn't be as accepting of the situation. A little blue SUV flies past my window. I frown. It looks like Sugar's car, but she's always slow and careful in the driveway. If Anderson did something to upset her, I'm going to kick his ass. Or, heaven forbid, he's driving and trying to impress our girl by being a reckless dick.

Turning, I catch sight of the clock on the microwave and glare at it. It can't be right. Sugar doesn't get home until almost eight. It's not quite seven yet. I check the clock in the living room, then shake my head. I stopped that the day Anderson

moved in. He said he couldn't sleep with the ticking. It had never bothered me, but then, I wasn't sleeping in the same room as the clock. At least he's a neat house guest. The futon gets folded back up every morning, and he packs all his bedding in the linen cupboard, so there is no sign that the room has been slept in.

Going into my room, I take my phone off the charger and check the time. It says the same thing as the microwave. I grab a shirt and pull it on as I hurry to the door. I should check, make sure she is all right. It could be nothing, but two out-of-routine things could also mean something is wrong. Grabbing the handle, I open the door just as something hits it from the other side. It swings in and slams into my shoulder. I stumble back a few steps. My pants leg is tugged, and I look down. There is a lynx with a mouthful of my pants leg just below the knee. It's trying to pull me out the door.

"Anderson! Really? Shift and talk to me like a normal person." He keeps tugging, so I flick him between the eyes. "Shift, dumbass."

He releases my pants and shakes his head, then shifts. Yep, dressed to impress. There is a little red mark between his eyes. Oops. I flicked a little too hard. He grabs my arm and drags me out the door. I dig my feet in, but all that achieves is snow going over the top of my slippers. I stop resisting and move around in front of him.

"Anderson! What is going on?"

"Sugar." He gestures at her car. It's parked crooked, and the driver's door is open. "Some guy shifted in front of her, and she freaked out."

"Shit."

"Exactly."

Anderson heads down the path to Sugar's cottage. Following him, I have to place my feet carefully. My slippers keep slipping, and as the snow that sneaks inside melts and makes them squishy. Sugar's door is shut, so Anderson knocks and calls her name. I try the handle, but it's locked.

“Maybe we should wake Carl up?” I turn and look at the main house.

“Why?”

“He has the master key.”

I hear a click and turn back to the door. I try the handle again, and it turns. Slowly opening the door, I call Sugar’s name softly, but there’s no answer. She isn’t standing at the door, and I can’t hear any movement in the cottage.

“Where is she?” Anderson crowds in behind me.

“She must be hiding. Shut the door.”

“If she’s hiding, then who—Shit!”

He grabs my arm, and I turn. Anderson is pointing at the door. Perched on the deadlock is one of the sugar gliders.

“Do you think it opened the door?” he whispers without looking away from the glider.

“Don’t be ridiculous, it’s just a pet.”

Reaching around him, I swing the door shut. The glider jumps and lands on Anderson, then runs up his shirt. Anderson pulls his head back as far from it as possible. I chuckle as the glider looks at Anderson, then at me. Apparently, Anderson is afraid of a harmless little creature. The glider leaps over to me and climbs up onto my shoulder.

“It’s... not normal.” Anderson pokes it with a finger, then jumps back. The tip of his finger is bleeding. “It bit me!”

“I’d bite, too, if—argh!”

Reaching up, I touch my stinging ear. There is blood on my fingers when I look at them. A sound like a high-pitched snicker comes from behind me. Turning, I catch sight of the glider on one of the platforms on the wall. It lets out a sharp bark and runs along the ropes to the next platform, where it looks back at us, then barks again.

“I think it wants us to follow it.”

Anderson pops his finger out of his mouth. “See, not normal.”

I give him a look, then follow the glider. The behavior is unexpected, but ordinary dogs are known to lead people to their owners this way. We follow it into a bedroom. It lands on the bed and runs over to where the other glider sits looking at the wardrobe. It touches its nose to the other glider's cheek, then placed one of its paws over the paw of the other glider. Anderson points at them and raises his eyebrows. Maybe he has a point.

I open the wardrobe door a bit and look in. In the back corner, a pair of wet shoes peek out from under the hanging clothes. Anderson looks over my shoulder, then pushes me out of the way, opening the door fully and kneeling.

“Sugar.” His voice is soft and gentle. “Sugar baby, it’s me, Andy Pandy.”

There’s a rustle and then she slams into Anderson, knocking him back onto his ass. Wrapping her arms around him, she starts babbling. There are a few random noises and stuttering before I can make sense of what she’s saying.

“And... and horns, and teeth... wings, Andy, and... and.”

“Shh, it’s okay, Sugar.” He smooths a hand over her hair. “You’re safe now.”

Kneeling beside them, I rub circles on her back, feeling each gasping breath she takes. Whatever it was, the creature scared her. It’s possible that this will be enough, that from this moment, she’ll know that magic is real. I would have given her a gentle awakening, but the past can’t be changed. Anderson keeps murmuring a soft litany of assurances that she’s safe as she continues to make incoherent noises and whimpers. Slowly, her breathing settles into a normal rhythm, and she relaxes. Anderson pushes her hair away from her face. She’s asleep.

“Take her, please.” Anderson looks up at me, the corners of his eyes pinched. “I pushed too hard.”

With a nod, I take Sugar out of his arms and lay her on her bed, removing her wet shoes, then pulling the blanket from the

end over her. Turning, I help Anderson up and sit him on the edge of her bed. He is definitely favoring his left side.

“Dumb, I know.”

“Sugar needed you... Andy Pandy.”

“Don’t ever say that again.”

“Oh, it’ll happen one day. But for now, you rest and keep an eye on our girl.” I pat his shoulder. “I’ll be back in a bit.”

“Okay.”

Anderson lies down on the bed beside Sugar with a wince. I leave the room before he can see my face. He hates sympathy. I hear a small cheep as I pass the other bedroom. Both gliders are huddled together, watching me. Anderson is right. There is something strange about them.



# *Sugar*

Blinking my eyes open, I stare at the ceiling. It's my bedroom ceiling. I don't remember going to bed, but I know where I am because I know those posters. Smiling faces stare down from the ceiling. Men who have all lost their shirts and have glorious, tanned muscles that now paled in comparison to Humphrey. Humphrey!

I fling an arm over my face as I remember. He really did morph into a winged monster with fangs and horns. It wasn't my imagination. It was real. There's a low rumble from the bed beside me. It sounds a lot like a purr but deeper and louder. Something shifts beside me and starts bumping against my arm. Lowering my arm, I find a large gray face with distinctive tufted ears and mutton chop fur. The lynx headbutts me, purring as it rubs its head against mine. Grabbing it, intending to push it away, I stop and flex my fingers in its fur. It's so fluffy and so soft.

Digging my fingers in, its purr intensifies, and it arches into my grip. Suddenly, there's bare flesh under my hands and lips press against mine. A tongue claims my mouth, and I gasp. The lips pull away, holding my bottom lip gently between

teeth. Letting go, the person draws back, and I'm able to focus on their face.

"Anderson?"

"Surprise." He leans on an elbow next to me, tracing a finger over my neck. "But you think I'm so soft and fluffy. I like that."

I frown. Had I said that out loud?

"Now, what should I do with you?" He rolls on top of me, pushing up so his arms are straight, and smirks. "Should I do some pushups?"

"Wait." I place my hand on his chest.

The whole situation with Humphrey, Tanner, and Anderson is a mess, and I need to make them aware of each other before things get more complicated. His skin is so warm, though, and I smooth my hand over his firm pec.

"Do you want to feel me all over?" Anderson smirks.

"Yes. No! I mean..." Closing my eyes, I take a deep breath. Anderson is right in front of my face when I open my eyes. His eyes are closed, lips puckered, and he makes kissy motions.

"Ugh, seriously!" Pushing him away, I sit up and scooch back until I am against the headboard. "Yes, I want to touch you all over."

"Good."

He crawls up my legs, and I put my hand over his face.

"Anderson." Ugh, I am trying to be serious, and he is so... distracting! "There's another man. Two, actually."

"Two?" He sits up, pinning my legs beneath him, his engorged cock standing at attention. It is far more impressive than when he was ten, and there is a metal bead at the tip. Taking my hand from his face, he turns it and kisses my wrist. "Such a greedy girl."

"Getting started without me, I see."

Jerking my gaze away from Anderson's cock, I see Tanner in the doorway. He walks confidently into the room and sits on the edge of my bed. Looking between them, I'm not sure what I should say. Anderson nuzzling into my hand isn't helping me maintain logical thought, either.

"Well, Sugar baby? Is Tanner one of your other men?"

"Yes."

"Excellent." He rolls the word out, savoring each syllable. "Because Tanner and I were talking last night. Imagine our surprise when we discovered we were talking about the same gorgeous, sexy woman. We would love to share you."

"Oh, umm..."

I look over at Tanner, and he nods. He shifts on the bed, moving over until he's sitting next to Anderson, then picks up my other hand. I feel all wibbly wobbly in a good way with them both touching me.

"Sugar, who is the other man?"

"My new boss."

"Hmm... Lots of thinking to do before you sex up your boss, Sug. Let me help you." Anderson leans forward again.

"Stop." I push away the hand that's sliding up my leg. His touch is seriously distracting. "I already have."

"Have, what? Thought about it?"

"No. I've sexed up my boss."

"Oooo! Was this before or after you fucked me, sexy girl?"

I roll my eyes at Anderson. "I haven't fucked you."

He blinks.

"Huh, must have been a dream then. A very, very good dream." Anderson licks his lips, and the playful glint in his eyes disappears, replaced by a hungry intent. "Shall we see if my imagination is anything like reality?"

"Have you ever been with two men at the same time?" Tanner rubs his thumb over my wrist.

“No.”

“We’ll go slow then.” Anderson sits on the bed next to me and speaks softly next to my ear. “One after the other like a choo choo train.”

Rolling my eyes, again, I turn to face him. He covers my lips with his, wiping whatever I was going to say from my mind.

“Then we could take you together, claiming both of your tight little holes.”

I shiver, gushing slightly at his words and how he whispers them in a husky voice in my ear like it’s a forbidden secret. “Who knows? Maybe one day we will stretch your greedy cunt around both our cocks at the same time.”

I gasp. That’s a fantasy I’ve never dared share with anyone, not even my twin.

“You smell her? I think she likes that idea.”

I look at Tanner, heat rising in my cheeks. What did he mean, he could smell me?

“Can we take care of your needs, Sugar?”

I nod enthusiastically, and Anderson tips my chin towards him.

“Words, Sugar.”

“Yes,” I hiss, and he chuckles, tapping my nose.

“Good girl. Now kneel in the middle of the bed.”

Both men get off the bed and wait as I push away from the headboard and shuffle into the middle of the bed to kneel as ordered.

“I think we’ll start with peeling those clothes off.”

Kneeling on the bed on either side of me, they work together to remove my clothes, taking every opportunity to caress, lick, or kiss my skin with each piece of clothing they remove. Anderson lifts me, and Tanner slides my pants over my hips. When I’m naked, Tanner backs off the bed, pulls his shirt off, and reaches for the button of his pants. Spotting me looking, he hooks his thumbs into the waistband and pushes them down

slowly, rolling his hips. When his cock springs free, he pumps it slowly and runs a finger through the slit at the tip. Rubbing my thighs together, I try to ease the building ache.

“That’s a beautiful cock, isn’t it?”

I jump slightly, and Anderson rests his head on my shoulder while he rubs his hands up and down my back. Sliding his hands under my thighs, he lifts me against his chest and sits. Placing me astride his legs, he spreads them, forcing my legs apart until I’m splayed wide with everything on display. Looking down over my shoulder, Anderson slides his hands around my sides, then runs his fingers through my folds. I’m so wet and slick that his touch glides over my sensitive skin.

“Hmm, I was going to have Tanner lick that pussy until you cream for us, but you’re already so slick. What do you think, Tan?”

Tanner reaches forward, his finger joining Anderson’s. He tweaks my clit, running around the edge of my entrance and dipping inside.

“So wet, just oozing and trying to clench down on something, but the poor little pussy is empty. I think it needs something to fill it up.”

I don’t know if the heat I am feeling is embarrassment about how they are talking or just plain horny lust. Or maybe it’s got everything to do with the way Tanner is teasing me with his fingers. I like this version of Tanner, all confident and—my breath hitches, eyes rolling back as new, pleasant sensations zing from my breast. Tanner nuzzles it, his tongue playing with the nipple he has sucked into his mouth.

“What do you think, Sugar? Should Tanner fill you up first?”

Leaning my head back on Anderson’s shoulder, I look up at him. “Why not you first?”

“Because I’m bigger than he is.”

Pushing Tanner away, I scooch forward and look down at Anderson’s dick. “I’ve had bigger.”

## Anderson

She's had bigger. Bigger than me.

Tanner slams a hand over his mouth as a snort of laughter escapes. The cheeky little... that was a first class hit to the ego, and I'll have my revenge. She pushes away from me, and Tanner stares, transfixed, as she straddles him. He puts his hands on her hips.

"Wait, I don't have a condom on yet."

She pauses a moment, then reaches out and cups his cheek. "It's okay, I'm on the pill. And I'm clean. Are you?"

Tanner nods, then his eyes roll back as she sinks down. Damn. If she feels that good, I can't wait until it's my turn.

I stroke my dick in time with the rise and fall of her body. The pace she is setting is a slow building torture. Tanner's fingers press into her, and his lips move, though no sound escapes. Shuffling up behind her, I release my dick and slide both hands between their bodies. Cupping her breasts, I massage them gently, then flick her nipples. She gasps, and Tanner groans. He looks at me over her shoulder and nods. I take her weight as he shifts position. Her back presses against my chest as he leans forward and drives into her again. I anchor her with

my hand on her neck, tipping her head back to rest on my shoulder.

“Oh, fuck,” she murmurs as her body rocks against mine with each thrust, my dick trapped between her ass cheeks. One of her hands reaches for Tanner and the other finds me.

“You feel that?” I slide my free hand down to her lower belly and press down. “Feel the way Tanner’s dick rubs your insides. Is he hitting all those magic spots?”

Tanner and I exchange another look as she whimpers. He is gritting his teeth, and there are tiny beads of sweat on his brow. He’s close, too close. Changing the angle of my hand, I press down with the heel and search the apex of her slick folds with my fingers. She lets loose a keening wail when my fingers brush over her clit. Applying pressure, I hold my finger still, a counterpoint to the frantic movement of their bodies.

She screams out his name, her back arching as she frantically grabs for him. I suck on her neck as he thrusts into her hard, once, twice, then there’s no movement but the tremors running through her body. Releasing her neck, I lick it. If I’m lucky, there will be a hickey for the world to see that she’s been claimed. Tanner runs his hands over her stomach, a tiny smile on his face.

I could leave them to their post coital bliss, but I’m a selfish bastard.

“Did we break you, Sugar?” I turn her face to me.

She blinks at me, then smiles. “More?”

“That’s right, Sugar baby. Do you think you can handle more?”

“Yes, please.”

Lifting her off Tanner, I spin her around and hold her over me, lining myself up with her entrance. She slides down my dick, and I moan as her soft, velvety warmth encases me. I hold her still and enjoy this feeling of rightness and completeness as Tanner smirks. Laying her down on the bed, I move slowly, in and out, changing my angle slightly until I hit that spot where she gasps and digs her nails into my skin.

“Mmm... That’s the spot, isn’t it? Right there.” Thrust. “And there.”

Each thrust draws gasps and groans from her that descend into primal sounds as I alternate between thrusts and grinding deep within her. Tanner plays with her breasts, and she clenches down on me hard.

“Shit! Do that again, Tan.”

“What, this?” He pinches both nipples at the same time.

“Yes!”

She clenches down again, the compression on my piercing bordering on painful pleasure as I continue to move within her. I need. I want. I can feel that tingle deep within me. I’m going to come soon, but she isn’t quite there.

“Clit!”

Tanner kisses Sugar and reaches between us. His fingers brush my abdomen, then land on her clit. She shatters around me, her screams muffled by Tanner’s kiss. Fireworks explode at my release, and I jerk and shudder as I empty inside her.

Lifting her, I twist and flop down onto the bed, basking in the euphoria of the moment with Sugar sprawled limply on top of me. The bed dips as Tanner lies down beside us, flinging an arm over her back. She hums and wiggles slightly.

“I think you’ve actually broken me now.”

“Oh, precious.” Tanner smooths her hair back. “This is just the beginning. There are so many different ways we can pleasure you. Different positions... And we could even use toys.”

“Toys?” She lifts her head, eyes wide as she looks between us. “You would use toys.”

“Oh yes. Toys are fun. But we can discuss that another time.” I press her head against my chest. “Let’s just rest for now.”

Sugar sighs, her hand resting on my chest. Her fingers creep across my chest to my nipple. The little circles she makes around it tickle. Pain sears through me, and I jerk back and look at Sugar. She has my nipple firmly clasped between her



fingers and has twisted it. Pushing up, she sits on my lower belly, her eyes flinty. Her grin sends shivers down my spine. I glance to the side when I hear a thud. Tanner peeks over the edge of the bed. I don't blame him for trying to hide.

"You." I look back at her and wince as she adds an extra twist. "You were a lynx, then human. Explain!"

Oh, I had hoped it would take longer for her to remember that.

"You shifted in front of her!"

"She was petting me. What was I supposed to do—Argh!"

Sugar twists my other nipple.

"Okay, okay! Please let go, and I'll explain."

She studies me for a moment, then lets go and puts her hands on her hips. She is fucking sexy like this, but the throbbing of my nipples keeps me from getting too distracted.

"I'm a shifter. I'm human and a lynx, have been all my life. No, you won't turn into a shifter if I bite you. Yes, it is likely that our kids will be shifters. And given how much spunk we unloaded into you, you could be pregnant already."

She face-palmed and growled. "You clearly have no idea how that actually works, and I'm on the pill, remember? Now! How come I've never seen you change before?"

"You have, when we were kids. But the ward magic wiped it from your mind."

"Ward magic?"

"Silver Springs has wards around it." Tanner perches on the edge of the bed, out of her reach. "The wards protect the supernaturals who live here by making sure the magical things don't stick in your brain."

"Now that you know, you'll be able to see all the other magic things. Also..." I wait for her to look at me, then point at Tanner. "He's a shifter too."

"Really? Can I see?"

"Go ahead, Tan. Show her your animal side."

He groans and shifts. Instead of a naked man, his spot on the bed is occupied by an Egyptian Mau, his tail curled elegantly around his feet. Sugar gasps, then pursed her lips.

“Me, you’re Me!”

Tanner shifts back and hangs his head.

“I thought... when you said... Oh God, I feel so stupid now.”

“Don’t!” Tanner reaches out and pulls her into his arms. “You couldn’t have known, and when I said it, I didn’t realize you didn’t know about magic.”

“Also, it was the funniest thing I’d ever heard.” I roll over and sit up, holding my arms out wide. “Sticky hug pile!”

“Nope!” Sugar scoots out of reach. “I’m going to clean up. Alone!”

“I’m addicted to you, Sugar!”

She shakes her head and leaves the room.

Flopping back onto the bed, I sigh. I’m already more than halfway in love with her. Looking at the ceiling, I frown and point at one of the posters.

“Is that fireman holding a koala?”

# *Sugar*

I prop the note on the coffee table where Anderson should see it as soon as he wakes up. He's curled up on my couch. It's a very comfortable couch and big enough to hold him. Today has been... well, a lot. It's sweet that he stayed to make sure I was all right with all the revelations. I won't say I am a hundred percent all right. I probably need a bit more time to process. After all, everything I know has been turned upside down. There is more to magic than just Tanner and Anderson shifting into animals. They told me that I'll see magical things everywhere now. The town wards won't hide it from me anymore. My world is about to get a whole lot more interesting.

Atticus lands on the top of the couch and scampers along the back, stopping at the edge of the cushion. He looks down at Anderson's head. He shuffles his hindlegs forward, and I scoop him up in my hand.

"Uh, uh, uh, little one. I like this guy."

Atticus tilts his head and chirps.

"I know he's a bit immature, but he's also sweet and fun, and I'm sure there's a serious side in there somewhere."

Atticus looks back at Anderson, then to me and does this weird little huff and head shake. He runs up my arm, climbs my hair, then launches from the top of my head. Landing on the climbing frame, he climbs up to the perch where Daisy is and curls up next to her. Grabbing my bag, I swing it over my shoulder.

“You two behave. Let Anderson finish his nap. And no biting, Atticus.”

He ducks down low and tucks his head against Daisy. I squint. Daisy chirps, and Atticus buries his head under her. I sigh. With how he’s acting, Atticus has probably already bitten Anderson. Hopefully, he won’t bite him again. I double check that the kitchen door is shut and turn off the main lights, then with a final look at Anderson, I leave. Flipping up the hood of my jacket, ‘coz it’s biting cold tonight, I jump into my car and make my way to O’Malley’s pub. Lizzy is meeting me there.

Finding a spot not too far from the entrance, I run inside. I’m greeted with a wave of warmth and the sound of a group of people yelling at whatever game is playing on the TV. I glance at the group as I make my way to the bar. They are all wearing the same team jersey, and a few have those big foam hands. I perch on a stool at the bar and look around while waiting. Lizzy waves to me from a table on the opposite side of the room of the sports fans.

“Hi, Sugar, do you want the usual?”

I turn to Charlie with a smile. “Yes, please, Charlie. Can I get my meal to go? I have to go into work early.”

“Sure thing.”

Charlie mixes up my drink in no time at all. I pay her, then sipping through the straw, I take the top off before making my way over to Lizzy.

“Hey, Lizzy.” I set my drink on the table and sit down. “What’s new with you?”

Lizzy levels her best no-nonsense stare at me. “Oh, no you don’t, Sugar. This meeting is about you. What’s this about

three guys kissing you?”

“It’s just that. Before work, I kiss one guy; the next morning, the next one kisses me, then that evening, the third.”

“Details, Sugar, details! Who are they?”

“The first one, I’d never met him before. We kinda... went all the way.”

“No!”

“Yes! And it was amazing.” I take a sip of my drink. “Turns out he’s my new boss.”

Lizzy’s mouth drops open. “No way.”

“Yes way. The second guy, you remember my neighbor, Tanner?”

“Is he the grumpy one or the creepy one?”

“Grumpy.”

Lizzy sips her drink and waves with her hand for me to continue.

“He knocked on my door, almost hit me with flowers, then, without saying a word, kissed me.”

“Wow.”

“Yeah. And do you remember Anderson James, Seth’s friend from school?”

“McHotness, captain of the ice hockey team?”

“Yep, he’s back in town, and, well...”

“Oh my God, Sugar! You had such a crush on him.”

“There’s more.”

“What, more than three guys?”

“No, Tanner and Anderson are friends.” I pause. Lizzy sits watching me. “I had my first threesome today.”

Lizzy squeals. Right at the moment when the sports crowd is quiet.

“Keep it down over there. We’re trying to watch the game!”

We stare at each other, then the same voice yells at the referee. I laugh, and Lizzy giggles. Charlie puts my food on the table as she goes past.

“Seriously, Sugar, what are you going to do now?”

“Well, I have to talk to Humphrey—that’s my new boss. I need to tell him about Tanner and Anderson. But I think... I think I might actually be getting my own harem.”

I wait, drinking my drink while Lizzy lets the silence between us drag. She is my best friend, and her opinion means a lot to me. She smiles, and I sigh with relief.

“That’s so exciting, Sugar. I hope it happens for you.”

“Thanks. So, what’s been happening with you?”

“Nothing as awesome as you, but I finally got word from Calluna at the pet store in town. She said she was able to find a baby that needed a new home. So I’ve been busy building like a beaver to set him up in my office.”

“Ooo, that’s awesome. When does he arrive?”

This is exciting! Lizzy has always wanted an exotic lizard. With the number of dream boards and the amount of research she’s done, it’s going to be a well-loved and spoiled pet.

“Soon, about a week, week and a half at most.”

“I’ll have to get a little welcome present for him.”

My bag starts beeping, and I pull out my phone, silencing the alarm.

“I gotta go.” Standing, I pick up my food. “Hey, you wanna check out the arcade with me this weekend?”

“Sure. Drive carefully.”

I flash a smile. “Always.”

I hurry out the door and to my car. I hate cutting it short like that, but I need plenty of time to talk with Humphrey, then pull myself together from whatever reaction he has before I go on air. I put the food into the box behind my seat and climb in. Starting the engine, I tune the radio to the main Scarborough

station. They have tried to hire me a few times, but I don't want to move. Donna is on air. She is repeating part of my show last night, word for word. I'll have to mention it tonight. After all, imitation is a form of flattery, but I'll add my own Flossy Fox-style warning. Copying another station's shows is just lazy and bad practice. It doesn't let the talent of the presenters shine.

Getting out of Silver Springs is easy, but I stay below the speed limit as I leave the residential streets. It doesn't look like a snowplow has been along this road today. My car slips a few times, but I keep control of it. I'll have to let the others know before they leave that there are icy patches. Something appears on the road in front of me. I swerve, and the back end of my car slides sideways. Fucking shit! Spinning the wheel, I try to correct it, but there's no traction. My heart thunders in my chest as I slide off the road. The tires catch for a moment, then something hits the back end, and I'm spinning again. Eyes wide, I clutch desperately at the steering wheel as I try everything to correct the spin. I catch a glimpse of the trees in the headlights.

*SMASH!*

The airbags explode around me.

I sink into darkness, hoping someone finds me before I freeze to death.

## Humphrey

The sharp knock on the door is a welcome distraction from reading the copious number of rules and regulations that govern a radio station. I look over at the door and see Dwayne standing there. Things between us are a little tense after our fight this morning. While I don't regret revealing my true self to Sugar, Dwayne is right about the complete failure of my actions. All I achieved was scaring her.

"Boss, have you seen Sugar?"

"No." I sit up straight, glancing at the clock. It's past time for her to have arrived. Maybe she snuck past successfully this time. "Is there a problem?"

"Yeah." He approaches my desk. "She's not here and isn't answering her phone."

"Could she simply be running late?"

"It's possible, but normally she sends a message or answers her phone."

Pulling up her personal information on the computer, I pick up the office phone and dial her number. It rings, and rings, and – *Hello, you've reached Sugar Monroe. I can't* – I hang up, ignore the pointed look Dwayne is giving me, and dial the



second number in her file. It rings for a while, but I put it on speaker and wait, hoping that if she has enough time, she will answer.

*“Hello?”* The voice on the other end of the phone sounds fuzzy with sleep.

“Hello, I’m looking for Sugar Monroe.”

*“Well, you’ve got the right number. But I think she’s already left for work. Can I take a message for her?”*

“This is her boss. She hasn’t arrived yet.”

*“Shit, let me check.”* The line goes quiet. I hear footsteps, then a loud clunk. *“What the fuck? There’s a cord. Why is there a— who has a cord on their phone? Don’t you look at me like that, you little gray freak.”*

I look up at Dwayne, who is covering his mouth, his eyes sparkling. “She has pet sugar gliders. They’re a little odd but incredibly cute.”

*“Hey, you there?”*

“Yes.”

*“Her car is gone.”*

“Do you know when she left?”

*“No idea. I was asleep. Hang on.”* There is a moment of silence, then some muttering. *“If I’m understanding this right, Sugar left a couple of hours ago.”*

“Thank you.”

I hang up the phone. If she left home several hours ago, she should be here by now. Pushing away from my desk, I stand and walk past Dwayne. Heading towards the entrance, I undo the top buttons of my shirt and pull it over my head.

“Where are you going?” Dwayne catches my shirt as I throw it at him.

“I’m going to find her.”

Kicking off my shoes, I exit the building, then change forms.

“Here!” Dwayne hands me a cell phone. “In case you need it.”

Nodding, I tuck it into my pants pocket and stretch my wings. Taking off from the ground is hard. It takes strength to lift my stone body. I'm going to have to find out how to get to the roof from inside. It's so much easier to take flight when there is already air under me. But that's a consideration for another day. Pushing off the ground, I beat my wings, clawing to the height of the trees. Turning to the road, I angle my wings to catch the air and glide down the road. The full moon shines, assisting my search of both the road and the clear land on either side of it for Sugar's blue car or anything out of the ordinary.

Beating my wings occasionally to maintain height and momentum, I make it to the intersection with the main road. There has been no sign of her car yet. I circle the intersection, then turn towards Silver Springs. It's more of the same, empty road and clear snow at the sides. I focus, shaking off the worst-case scenarios that try to worm into my mind with the monotony of the view. Light seeps out from under the trees across the snow with flashes of red and blue. Rounding the corner, I find a fire truck and two police cruisers. I land softly near the fire truck, folding my wings behind me. I see one of the firefighters standing at the back of the truck. He looks over at me, then resumes talking to someone around the side of the truck. He turns to face me as I approach, taking off his helmet to run a hand through his salt and pepper hair.

"Can I help you, son?"

"I'm looking for my employee. She's late for work."

"We're a bit busy here."

"I understand. I was just wondering if you might have seen her car. She drives a blue Jeep-type vehicle."

His eyes flick over towards the woods and back to me. It's quick, really quick, if I'd blinked at that exact second, I would have missed it. I move out a few steps so I can see what is behind it. There are a few portable floodlights set up, all pointing towards a car wrapped around a tree. A cold numbness washes over me. It's blue. There's a black mark on the rear side panel, like something exploded against it. The

driver's door is missing. I feel like I'm wading against the tide. Something is pushing me back and pulling my arms behind me. Roaring fills my ears. It's Sugar's car.

No, no, no! This can't be happening. Where is she? Where is my *Hertis Rote*?

The pressure holding me back releases, and I fall forwards. The cold of the snow slamming into my face shocks me back to myself. Pushing up, I look towards Sugar's car. My arms get whipped out from under me sideways, tipping me onto my back. A fireman and a troll police officer stand over me. They move away from each other, and an elderly woman walks through the gap with a woven basket hanging from her arm and a branch she's using as a cane in the other hand. The fireman and cop step back as though they're scared of her.

"Gargoyles." Shaking her head, she jabs the branch into my chest. "You weren't going to ruin their crime scene, were you?"

Crime scene? I push against the ground, but a weight pushes down on my chest. The only thing touching me is the branch, but it feels a lot heavier than it looks. A shiver runs up my spine at her soft chuckle. She is no ordinary woman.

"Evanora?"

"You're not as thick as you look."

"Please, Sugar. Is she all right? Please, I need to know."

"Hmm..." Her piercing gaze cuts through me, and I shift slightly, uneasy beneath her gaze. "Sugar Monroe is your *Hertis Rote*?"

"You know Sugar?"

"I know a lot of things, boy. Now answer the question."

"Yes, she is my *Hertis Rote*."

A smile spreads wide across her face, and she laughs. At least, I think that's what she does. It sounds like dry leaves crunching underfoot.

Changing to human form as I roll away from her, I crouch, watching her warily. Evanora, the Witch in the Woods. Given how she was just holding me down, she probably laughed when she got my letter. Her laughing now, at the knowledge that Sugar is mine, is worrying.

“Sugar is alive. You won’t find her here, though, so stay out of my woods!” With a final jab of her stick in my direction, she turns and hobbles back into the woods. The darkness swallows her.

Changing forms, I leap into the air. I push myself higher and higher until my lungs are straining for oxygen. Spreading my wings, I glide, spiraling towards the station. I focus my thoughts on Sugar. She’s gone; missing, but alive. The fledgling bond between us is still new enough to fade, but with focus, I can feel the tiniest of tugs towards town. I land in the car park, and Dwayne runs out to me.

“Did you find her?”

“Something attacked her. She’s missing.”

“Shit!” Dwayne pulls his hair, tugging it harshly. “You’ll have to go on air for her.”

“What!?” I can’t go on air. I don’t know what I’m doing. And I need to start looking for Sugar.

“It’s too late to call anyone, and Alistair never does overtime.”

“What about you?”

“I can’t!” Dwayne looked up at me, his hands twisting. “I... the last... the last time I was on air... there... there was a... a... a bomb in the microphone.”

A bomb in the microphone? I study Dwayne. This is a story I will need to hear one day, but for now, I have a shaking and stammering vampire who looks ready to run if pushed in the wrong direction.

“Fine, I have no idea what I’m doing, so you’ll have to help me.”

“Yes, sir, I can do that, sir. Sugar always has a few days of programming set up.”

Dwayne goes inside, a bounce in his step. My feet are heavier as I change forms and follow him inside. How am I going to do what Sugar does? Especially since all I want to do is search for her.

# Humphrey

Slumping down onto the couch, I pull the map of Silver Springs towards me, marking the areas I flew over this morning. I've known my *Hertis Rote* for two days, and someone took her. It's my shame that I have failed to protect her, that some unknown force has taken her. The bond between us keeps pulling me towards Silver Springs. I feel she is there somewhere, but because the bond is so new, I can't pinpoint her location. Instead, I am playing a frustrating version of hot and cold, just trying to narrow it down.

I will have to fill in for Sugar again tonight. Growling, I scrub my face in my hands. It's ridiculous that with all the employees and volunteers, no one is available to fill in for Sugar. Not even Carmel wanted to fill in. Going on air is a waste of my time. I need to be out there looking for her. But I have to think about what is best for the station as well.

“Sir?”

I look up as ZarZa places a cup on the table in front of me.

“What is it?”

“It's a pick me up, sir, better than caffeine.”

“Thank you.”

I take a small sip. It has the overwhelming flavor of citrus, not my favorite flavor, but I drink the whole thing. ZarZa smiles as I set the cup down.

“I know you are determined to find Sugar, sir. But sleep is better than any pick me up potion I can brew.”

“I have to find her.”

“I understand, sir, but you haven’t rested for two days; so this is for your own good.”

I frown. What does she mean? She stands and pushes me gently to the side, so I am lying on the couch. My limbs feel heavy. ZarZa tucks a blanket around me.

“You’ll be no good to Sugar if you’re exhausted. Sleep well.”

I fight against the sleep taking me over. Tricky witch.

# *Sugar*

My head pounds a relentless beat in time with my pulse.

*BANG!*

I flinch and open my eyes, squinting at the light filling the room. My neighbors know that I sleep during the day. They're pretty good about not making loud noises. Why are the curtains open? Shutting them before I climb into bed is a habit. It's been part of my routine for years. I wouldn't forget. Details of the room slowly register in my mind. My view is limited from where I'm lying, but there is too much yellow. The bedside table is scuffed and not mine.

It's hard to think with the pounding in my skull. Lifting my hand, I press against my forehead where it feels like the pounding is centered. There is a lump and something sticky. Pulling my hand away, I notice two things: there is red on my palm and a rope tied around my wrist.

My chest feels tight. Blinding pain sears through my head, and I gasp for air, then curl into a ball. As it subsides, I force myself to be calm and list the things I know.

One: I'm alive.

Two: I have a head injury.



Three: I am in a room with a window.

Four: There is a rope around my wrist.

I need more information. Uncurling, I carefully sit up. The movement isn't comfortable, and I grip the bed hard to stop myself from falling over as the world spins around me.

Five: I might have a concussion.

When everything feels relatively stable and stationary, I do a quick visual scan of my body. My clothing is intact, both shoes are on my feet, and there is visible bruising on my exposed skin.

Six: There are no other ropes attached to me.

I follow the rope. It is tied around the leg of the bed I am on, and it has a generous length of probably a few yards. I look at the knot on my wrist. Either the pain is fading, or my body is becoming accustomed to it. I blink repeatedly and squint at the lumpy knot. It is a stack of granny knots. Whoever tied me up is dumb. My brother used to tie me and Spice up so he could play computer games. Granny knots are easy. I pluck at the knot with my free hand. The rope is tight, but I'm persistent and have nothing better to do.

The door bangs open as I work on the last knot. Two people came in. They are wearing robes like wizards in the movies, complete with face-hiding hoods.

"Who is this?"

"Daisy Ortega."

The one who spoke first grabs my chin and forces me to look into his hood, then flicks my head to the side as he lets go. My neck protests the movement, and my vision blurs, my head spinning. Nausea swirls in my stomach.

"That is not Daisy Ortega. That's just a useless human!"

Hey!

Wait. My mouth needs to move for words to come out.

"But every time the seer looked for Daisy, everything pointed to this woman."

“That is not Daisy Ortega!” He points at me as he shouts. The other guy takes a step backwards. “You failed!”

“We wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t failed first.”

“What did you say?” His voice drops, and he sounds dead and emotionless.

The last of the knots falls free, and I rub my wrist. They aren’t paying attention to me.

“You heard me. If you hadn’t lost them, we wouldn’t still be looking for them years later!”

I move slowly, pushing up from the bed and edging around them towards the door.

“The great tracker, who never loses his target, thwarted by a bicycle in the road. That’s a pathetic lie to cover your incompetence. And guess where I found this one?” He waves his hand in the direction of the bed. “On the same stretch of road as your mystery bicycle.”

I pause as they both look at the bed. I’m so close to the door, just a few steps more. Reaching out, I wrap my hand around the edge of the doorframe and ease closer as they stare at the bed, then at each other. It feels like time slows and stretches as they turn to the doorway, then it snaps back as our eyes meet.

I fling myself through the doorway, glance to the left—more doors—to the right, banister railing. I run for the railing. The area opens up, and I spot the stairs. A man steps out of a doorway opposite the opening for stairs. He’s facing the other way. I speed up. If I’m quick enough, I can get to the stairs first.

“Stop her!”

He turns, and I skid to a stop, backing up a few steps. I glance between him and those behind me, and my head spins again. I blink hard, then squint to focus. I back up to the railing. They stop moving as I connect with the railing. Turning, I throw a look over the edge. They call for me to move away. I glance both ways again. They are edging closer. The drop is a little higher than I thought it would be, but there is a table directly under where I am standing. If I can land on that, I should be

fine. Taking a step back, I grip the railing and hope I can still do this.

Pushing off with my feet, I hoist myself over the railing, legs tucked up. I clear it perfectly, and my trajectory feels good as I fall feet first. My shirt jerks tight, then releases, and I curse. It's just enough to swing me off course. Yelling and thudding footsteps fill the room as I land awkwardly on the table. I thrust my arms out as my momentum carries me over the edge of the table towards the floor. White hot pain radiates from my wrists and up my arms as I hit the hard tile floor. Something snaps, and the rest of my body crumples onto the tiles.

"Shit, shit, shit, shit!" A man appears over me. His hood is pushed back, revealing a pleasantly attractive young man with strawberry blonde hair. "You're okay. Well, not okay, okay, but you're alive."

"That was crazy, girl." Another cloaked figure kneels beside me. I recognized the voice as the one who thought I was Daisy. "Is that... bone?"

He collapses on top of me, and a shrill scream rips out of me, blocking out all other sounds as pain overwhelms me and swallows me whole.

# *Tanner*

Looking around Jewels Café, I spot a man who fits the description I was given. I am told he is a psychic. It's a long shot, but maybe he can have a vision or something about Sugar.

"Excuse me."

The brunette looks up from the sketchbook he was drawing in.

"Are you Asa?"

"Yes."

"I'm Tanner. I heard you are a psychic."

"Yes, but..."

"Please, can you do a reading for me? My mate was kidnapped." I sit in the chair opposite him and pull Sugar's scarf from my bag. "This is her scarf. She wore it the day she was taken. Please, anything you can tell me, anything at all."

With a sigh, he reaches out and takes the scarf. Closing his eyes, he runs his hands over it.

"She is somewhere close. There is danger, and I see her jumping. Look for a building that is at least two stories tall."

He holds the scarf back out to me.

Taking the scarf, I inhale the fading traces of Sugar's fragrance and tuck it back into my bag. I stand, then stop when he puts his hand on my arm.

"Hold on to your hope. She has a fire in her soul which will see her in your arms again."

"Thank you."

Leaving the café, I walk, not going anywhere in particular, just walking. Everything is a jumbled mess. My head and emotions have been scrambled since I saw Sugar's car on the back of the tow truck. My boss gave me a few days off to get my head straightened out, but all the extra free time isn't helping. At least I have Daisy and Atticus to focus on. Carl threw the instruction book Sugar left him at me after Atticus bit him. Looking after them is a lot of work, but they are fun to play with.



## *Sugar*

Sounds surround me. Beeping. Voices, both soft and raised. There is a snap close by, then something brushes across my forehead. I try to open my eyes, but my eyelids feel heavy.

"Jane Doe, my ass. This is one of the Monroe twins."

"You sure?"

"Yes, Porter, the Monroe twins made themselves memorable. Ah, Nurse Anna, just in time to help me figure out if this is Sugar or Spice."

There is a rustle, and my warm cocoon disappears. My eyes pop open, and I'm met by a white ceiling.

“Doctor, didn’t Spice have her appendix taken out when she was fifteen?”

“Yes, she did. The brat wanted me to give her a lightning bolt scar.”

“You wanna take it out again?”

A face appears over me. It’s Dr. Shaw, and he smiles at me.

“Hello, Sugar. You’ve broken your arm again. Can you tell me what happened?”

“Car crash, then jumped.”

Dr. Shaw’s brow furrows. “You jumped?”

“Yeah, I was escaping. They tied me to a bed.”

“Ah ha.” He glances at someone else. When he looks back, his smile has changed. It’s become that tight smile, the sort people make to try to get you to feel better when things are bad. “Don’t you worry, Sugar. We’ll fix you up.”

He motions to the others in the room, and they all disappear from sight. The top of the curtain twitches, and I hear the murmur of voices. I sigh. Time and day are unknown, but hopefully Carl is looking after Atticus and Daisy.

## Anderson

I stand at the door, tucking my hands into my pockets as the sound of the doorbell fades. I've put off coming to see Seth. I wanted to find Sugar, but whoever took her made sure she was untraceable. The door opens halfway, but there is no one there.

"Whatcha want, mista?"

Looking down, I see a boy. It's like I'm looking back in time to when I first met Seth.

"Chris, what are you meant to be doing?"

Chris looks up as the door opens all the way. Seth's older than when I last saw him. His outfit is all sharp pressed angles, with a loose tie and top button still to be done up. He got the shirt and tie job he wanted.

"Brushing my teeth."

"Off you go." He jerks his head towards the inside of the house and turns to me. His eyes go wide as he looks me up and down. "Andy. This is unexpected."

"Yeah. Seth, have you seen Sugar?"

"Sugar? Why?"

“We were supposed to meet up for breakfast.”

“Fuckin hell.” Seth glances behind him, then steps out onto the porch with me, shutting the door. “As a date? It better not have been a date. You’re not allowed to date my sister, remember?”

“As in catch up. I bumped into her at the ice rink a few days back. We arranged to meet for breakfast, but she didn’t show.”

There is enough truth that the lie shouldn’t set off his bullshit detector. His eyes narrow, and I do my best not to squirm. His scrutiny was difficult to endure as a kid, but now we are older, and I’ve done something he won’t approve of. It’s torture. The door behind him swings open, and Alice grabs his arm. She’s a petite little thing, not much to look at, but she has a beautiful soul. Her belly is round like a basketball, and Seth looks at her like she is his world. I feel a pinch of jealousy as his arm circles her waist. He can touch the woman he loves while mine is missing.

“Honey, the hospital just called. They found her, they found Sugar. She’s there right now.”

Seth buries his head into her hair, and she looks over at me with a smile.

“Hi, Andy.” She holds out a set of keys. “You’ll get my big teddy bear there safe, won’t you?”

“Certainly, milady.” I kiss her hand as I take the keys, and Seth growls at me.

“Oh, stop it.” She slaps his chest. “Now go and check up on your sister.”

Seth kisses her forehead, then leads me to the sensible sedan I parked behind.

“What, no Porsche?”

“Shut up and drive.”





## *Sugar*

The fluorescent lights in the ceiling slide past at a constant pace. *Fwip, fwip, fwip*, my brain chants as each one passes overhead. There have been scans and discussions by people in scrubs, but I didn't recognize most of them. They probably introduced themselves, but with the blissful haze of the painkillers, I don't remember them. *Fwip*. But, hooray, they figured out that my arm is broken. *Fwip*. I could have told them that. I could see the bone. It's not supposed to be on the outside. *Fwip*. Now I'm being taken to surgery, the set of scrubs who is pushing me is bah, bah, bah, baahing "Ride of the Valkyries" right at the edge of my hearing. It is bloody annoying.

*Fwi—*

Huh, we've stopped.

"Sugar." Anderson appears beside me. His hair is disheveled and hanging around his face. "Oh, sweetling."

A hand touches my shoulder on the other side. I turn my head. If Anderson is on one side, then is Tanner on the other? Nope, my heart sinks. It's Seth, my brother. He has that pinched, worried look. At some stage in my near future, I'll have to suffer through another lecture about taking unnecessary risks and making people, namely him, worry about me.

"Sugar." Seth sighs. "I'll see you on the other side, okay?"

"Okay."

They exchange a look over my head, and Seth steps back. Anderson hesitates, then leans forward and kisses me, soft and quick, on the lips.

"Love you," he whispers in my ear before stepping back.

The movement resumes but thankfully the bah, bah, bah, baahing doesn't.

"Girl, if looks could kill, Blondie was giving your man such a death stare. There's nothing wrong with two lovers, you know."

"Blondie is my brother, so eww! And my man..." I really do like the sound of that. Anderson *is* my man. "Is his best friend."

"OMG! Brother's best friend! Way to trope it, girl. Spirit high five!"

"Spirit high five?"

"Yeah, I can't physically give you a high five, so I'm doing it with my soul. Sooo, your brother, is he single?"

"Married."

"Damn, got any other hot brothers?"

A soft laugh escapes at her bubbly optimism, and I shake my head.

"Oh, that figures, the hot brothers are always taken."

The set of scrubs continues to ramble in her bubbly way, and I tune her out. Seth better not scare Anderson off. I want Anderson. He's mine. And a million times better suited to me than any of the guys Seth keeps trying to set me up with.

## *Tanner*

I stop, shifting the basket of fruit to my other hand. There is a man standing at Sugar's door.

"Can I help you?"

He turns. He has the same forlorn expression as Anderson.

"I was hoping..." He runs a hand through his dark hair. "Do you know if they have found Sugar yet?"

"Who are you?"

"Humphrey Atkins." He holds out his hand. "Sugar is my mate."

Cocking my head to the side, I study him. If I were in cat form, my tail would be twitching. I knew there was a third. Sugar told Anderson and me about him the day she disappeared. All I knew was that he was her new boss. I have been too busy worrying about her to even consider what a third means for our relationship. And I certainly don't know if this is the right guy or some random ass.

"Anyone could claim to be Sugar's mate, doesn't mean I believe them."

I push past him and unlock Sugar's door, opening the door just enough to slip inside and shut it. His foot sticks through the gap. I kick at it. My steel toed work boots should convince fancy dress shoes to back up.

"Whether or not you believe me, it is the truth."

He pushes against the door. Throwing my entire weight against it, I try to stop the door from moving. I scramble for grip on the carpet as the door keeps moving. Without warning, it slams shut, and I fall to the floor, hitting my head and shoulder against the door on the way down. Shaking my head, I push off the ground, getting a foot under me. I look up before bracing against the wall and see him. He is inside, squatting beside me.

I lunge towards him, shifting midair. My claws connect with his face and scrape down hard, smooth stone. I am lifted into the air, dangling by the scruff of my neck. Narrowing my eyes, I hiss. He's got wings and horns and teeth that stick out over his lip. He's not like any demon I've ever seen before.

"Now, now, little kitty. No need to be so hostile. I'll put you down, then we can both shift back and talk about things properly."

He sets me down, then shifts back and looks around Sugar's living room. My tail lashes back and forth as I consider his words. I shift and watch him as he examines some of the hanging ropes and platforms.

"What are you?"

"Gargoyle. What is all this stuff?"

"Habitat, toys, stuff for Atticus and Daisy. They're Sugar's pets, since you didn't know."

He slowly turns to face me. "I'm sensing a bit of hostility from you."

"No shit, Sherlock."

"I told you who I am."

"The only one who can confirm that is Sugar." Leaning down, I pick up the fruit and carry it to the table. "And she's not here,

is she?”

“TANNER!” Anderson charges into the room, wraps his arms around my waist, picks me up, and spins around. “Tanner, Tanner, Tanner!”

“What?” Bracing my hands against his shoulders, I push away.

“They found her!” He adds bouncing to the spin. “They found her! They found her!”

“Put me down.”

“Oh right. Sorry.” He freezes and grins sheepishly, then lets go, dropping me as he steps back.

“Who did they find?”

Anderson whirls to face Humphrey. He frowns, then jabs a finger towards him. “You! You’re the freakazoid who wiggled out Sugar.”

“Are those even words?” Humphrey raises a single eyebrow.

“Whoa!” I jump between them, holding up my hands. “We’re not fighting in Sugar’s living room.”

I look from one to the other. Humphrey’s face is blank, while Anderson grits his teeth. Something soft brushes against my neck. Looking at my shoulder, I see a sugar glider clinging to the shoulder of my jacket. I’m not sure which one it is. I can only tell them apart when they are together because Atticus is a little bigger. It positions itself so it’s facing Humphrey and sniffs the air. Then it races along my outstretched arm to my hand. Its little claws dig in as it climbs to the top of my fingers and sniffs again.

“Is that a sugar glider?”

“Yes, it’s Sugar’s pet.”

Humphrey nods. “I was told she had them.”

He reaches out his hand. I consider warning him. If it’s Atticus, then he’ll get bitten. He still bites Anderson and me occasionally. It doesn’t matter that we are looking after them in Sugar’s absence, he still bites. Anderson pushes my hand down and shakes his head when I glance at him. Apparently,

he doesn't want me to warn Humphrey. Turning back, I see that Humphrey is patting the glider's head with a finger. Maybe it's Daisy. Daisy is nice. The glider turns its head as Humphrey's finger runs over its head and bites.

Humphrey yelps, and I whip my hand back to my chest, covering Atticus with my other hand. There is no doubt that it is Atticus, though he doesn't usually take so long to bite someone. Humphrey is pressing down on the webbing between his fingers. That spot is painful and explains why the bite took so long. Atticus was going for maximum effect with his tiny teeth. He squirms out of my grip, runs up to my shoulder, and launches himself towards the wall. Humphrey stares at him with narrowed eyes and gritted teeth as Atticus climbs up a rope to a platform, then bounds to the ledge where Daisy is and sits next to her watching us.

"It bit me."

"Atticus does that." I sigh at the choking noises behind me. I just know Anderson is trying not to laugh. "He still bites us occasionally, and we've been feeding them since Sugar went missing."

"Does he bite Sugar?"

"Nope." Anderson pops the P as he moves to stand next to me. "I've examined every inch of her skin. Not a single bite mark except the ones we put there."

"We? What do you mean we?" I turn to him with a frown and jab his chest with a finger. "If she's got any bite marks, they're yours."

"Are you sure?" Anderson squints his eyes and draws out the last syllable.

"Enough!" I jump involuntarily at the harsh snap of Humphrey's voice. "Who are you two?"

A smug look flashes across Anderson's face before he turns to look at Humphrey. I'm going to have to try to stop him if he pushes Humphrey too far.

"We"—Anderson gestures at himself and me—"are Sugar's mates."

“No, you are not. She is MY *Hertis Rote*, and I will not share her.”

“Tough titties, you mutated demon freak.”

“Now see here...” Humphrey’s voice was calm, too calm.

“No!” Anderson steps forward so he is toe to toe with Humphrey and jabs a finger at his chest. “You see here.”

“Time out!”

“Stay out of this, Tanner.”

Shit and double shit. I have to stop this. Anderson is shifting slightly from foot to foot, his chin lifts and shoulders thrown back. I know him. It won’t take much for him to attack. And Humphrey is just standing there. He seems calm, but there is a flinty quality to his face. He shifted really fast when I attacked him. He can probably do that again.

“Enough!” Grabbing Anderson’s ear, I twist and pull him over to the recliner, forcing him to sit. “Sit! Stay! This is not the time for macho bullshit.”

“But—”

“No!”

“Tanner.”

“I know where Sugar keeps her duct tape.”

Anderson purses his lips and scowls, then crosses his arms and slumps back into the seat. I swear, sometimes it feels like I’m wrangling a toddler instead of a grown man. I watch him warily. It isn’t the first time I’ve threatened him with duct tape, and he knows it isn’t an idle threat. Satisfied that he will just sit there and sulk, I turn to Humphrey.

“Don’t let him take Sugar from us.” Anderson grabs my hand. “Please.”

I squeeze his hand and turn back to Humphrey. He hasn’t moved, but he’s watching us, and I can’t make sense of his expression.

“I don’t know you, and I don’t know what a *Hertis Rote* is,” I say.

Humphrey’s attention is focused on me, and his mouth opens, but I push on.

“But! I do know Sugar is our mate. That means she is very important and precious to us. We will never force her to choose between us, because the decision to accept or reject us is hers and *hers* alone.”

I maintain eye contact until he blinks and looks away. He huffs.

“*Hertis Rote*, it means the same as *mate* does to shifters.”

That makes sense. He had referred to Sugar as his mate earlier.

“Bullshit!” Anderson pulls his hand from mine and stands. “If she means as much to you as she does us, you would never have shifted in front of her like that.”

“That was a spur of the moment decision I regret.”

“I should fucking hope so.”

I hold up a single finger in front of Anderson’s face. He glances at me, then sits back down. His point has been made, and I don’t want the situation to re-escalate. I watch them carefully. They are both still tense and watching each other. I hear a chirp and turn to where Daisy and Atticus are watching. Daisy launches herself at me, so I hold up my hand like I’ve seen Sugar do. She lands, wrapping herself around my hand, and I gently stroke her back. She chirps, looks at Anderson, then at me. I lower her, and she hops onto his shoulder and snuggles into his neck.

“Sugar told us that we weren’t the only ones she likes, that there was one more. She didn’t tell us his name, but she did tell us what his job was. So, Humphrey, what is your job?”

I watch Anderson as I wait for Humphrey to answer.

“I’m the new station manager at the radio station where she works.”

“So you’re her new boss?”



“Yes.”

Anderson sags further into his seat. That one piece of information is everything Sugar told us about him. We should have asked more about him, but there were other things on our minds at the time.

“Swear to us one thing.” I turn and fix him with my most serious stare. “Swear that you will abide by whatever decision Sugar makes. Even if you don’t like it.”

He looks away and rubs his thumb along the back of his other hand. When he looks back at me, he nods.

“I swear, but sharing won’t come easy to me.”

I smile. Her choosing all of us is a best-case scenario, and for someone not used to it, sharing is an adjustment.

“Sugar is in the hospital.” We both turned to Anderson. “That’s what I was excited about earlier.”

There is a thud behind me, and I glance back. Humphrey is on his knees.

“She’s all right.” He lets out a deep sigh and looks at Anderson with shiny eyes.

“Sort of. When I saw her, she was on her way to surgery,” Anderson says.

I look at Anderson. Surgery doesn’t sound good.

He points to his arm. “She has a broken arm they need to fix.”

“When can we see her?” I ask.

“Doc said no visitors today, but if it all goes well, she can come home tomorrow.”

“I’ll make arrangements for her care,” Humphrey says.

“No.” I spin my hand in a circle, indicating all of us. “All three of us can look after her. It will help you get to know us as well.”

Humphrey looks at me for a moment, then nods. It’s going to be interesting to see what sort of person Humphrey is. I’ve never met or heard of a gargoyle before.

## *Humphrey*

The programming smoothly transitions into the next song. It is the last song of the set and then I will have to go on air again. The experience so far has been easier than I had expected. It was a learning curve with all the technology, but the actual programming was easy. Sugar had meticulous plans, songs, fun facts, and other observations written down in her schedules. Unfortunately, there are only a few more of her plans left before I'll have to make my own.

The door opens, and Dwayne enters. The last few days have shown me the vampire's worth. I would have failed and possibly closed this time slot without his help. He is an absolute whizz in the control room. He runs practically everything from there as I slowly learn what I'm meant to do.

"There's a caller on line one."

I look across the equipment, begging for my brain to supply the information on how to take a call on air.

"Here." Dwayne shows me each step as he talks it through. "Turn this on, press this, then that, and you're good to go. Remember, name of program, who you are, and then take the call."

“Got it, thanks.”

He leaves, then gives me a thumbs up through the window that separates our desks. The first button he pointed to lights up as he transfers the call to my control. The song ends, and I turn to my microphone.

“You’re listening to the Night Watch, I’m Humphrey, and we have a caller.” I follow Dwayne’s instructions exactly. “Hello, caller, you’re on air.”

There is silence, and I wonder if I’ve made a mistake.

“Humphrey Dumphrey sat on the wall. Because Flossy Fox had a great fall.”

Eyes widening, I look up at Dwayne, my mouth opening and shutting like a goldfish. He nods eagerly.

“Hello, Humphrey, are you keeping the Night Owls entertained for me?”

I relax at the sound of her voice, that purring tone rolling through me. Her voice soothes the jagged and frayed edges of my soul, and the simmering rage over losing her stops beating against my control. There is a rasp in her voice that wasn’t there before, but I know she’s safe in the hospital.

“Flossy Fox.” I breathe her name, barely remembering to use her on-air handle in time. “You’re awake.”

“Of course I’m awake. The night is when I play.” There is silence on the line, and when she speaks again, her voice sounds sad and has less of the Flossy Fox purr. “I’m pretty banged up, Night Owls. And my boss is probably going to conspire with my doctor to keep me off air for a while longer.”

I chuckle. Damn right I’m going to keep her off air until she has all the appropriate medical clearances.

“I’m sure you have a special someone who will keep you entertained.”

“Hmm, yes, there are three sizzling young men, all desperate for me to claim them as mine. And I know one of them will definitely help me break all the rules.”

“Flossy.” I fill my voice with censure. I only met Tanner and Anderson today, so I am not sure which one she means. “Perhaps you should behave until you’ve healed.”

“Mmm, but you know how it is, Humphrey. Misbehaving is so much fun. And I’m sure at least one of my three knows how to discipline me the *right way*.”

The rolling emphasis she puts on the last two words causes Dwayne’s eyes to bug out, and it looks like he chokes on his drink. I wish I knew if she is saying that for herself or if it is just part of the Flossy persona.

“After all, there’s a bad boy, a good boy, and a bossy one. What do you think, Humphrey? Should I keep them all?”

I stare at nothing, not sure how to answer that question. Frantic movement catches my eye. Dwayne is signaling no and abort.

“That question feels like a trap, Flossy.”

She laughs. It’s a beautiful sound, so free, but it stops abruptly.

“Uh oh.”

“What is it, Flossy?”

“My guardian angel has discovered that I am not asleep. She’s not happy.”

“You, missy, are supposed to be asleep.” The new voice is heavy with disapproval and must belong to whatever nurse was on duty.

“My circadian rhythm won’t magically change because you want it to.” There is a moment of silence. “What are you—No, don’t ha—”

The line disconnects, cutting her off mid word. I take a calming breath and remind myself that she’s in the hospital. She’s safe.

“Well, Night Owls, it seems Flossy Fox is back with us and getting into trouble already. It’s only a matter of time before she is back behind the microphone filling your nights with her special brand of cheer.”

The messenger tab starts flashing with messages, mostly well wishes, but a few want more information.

“I’ll be sure to pass on your well wishes. But Flossy needs this time to heal. The more peace and quiet she gets, the sooner she will be back. And when I know more, I’ll let you know.”

Searching through Sugar’s lists of comeback songs, I find one that is just perfect and line it up.

“Someone, not mentioning any names, TarNFeather, wants Flossy to hurry up and get better because Humphrey sucks. That’s savage and brutal, and this song says everything, so I don’t need to.”

I hit play and listen with eyes closed and a smile at the gentle beat that leads into the gravelly voice of Sia singing “Unstoppable.” Not only is this song a good comeback for that comment, but it’s how Sugar seems at the moment. She didn’t have to, but she called from her hospital bed, just to let her listeners know she was hurt but not out. Opening my eyes, I see Dwayne giving me a thumbs up. Yeah, I did pretty good. And tomorrow, I’m going to see my girl.

# *Sugar*

Seth pushes the wheelchair through the doors and into the morning chill, stopping near the pickup parking. He helps me out of the chair and onto the bench, then fiddles with how my jacket is hanging over the cast. I appreciate him taking time off work to take me home, and the caring big brother role is sweet and all, but there are limits.

“Seth. It’s fine.”

He gives me the same look he used to when we were kids and I told him to back off.

“Where’s the car?”

“Stay here.”

Looking me over one more time, he grabs the wheelchair and takes it back inside. Seth signs for me to stay as he passes me on the way to the parking lot. I grin and roll my eyes. Like I can go anywhere. The painkillers I was given are amazing with a capital A, MAY and ZING, but they leave me feeling a bit drowsy. It’s disappointing that neither Anderson nor Tanner came to see me. I saw Anderson before I went into surgery, but he didn’t come back.

A silver minivan pulls up in front of me. Seth gets out and opens the sliding door. No wonder he had been impatient upstairs. He's driving the kidsmobile, and Alice will need that back. With a sigh, I push myself off the bench. Seth runs over and grabs my good arm. I meet his glare with one of my own and pull my arm away. He might be in caring big brother mode, but I'm not an invalid. It's just a broken arm. It's not even the first time I've broken a bone. He scowls and guides me to the back door of the kidsmobile.

“Sugar!”

Pausing at the door, I turn. Tanner and Anderson are hurrying down the walkway towards me. Seth pushes at my back.

“Get in the car, Sugar.”

I glance back at him. He's frowning at them and increasing the pressure on my back.

“Seth, they're...”

He growls and scoops me up, putting me in the car. He buckles my belt and slams the door shut before I can protest. Jumping into the driver's seat, he pulls away from the curb way too fast for the parking area. Tanner and Anderson stop, and their bodies sag as they watch Seth drive me away. I watch them until they are out of sight, then turn to the front and glare at the back of Seth's head. What the hell was that about?

“What the fuck, Seth?”

“Language, Sugar.”

Gritting my teeth, I inhale deeply, forcing my mind to calm, then I enunciate every word clearly.

“What the fuck was that, Seth? You practically threw me in the car, then drove off before I could say hi to Tanner and Anderson.”

“Sugar, can we not talk about this right now?”

“Sure, right after you explain yourself.”

I fix a hard stare at the rearview mirror. He looks in the mirror, then refocuses on the road and sighs.

“Andy’s not the man for you, Sugar. You need a stable man, something Andy will never be.”

“What you think doesn’t matter, Seth. They’re mine, and I love them.”

Seth looks into the mirror with a frown, and I nod.

“That’s right, both of them.”

Slamming the brakes on, he jerks the car to the side of the road. Engaging the emergency brake, he twists in his seat to face me.

“No! Not happening, Sugar! You will find a nice man—*one* nice man—and settle down.”

“News flash, Seth.” I unclip my belt. “You don’t have a say in this.”

Flinging off my belt, I open the door and hop out, stumbling a little, and start walking down the street. Seth jumps out of the car and grabs my good elbow, pulling me back against him.

“Back in the car, Sugar. We’ll discuss this when you’re feeling more reasonable.”

I look at him, tilting my chin up and wait for him to meet my eyes. I flash a sweet smile and drive my knee up, connecting solidly with his groin. With a strangled squeak, he crumples to the ground, hands protecting his abused member. Honestly, he brought it on himself, and he forgot what my go-to move was.

“I’m Nutcracker Monroe. I’m perfectly reasonable.”

Turning on my heel, I tug my jacket back up over my shoulder before it slips all the way off and walk away without looking back. The fucking nerve, thinking he knows what I need. I’m not him, and I’m not Spice. The sort of person I need is different from what they have. I bet he’s the reason Tanner and Anderson didn’t visit me in the hospital. If I want more than one lover at a time, then I will have more than one. Anderson and Tanner are happy to share. I don’t know about Humphrey, though. Humphrey. I sigh and slow down. I still need to talk to Humphrey. There is so much we need to talk about. Hopefully, he will come and visit me today.



Stopping, I look around. I have no idea where I am. I wasn't thinking about where I was going, I just walked. The last tiny spark of energy fizzles out, and I flop down to sit on the curb. My jacket slides off my shoulder again. I leave it. I just don't have the energy to pull it back up. Drawing up my knees, I wrap my good arm around them and rest my head on my cast. A few tears slide down my face. I don't know why I'm crying. Everything that's happened—finding out that magic is real, the crash, being kidnapped, then Seth—it's just all too much.

“What's this?”

Looking up, I find a little boy standing in front of me, his head tilted slightly to the side as he taps on my right arm.

“It's a cast.”

“What's it for?”

“I broke my arm.”

His eyes go round like saucers, and he looks from my arm to his and back again.

“You can break your arm?”

“Yeah.”

“Natty!”

The boy—Natty, I guess—looks up at someone behind me.

“Minnie, she broke her arm.”

Twisting round I see Minnie. She is focused on Natty. Reaching out with my good arm, I snag his shirt as he wanders onto the road and gently pull him up onto the sidewalk. I've heard rumors about Minnie, none of it nice, but I do remember that when she ran a bakery, she had the best croissants. Natty goes over to the wagon Minnie is pulling and looks under it.

“Hi, Minnie.” Using my good arm for leverage, I stand.

“Hi, umm...”

I smile, not surprised that she doesn't remember me.

“Sugar.”

“Yum! Where?” Natty looks up at me with a frown.

“Nope, that’s my name.”

“That’s a funny name.”

“I know.” I wince slightly at the gushy enthusiasm of my response. I need to get home before something prompts me to rant, which, given my current state, would be an unfiltered embarrassment. I twist my arm behind me to grab my jacket, but I stumble a few steps before I manage to right myself.

“Let me.” Minnie pulls my jacket over my shoulder and as far around my cast as it will go. “Sugar, are you all right?”

“Nope.” I pop the P. “I’m on top-shelf painkillers, my brother is an asshole, and I need to get home, but I’m lost.”

“Is there someone I can call?”

I think for a moment. I don’t know where my phone is. The last time I saw it was in my car before the crash. Even if I had it, I don’t have the numbers of the people I want the most. Why didn’t I get Anderson and Tanner’s numbers? I can probably call the station, but there’s no guarantee Humphrey is there.

“No, I don’t know their numbers.”

“All right, I’ll call one of my mates.”

Minnie pulls out her phone, glancing at Natty she moves away a few steps. I turn to Natty. He is looking at the ground, then he gets down on his hands and knees and peers under the bushes beside the path.

“What are you doing?”

Sitting back on his heels, he looks up at me with sad puppy eyes.

“I can’t find it.”

“Find what?”

“Your arm. It broke and fell off, but I can’t find it.”

“Oh, Natty, it’s okay.” I start towards him, but my feet fly out from under me. I land on my ass, and tears fill my eyes at the jolt to my arm. “Fu—udge nuggets!”

Closing my eyes, I run through some deep breathing exercises. I won't say it. I won't even think it. As soon as the words are out there in the universe, the random nature of Murphey's law and fate will happen. My day is already so, so much, and I really don't think I will cope if anything else happens. Stopping myself from swearing was a miracle, and it would be really nice if someone could wrap me up in a blanket and keep the world away.

"Sugar."

A hand touches my shoulder. Opening my eyes, I find Minnie and Natty looking at me with concern.

"I think I'll stay down. It's really not my day."

Minnie studies me, and I force a smile. It was that or cry, and if I start crying, I don't know if I'll be able to stop.

"Sugar, where do you live?"

"Primrose House. It's on Eastman Street, big place; you can't miss it."

She frowns, then looks up and down the street.

"Like that place there?"

I look where she is pointing. It's a big old building with balconies wrapped around it. A skeletal tree, almost as tall as the house, dominates the front yard.

"Yeah, like that one. Just like that one."

A man exits the building and walks down the path to the mailboxes perched in a row near the gate. I know him.

"Arghh! Fudge nuggets, sugar, honey, iced tea!"

Pulling up a knee, I bang my forehead on it. The universe can officially go fuck itself for today.

"Is everything all right here?"

I lift my head. Sure enough, it's Greg.

"Sugar?"

"Do you know him, Sugar?" Minnie places a hand on my shoulder.

“He’s my neighbor.”

“Can you help her up?” she asks Greg.

“Sure.” He looks at me as though he actually intends to break the no-touching rule, and I raise my hand, holding down the middle finger. Greg is old enough to read between the lines, and Natty shouldn’t understand the gesture.

He smiles. “I’ll get Carl.”

“Thanks for stopping, Minnie, it’s just...”

“A bad day.”

“Yeah.” I sigh and turn to Natty. “Hey, Natty, my arm didn’t fall off when it broke. The bones in my arm broke.”

“They can do that?” His little brow furrows as he pokes his own arm.

“Yep, but it hurts a real lot. The doctor put them back together, and the cast keeps my arm still so it can get better. The doctor will take it off when my bones are healed and strong again.”

Natty throws his arms around my neck and squeezes.

“Sugar.” Carl looks down at me, shaking his head. “Let’s get you home, missy.”

“Carl.” I hold up my good arm, but instead of taking my hand, he bends down and scoops me up into his arms. “Thanks again, Minnie. Bye, Natty.”

I wave as Carl carries me away. Wrapping my good arm around his back, I rest my head on his shoulder. I can’t believe I was this close to home and didn’t realize it.

# *Sugar*

Insistent pounding wakes me up. Sitting up, I groan. I fell asleep on the couch. It stops, and the silence is bliss. Then the sound of knocking shatters it again. I heave myself off the couch and drag myself to the door. Cracking it open, I sigh with relief. It isn't Seth. I'm sure he'll turn up at some stage, but I'm not ready to speak with him yet.

"Who are you?"

He holds up a badge and ID.

"Detective Bartlett, Miss Monroe."

"What can I do for you, Detective Bartlett?"

"I went to the hospital to get your statement, but you had already left."

"Come in." I open the door and stand to the side as he enters. I point at the dining table. "Please take a seat."

"Thank you. Oh, you have a cat?" He points at Daisy and Atticus's climbing frame.

I pause. That climbing frame had started life as a cat tree, but there are clear modifications. And most people in town know I have sugar gliders.

“Yes, he’s in the bedroom. I’ll just go shut the door. He bites people sometimes.”

Detective Bartlett makes his way over to the table, and I turn and hurry down the hall. Checking that Atticus and Daisy are in their nest, I shut the door to their room. Grabbing the voice recorder from the desk in my room, I check the battery and start recording. Assuming I have a cat could be an innocent mistake, but Dad taught me to be careful and trust my instincts. Right now, my instincts are itching about something elusive and unsettling. Tucking it into the sling, I return to the living room. Sitting down, I rest the cast on the table. Detective Bartlett has a pad on the table and is spinning a pen over his fingers.

“I’m not sure what I remember will be much use.”

“That’s all right, Miss Monroe, just start at the beginning.”

“I guess the beginning is when I was driving to work, somewhere around nine, nine thirty. I hit some ice on the road, lost control, and crashed.”

“So, the reason you lost control of your car was ice?”

“I guess so. I mean, it’s winter, it could have been sludgy snow, but I’ve got good snow tires, so it was more likely to have been ice.”

I don’t mention the other option that occurred to me yesterday. It was possible, since the people who took me had talked about magic, that maybe they used magic to cause my crash. I don’t want to be seen as a crazy person if the detective doesn’t know about magic being real.

“Right.” He jots down a few notes. “Please continue, Miss Monroe.”

“After my car crashed, I lost consciousness. When I woke up, I was on a bed in a strange room that was overwhelmingly yellow. There was a rope tied around my wrist, and the other end was attached to the bed. Whoever tied me up didn’t know what they were doing. They just used granny knots, really easy to undo. Two people came into the room. They were wearing robes with hoods, so I couldn’t see their faces, but they

sounded male. One said I was Daisy, the other said I wasn't, then they argued about that. I didn't pay that much attention to what they were saying because I had untied the rope and wanted to get out of the room while they weren't paying attention. They spotted me escaping, so I ran. There were more people in the building, and I jumped off that level to the floor below. Landed wrong, broke my arm, and passed out again. When I woke up, I was in the hospital."

"Why did you pass out again?"

"I had just snapped both bones in my arm. Do you have any idea how much that hurts?"

"Fortunately, no. I guess it would be quite painful, though." He puts down his pen, rests his hands on top of the pad, and looks me in the eye. "Do you know where Daisy Ortega is?"

"Pardon?" A little red flag pops up. I didn't mention a surname for Daisy.

"The seer revealed you as a link to Daisy Ortega. Where is she?"

"I don't know anyone by that name." Red flags wave desperately. I definitely didn't mention the seer or anything else I overheard. "So how would I know where she is?"

"Miss Monroe." He pulls out a stick and places it on the table. "It's in your best interest to tell me the truth."

"Or what?" I scoff. "You'll hit me with your little stick."

"This is a wand."

I snort.

"You may not believe in magic, Miss Monroe, but I assure you, it's very real. Now, tell me where Daisy is."

"Detective Bartlett, I have told you. I do not know anyone called Daisy."

"Very well, Miss Monroe. We will do this the hard way, then."

Picking up his wand, he stands and points it at me. There is the sound of glass shattering, then the table flips out of the way and something black blocks my view of the detective. I look

up, following a ridged line to the clawed tip, then down the top edge to the creature crouched beside me. It looks back at me, the eyes so familiar. I only saw it for a moment before fleeing in terror. I think this is what Humphrey turns into. I say his name silently, and he smiles. He looks strange like this, but it's still my Humphrey. I reach out to touch him. He glances at my arm and frowns. I am reaching for him with my broken arm, but with the cast and sling, it's more of a twitch than a reach.

His eyes go flinty. He looks over at the detective and rises. It's like one of those scenes in the movies where something is rising from below the hero, where it just goes on and on and on. It's a wet dream in black with white squiggles. Corded muscles, defined pecs, chiseled abs. Each and every part of him is sculpted to perfection. Including the tidy oval bellybutton. I really want to stick my finger in it, just to see how he would react.

He turns to face Detective Bartlett, moving so he stands between us, shielding me with his wing. I peek around the edge. The detective is white as a sheet and pointing his wand at Humphrey. The wand is shaking. He grabs his wrist with his other hand, and it steadies slightly.

“You sought to harm my *Hertis Rote*.”

I've never heard the term *Hertis Rote* before, but the way he says it, with all that menacing rumble in his voice, makes me believe it's something good. Detective Bartlett is in deep trouble. Humphrey lunges forward, and the detective squeals and drops his wand. Scrambling backwards, he pulls his phone from his pocket and trips over the coffee table. Humphrey grabs his ankle and flips him onto his back, pinning him to the floor.

“I should squish you like a bug, but that's awfully messy.”

A cold breeze wraps around me, and I shiver. The window nearest me is smashed. That explains the sound of breaking glass just before Humphrey appeared. Picking up the wand, I look it over. It isn't very impressive, just a pointy, round stick with a knob at the end. I walk over to where Humphrey is and



duck under his wing. He has a claw around Detective Bartlett's throat. I hold the wand where the detective can see it.

"So, how does this thing work? Is it a flick and swish?"

"Give that back, you stupid hu—erk."

Humphrey squeezes his throat, cutting off what was sure to have been a pathetic insult. It isn't much of a movement, but it's effective. I make a mental note to ask him about breath play later, and maybe even some of the other interesting-sounding things I've read about.

"Sugar?"

I freeze. That sounds like Greg. Looking out from under Humphrey's wing, I see the body that belongs to the voice. It's Greg.

"Sugar! Get away from that creature." Greg steps forward, pulls out a wand, and points it at Humphrey.

"Put that away!"

I snap, stepping out from behind Humphrey's wing, but then it's in front of me again. I sidestep, and he blocks me again. Turning to him, I growl. His eyes widen, and I duck around his wing. Humphrey sighs and folds his wings behind him.

"That creature is Humphrey, and he saved me from the fake cop who was pointing this at me." I hold up the wand.

"I'm not a fake cop!"

"Yes, you are." Rolling my eyes, I turn back to Bartlett and point his wand at him. "You suck at taking a statement, and the locals would have told you I have sugar gliders, not a cat. Depending on how much they liked you, would have determined whether they would have told you to stay away from them or try to touch, because Atticus always bites."

"Sugar." Greg plucks the wand from my hand. "How about we all sit down? I'm sure this was simply a misunderstanding."

"Really?" I pull the voice recorder from my sling and roll it back a few minutes. "Not sure how else I am supposed to interpret this."

I press play.

*"...revealed you as a link to Daisy Ortega. Where is she?"*

*"I don't know anyone by that name. So how would I know where she is?"*

*"Miss Monroe. It's in your best interest to tell me the truth."*

*"Or what? You'll hit me with your little stick."*

*"This is a wand."*

*Snort.*

*"You may not believe in magic, Miss Monroe, but I assure you, it's very real. Now, tell me where Daisy is."*

*"Detective Bartlett, I have told you. I do not know anyone called Daisy."*

*"Very well, Miss Monroe. We will do this the hard way, then."*

I stop the recording. Greg is studying Bartlett. He lifts his wand and does the swish and flick. Bartlett's face wavers, then changes to one I recognize. It's the strawberry blonde from the kidnappers' house.

*"That's one of the guys who held me captive!"*

*"Is it now?"* Another swish and flick and handcuffs appear around Bartlett's wrists. *"My boss will be very interested in talking to you."*

Greg passes a card to Humphrey. He looks at it, then releases Bartlett and sits back on his heels. Greg yanks Bartlett to his feet, but Bartlett rips his wand out of Greg's hand and thrusts it at me. Greg's hand whips out, and Humphrey's wing snaps to full extension before me. *CRACK!* Someone screams, then Humphrey pulls his wing back. A bleeding gash splits Bartlett's pale face.

*"Sugar is my Hertis Rote. If I ever see him again, his life is forfeit."*

*"I'm not sure what that means, but okay."* Greg tightens his grip on Bartlett and leads him to the door.

He stops and glances at my side window. Lifting his wand, he executes a more complicated swish and flick. All the glass pieces lift from the floor and fly back into the window frame, fusing together so the window is whole. I stare at it in wonder. I've been told that it is real, but to see it in action makes magic really real for me.

“Are you all right?”

I turn. Humphrey has changed back to human. He has no shoes or shirt, and I have zero complaints. The view is enough to make any girl drool. I lift my arm.

“I broke my arm.”

“I noticed that. I might have to... punish you for being so careless.”

My breath hitches. I wasn't sure if it was excitement or nerves. He reaches out and pushes my hair away from my face.

“Have you ever been punished before, Sugar?”

“No.” My voice is far too breathy.

“Do you want to be punished?”

“I...” I bite my lip and think about it. “I don't know.”

“Good girl, being honest is the best option. We'll discuss it after you've healed.” Reaching out, he takes my hand and pulls me towards the couch. “Right now, I just need to hold you.”

He sits on the couch, his back tucked into the corner, and taps his lap. I sit so my good arm is against him, and he tucks me tightly against his chest, wrapping his arms around me and nuzzling into my hair. I can hear the steady thump of his heart as he breathes deeply against my head.

“What does it mean, that thing you called me, hurt... hart...”

“*Hertis Rote?*”

“Yes.”

“It means my heart's root. The person who fills the center of my heart, my anchor, without whom I am cut adrift in a world

without warmth and color. It's the gargoyle equivalent of a soulmate."

"That's both beautiful and heavy."

"Yes. Now, shush."

I wiggle into a more comfortable snuggling position and smile at his tiny growl. I do enjoy the way he orders me around. It's bossy but not tyrant-ish. I feel like my wants and needs are balanced with his desire to be in charge. It's safe and reassuring that he has things under control. And the pogo stick in his pants that's now poking my leg, that's all mine.

# *Sugar*

Something squeezes my knee, and I blink the sleep from my eyes. I must have fallen asleep again tucked up on Humphrey's lap. I look up, and he smiles sleepily. My knee is squeezed again. Tanner is crouching in front of me, his hand on my knee.

"Hey, beautiful."

"Hi." I sit up. "How did you get in?"

"Carl gave me the key. Atticus kept biting him, so I've been looking after them."

"Argh, stop biting, you little shithead!"

Humphrey makes a sound and smirks. He tightens his grip around my waist as I try to turn towards Anderson's voice behind me.

"Anderson tries to help."

"Atticus, Daisy."

I hear a couple of loud squeaks, then Anderson yelps. Within moments, two soft balls of fluff are rubbing against my neck. Atticus crawls down onto my sling and barks, looking from it to me and back.

“It’s just a broken arm, Att.”

Daisy chirps, and I tuck my chin to my chest. She puts her paws on my cheeks and rubs her nose against mine.

“Sugar baby.” Anderson tilts my head back and kisses me. I scrunch up my nose as the stubble on his chin tickles it.

“Interesting, I thought...” Humphrey looks thoughtful as Anderson jumps over the back of the couch and sits beside us. “Tanner, you kiss her now.”

“What, why?” Tanner’s eyebrows scrunch.

“Just do it,” Humphrey says.

“Hey.” I frown at Humphrey. He can’t just boss everyone around. “He doesn’t have to kiss me if he doesn’t want to.”

“It’s all right, Sugar. I was just surprised, but I think I know what’s going on,” Tanner says, then sits on the edge of the couch and turns my face towards him. He kisses me, soft and sweet, then looks over my shoulder. “Jealous?”

“No, weirdly happy.”

“What’s going on?”

“My people are possessive. I thought I would struggle with them touching you.”

“Umm, do you all know each other?”

“We met yesterday, Pet.”

“Yeah, and if Tanner hadn’t stopped me, I would have punched his lights out for scaring you the way he did.”

Tanner turns and shoves Anderson against the end of the couch. Using Humphrey’s shoulder for leverage, I push off the couch. Maybe I’m being too greedy. I want them all, but if they’re going to fight, then it might not work out.

“Guys, please don’t fight. I’ve had a... a rough few days.”

There are hushed murmurs from the couch as I walk to the climbing frame.

“The people who took you... What did they want?”

“That’s the thing, Tanner.” I put Daisy and Atticus on the climbing frame one at a time. “They didn’t want me. They wanted someone called Daisy Ortega. They took me because they thought I was her.”

I watch Daisy. She froze mid step when I said the name of the woman they were looking for. There’s a knock on the door, and she squeaks and runs to the hidey hole. Atticus follows. That’s odd behavior. Turning, I see Humphrey blocking the half-open door.

“Who is it?”

“Sugar, it’s me, Greg. Could you kindly tell your gargoyles to let me in?”

“Humphrey, let my creepy neighbor in. If he does something bad, you can squish him.”

“Creepy?” Greg ducks under Humphrey’s arm and walks sideways to the coffee table. “How am I the creepy neighbor?”

“You watch me all the time, for one.”

“That’s because it’s my job.” He shuffles back a few steps out of Humphrey’s reach. “Easy, big guy. When my boss got information that the Balmori faction was interested in this town, I was sent to watch over Sugar.”

“Why Sugar?”

“Because she is the Ortegas’ guardian.” A prim woman steps away from the door. Her green pantsuit is creaseless and not a single hair escapes her updo. “It was a desperate measure at first, but we decided to leave them in her care. The situation was perfect. Sugar was completely outside the magical world, easily overlooked because her brother and sister are overachievers. And she provided the best possible care, even going so far as to love them.”

I reach out my hand, not taking my eyes off the woman. Tanner and Anderson wrap me in their arms. I grab hold of whatever part of them I can reach. What she is saying makes no sense.

“You used her, put her in danger without her knowledge.”

“She was perfectly safe.”

“She was just kidnapped for three days, then dumped, unconscious, with bones sticking out of her arm at the hospital doors.” Humphrey shifts as he speaks. His voice is calm, but his aura of menace grows and fills the room. “How is that safe?”

“We were fed false information.”

“Who are the Ortegas?” Anderson pulls his shirt from my grip and turns me to face Tanner as he speaks.

“Atticus is the last direct heir of the Aranda bloodline.”

“Never heard of ‘em.”

“Of course you haven’t. They’re an old witch family, well respected in their country. If Atticus or his wife, Daisy, were to die. Well... the next in line is a devious slimeball who would destroy everything the family has built over centuries.”

Atticus and Daisy. Atticus and Daisy. People I’ve been looking after without knowing it. People I’ve come to love. Atticus and Daisy. I look at the climbing frame. Atticus and Daisy are on the platform, their little gray faces focused on me. A buzzing blocks out all other sounds. It’s not possible. It can’t be. They’re just... but they’re not. They do things no other sugar glider does. They’re smart. But they can’t... That would mean... It would mean...

Daisy walks to the edge of the platform and slowly nods her head.

My knees buckle, and Tanner lowers me to the floor slowly. I can’t. I can’t...

He tucks my head against his chest and holds me tight. The steady beat of his heart cuts through the buzz. Warmth presses against me from all sides. A cocoon of safety, a sanctuary, filled with the swirling smells of comfort. Hot earth after rain: Humphrey. Pine trees: Anderson. Grandma’s baking spice mix: Tanner. I breathe deeply, letting their scents fill my lungs. My space, my safety, my comfort.

“Sugar?”



Shaking my head, I burrow into Tanner's chest. I don't know that voice, and I don't want to leave my safe space.

"Sugar, please."

"Leave her alone."

I put my hand over Humphrey's mouth. Grumbly growls are not the right noises. Atticus starts barking. I jolt upright. He's in distress. I need to help him. I need to...

I see him outside the wall of my men. He is sitting on a hand. He looks at me, then turns and runs up the arm of the person holding him. It's a woman, wearing a fluffy bathrobe. She has flawless milk chocolate skin and frizzy hair that is pulled back into a ponytail that poofs into a ball behind her head.

"Hello, Sugar." Her voice is soft, her accent making those two words sound exotic.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Daisy."

I shake my head. Daisy is small and gray. I squeeze my eyes shut, then open one. She's still there.

She smiles. "Yes, Sugar, it's true."

She reaches past my protectors and places her hands on my face, her thumbs rest where Daisy always put her paws. Leaning forward, she rubs her nose against mine; three little swishes, just like Daisy.

"Sir! Sit down!"

Turning her head, she releases me, then stands and hurries over to the couch. Greg and the woman are holding the arms of a man who is shaking and crumpling in slow motion. They back him up to the couch. Daisy sits beside him as the woman kneels on the floor in front of him. Humphrey blocks my view with his head.

"You don't need to see, Sugar."

"Humph. Help me up, please."

He huffs, then stands and holds out his hand to me. Taking his hand, I stuff as much of what I am feeling as I can into a mental box, a box I will open later, when there are no strangers in my house. Humphrey pulls me up and tucks me under his arm. Tanner and Anderson stand, arranging themselves around me so they can touch me as well. The weight of their hands helps to keep me grounded.

“What’s going on?”

“Atticus.” Greg glances at the couch. “His heart is struggling with the transformation back to human after being a glider for so long. Tara is trying to stabilize him.”

Atticus, the man on the couch, is long and lanky. His skin is a shade of gray, and he gasps for breath, clutching Tara’s hand, which is placed over his heart. Daisy brushes his black hair away from his face. It hangs down past his shoulders. He looks over at me, his eyes wide, and I move without thinking. Going around the back of the couch, I stop beside him. He starts talking, his speech pausing for each breath. It sounds like Spanish, but the accent is so heavy, I can only pick out a few words.

“I’m sorry. I don’t understand.”

Daisy looks up at me.

“He is saying sorry that you were in danger and got hurt because of us.”

Tara pulls back her hand and sits heavily on the floor, and Atticus relaxes into the couch with a sigh, his coloring looking normal again.

“Can you heal Sugar?” Atticus’s voice is a smooth baritone, so heavily accented that the words sound like they were just run over by a lawn mower, albeit a lyrical lawn mower.

“No.” Tara looks up, her head rolling slightly. She blinks slowly. “Too tired.”

“Excuse me.” Greg picks Tara up and vanishes.

Stepping back, a set of arms wraps around me. Looking up, I see Anderson smiling down at me.

“How are you feeling, Sugar?”

“I’m fine.”

“Ah, the you’ll-fall-apart-again-later type of fine.”

“The silly shifter is very intuitive.” Daisy runs her hand softly over Atticus’s forehead. “You have a strong triad, Sugar. Silly and stability.” She nods in Tanner and Humphrey’s direction. “Gargoyles are the best protectors, strong and dominant. People who love them are special.”

Greg reappears and holds out his hands to Atticus.

“Come on, sir. I’ll take you to the car.”

Atticus takes Greg’s hands and stands with his help. He wobbles a little as he walks, leaning on Greg. He stops beside me.

“You will be safe now.” He glances down at Daisy. “We will stop running and fight.”

I nod, mostly to reassure him that I understand. He reaches out but stops. Humphrey holds an arm in front of me. Atticus nods.

“Goodbye, Sugar. Live well.”

I watch as he heads towards the door, then turn away. Daisy picks up a band from the coffee table and holds it up. It’s the collar she wore as a glider.

“This has magic on it. It might disappear, or you might feel the need to give it to someone.” She smiles and places it back down on the table. “Wherever it goes, it brings good things.”

Unfolding from the couch, she comes around and stands in front of me.

“There are so many things to thank you for. But, Sugar, you do laundry so wrong.” She grabs my face and rubs noses again. “Separate your loads.”

She gives me a little shake, then lets go and runs out the door. In the silence, I hear the sound of car doors shutting, then an engine starts and fades away.

Tanner sits in the armchair, touches his fingers to his head, and mimes an explosion.

Anderson walks over to the window, twitches the curtain, peeks outside, then turns back to face the room. “I knew it! I knew there was something weird about them!”

Humphrey runs a hand through my hair and rests it on my neck.

“It’s safe to feel now, Sugar.”

“What am I supposed to feel?”

“Oh, Pet.” His voice is soft and sad. He picks me up and sits on the couch, positioning me so I am leaning back against him with my legs over the rest of the cushions. “You two shift. She needs cat therapy.”

Tanner and Anderson shift without question. At Humphrey’s direction, I soon have a lynx over my legs, resting its head on my belly while Tanner curls his smaller cat form on my chest, being careful of my arm. It’s warm and fluffy, and when they start purring, I close my eyes, and rest my head on Humphrey’s chest. I let my mental box open, trusting them to catch me if I need it, as tears run silently down my face.

## *Sugar*

Humphrey keeps his hand on my elbow as we walk down the street. Anderson hovers close at my other side. After that little slip outside the police station, they are staying close. I've seen little things they do that annoy the others, but they also acknowledge the things they have in common. Tanner went back to work this morning, leaving these two to take me to the station to get my handbag and the other stuff they found in my car.

They are complete opposites. In the few hours since Humphrey got back from the station, they've growled and gritted their teeth at each other a couple of times. I had also seen Humphrey hiding a grin or two at Anderson's antics. It's a promising sign that they might, with enough time, become friends. I am lucky, so very lucky, that they are willing to try to get along. This period where they are figuring out each other's boundaries and tolerances was going to be interesting.

"What do you need to get done today, Pet?"

"I need to contact the insurance company and then I'd like to pack away all of... the pet stuff."

Humphrey nods, and I feel Anderson's hand touch the small of my back. It's a small comfort and support, just enough to let

me know he is there. I think I might still be in shock about Daisy and Atticus. I don't know what to feel about them. They were in my life for so long, but they weren't actually sugar gliders. They were people, witches. They were hiding, and I was their unwitting protector. Should I feel angry because they used me, sad that they're gone, or betrayed because the people who took me were after them? I just don't know, and it's all just swirling together into a messy numbness.

“Sugs! What! The! Fuck! How dare you just disappear on me like that! Do you know how worried I've been!?” Lizzy's voice yanks me out of my thoughts. She is storming towards me all stompy in the snow. She stops, her eyes widening as they flick from my arm to my face. “Oh, holy shit! Sugar, what happened?! Are you okay? Of course, you're not okay. Look at you.”

She rushes at me, grabs my face, and tries to smother me in her b-cups.

“My poor Sugar! Tell your Lizzy who you hurt so I can get my axe and go Borden on their asses.”

“You don't have an axe.” I laugh as I pull away from her.

“Well, I can get one and then give them forty whacks!”

Lizzy mimes chopping with an axe, then stops and stares, her head turning slightly as she looks from Humphrey to Anderson, then back again and again.

Tossing an arm around my shoulders, she draws me away from them and leans in to whisper conspiratorially, “Sug, there are two guys following you around.”

“I know. One's Humphrey, and the other is Anderson. Normally there are three, but Tanner had to go to work.”

“No!”

“Yes.”

“What are we whispering about?”

Lizzy squeals and jumps sideways. Anderson grins. He'd snuck up behind her and spoken right next to her ear.

“Liz, you remember Anderson.”

“Oh my God.” She clasps a hand over her heart. “You about gave me a heart attack.”

“Eee, so close.” He holds up a hand with his finger and thumb almost touching.

“Andy!” I slap his chest with my good hand, and Humphrey taps the back of his head at the same time.

“Enough of that, Pup.”

“Pup?” Anderson turns to Humphrey. “No, just no! If you’re gunna call me anything, it ain’t gunna be Pup.”

“Come on.” I grab Lizzy’s hand and hurry down the street to Jewel’s Café. Lizzy glances back at them. “Don’t worry about them. They’re still figuring each other out.”

“Aren’t they friends?”

“No, they only met a few days ago. Humphrey is a very serious person, and Anderson hasn’t changed that much.”

Lizzy holds the door open, and we go inside, joining the end of the line.

“I think he’s deliberately pushing buttons even if he doesn’t realize it.”

“What are you going to do about it?”

“Hopefully they’ll figure it out themselves.”

“We already have.” Hands touch my waist, and I look behind me. It’s Anderson. “We agreed that he could call me Cub.”

“Good boy.”

Anderson hums and nuzzles the back of my head. Lizzy mimes sticking a finger down her throat and gagging. I can’t help but smile, especially when I see Humphrey smiling warmly at me.

“Pet, why don’t you and your friend find us a table. We’ll get the drinks.”

“Humph, this is my best friend, Lizzy.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Lizzy.” He holds out a hand, and she shakes it. “What would you like to order?”

“Can I have a hot chocolate and an apple cinnamon muffin?” Lizzy asks.

“And you, Pet?”

“Mocha with whip and chocolate sprinkles.”

“I thought I told you to leave my sister alone!”

I look towards the angry voice. Seth is striding towards me, a glare directed over my shoulder to where Anderson is.

“Come on, Sugar.” Seth grabs my arm and pulls me towards the table where Alice is half standing, her eyes wide as saucers.

“Seth, stop!” He ignores me, tightening his grip as I try to free my arm. “Stop, or I swear I will nut you so hard you won’t have any more kids.”

He stops and spins around, then leans down so he is right in my face and points over my shoulder.

“You stay away from him, Sugar. He’s not the one for you.”

“And who is?” I take a step forward, and he moves back, maintaining a safe distance. I can feel the attention of the whole cafe on us, and I don’t care. “One of those gormless twits you keep trying to set me up with. Newsflash, SETH boy, I’m a grown woman, and if what I want in my life doesn’t meet your approval, then sucks to be you.”

He falls backwards, landing on his butt. Hudson, from the aquarium, pulls his leg back and gives me a thumbs up.

“I choose Anderson and Tanner and Humphrey. The perfect man for me is actually three men. And the correct response from you is ‘congratulations, Sugar, I’m glad you’re happy,’ then you’re supposed to threaten them with grievous bodily harm if they ever hurt me. Not whatever this bullshit you’re doing right now is.”

Spinning on my heel, I take a few steps, then stop.



“Oh, and I’m not just a radio tech.” Putting my hand on my hip, I twist to look at him over my shoulder. “I’m Flossy Fox, queen of the Night Watch. So you can take your disapproval and shove it!”

I sashay out of the cafe. I hadn’t planned to out myself like that, but the shock on his face feels good. Argh! I didn’t get my coffee, but I’ve made my dramatic exit, and I am not going back.

“Oh my God, Sug, that was so awesome! You laid down the law!”

Lizzy bumps my elbow, and I’m suddenly sandwiched between two big male bodies. Anderson’s woodsy aftershave mixes perfectly with the hot-earth-after-rain smell Humphrey always seems to have. I sigh and relax into their hold.

“Aww, group hug.” Lizzy rests her head on my shoulder. She looks up at me and does a silent OMG.

“Liz, are you intruding on my manwich?”

“Yes, it’s a very nice manwich.”

“I licked it first.”

“Ha!” Lizzy lifts her head and looks me straight in the eye.

“Nah, Sugs, ya fucked it first.”

“Should we be worried about this?”

I blink at Lizzy as Humphrey’s voice rumbles over my head. She fans herself, and I smile. His voice *is* super hot.

“Nah, that’s just Sugar and Lizzy. I think we should take Sugar home, though. She’s looking a bit pale,” Anderson says.

Humphrey moves so he can see my face.

“You’re right. Say goodbye to your friend, Pet. You can see her another day.”

Yay for them agreeing on something, but boo for them wanting to take me home.

“It seems my men have spoken.” I smile ruefully and put my hand in my pocket. There is something in there. I pull it out.

It's the green collar Daisy wore. I don't remember putting it in there, but Daisy said there was magic on it. Lizzy deserved a little magic in her life, too.

"Here." I hold it out to Lizzy. "For your lizard."

"A collar?"

"Yeah, it'll be cute. Maybe you could even put a lead on it and take it for a walk, or it could ride on your shoulder like a tiny dragon."

"Thanks. Oh, and, Sugs, just don't forget, I licked you first!"

"Always."

Throwing my good arm around her, we hug. She waves as Humphrey steers me towards the road with a hand on the small of my back. He snags the back of Anderson's shirt before he walks out into traffic while looking at his phone.

"What are you doing, Cub?"

"Looking up positions that are safe for a broken arm."

"Positions?" Humphrey tucks me under his arm as we cross the road.

"For sex." Anderson watches Humphrey, and his lips tighten into a tiny smile when Humphrey scowls.

"No, not until her arm is healed."

"Humph." I look up at him with wide, pleading eyes. "That'll be six to eight weeks because I'm human. Can you really go that long without?"

He growls. "We'll see what the doctor says."

I shake my head sharply at Anderson, and he shuts his mouth. I have an appointment soon to check my stitches, so it is a reasonable condition. I also have two weeks of medical leave, and I intend to enjoy every day. With three sexy men to get to know better and figuring out how our little family is going to work together, I doubt I'll get bored. And if I do, I'm sure they will have interesting ideas for keeping me entertained.

# *Sugar*

*6 months later.*

Trailing my hand along the railing as I ascend the stairs, I can't help but smile as I round the switchback landing. Anderson is doing a wonderful job of redecorating our house. When we first moved in, everything was either dated or smothered in paint. These stairs had been a trial. The previous owner had wrapped carpet around everything: the stairs, the rail, the bars, and even the first three feet of the wall. All carpeted. After a tiny slip, I was forbidden from using the stairs, and it was the first area to be fixed. All three of my men worked together to rip all that carpet out. It was a glorious display of muscles and strength. They seem to be bonding more as they work together to make this house into our home.

Now the bedrooms on the top floor are done. The master was my domain, and they each had their own room, but so far every night has been spent piled together in my bed. Well, for what counted as a night for me, because I still work nights. Lately, I have been thinking about changing to a daytime session. It will mean a reduction in hours, but I'll have more time to spend with my men. I miss the time I spent with them back at the beginning when I had to stay home because of my broken arm. I miss falling asleep with them and having them there when I wake up.

Turning left at the top of the stairs, I wander towards the small room next to mine. That's where Anderson and Humphrey are currently working. It's a bright and airy room, but Anderson refuses to tell me what he is planning, insisting that it's a surprise. Normally, I would be good about not peeking at a surprise, but I'm bored, and I keep hearing strange noises from this room.

Pushing the door open, I stop in the doorway, my mouth opening and shutting a few times as I process what I am seeing. They are tangled together, wrapped in wallpaper. It's over part of Anderson's head and wrapped around their bodies. Arms are pointing in odd directions and there is even a foot sticking out.

"Umm."

Humphrey's eyes jerk to me, then they shuffle around until Anderson is looking at me as well, the wallpaper covering half his face.

"Sugar, I know what this looks like, but it's not my fault," he says.

"Well," Humphrey mumbles. "Not completely."

The tangle of wallpaper and limbs jerks, and they growl at each other. These two... I shake my head. Most of the time now they get along fine, but every so often....

"What happened?"

"I was lining up the pattern, and this lug let go of the top of the paper." Anderson points at Humphrey with a hand that is twisted in the paper.

"You said to let go."

"I did not!"

"You said, that's it, let go."

Anderson squints. "I said *don't* let go."

"I heard 'let go.'" Humphrey shrugs. "So I did."

"Boys! That doesn't explain this."

“I tried to get it off him, and well, we...”

Humphrey trails off, and they look at each other. Anderson purses his lips and wobbles his head from side to side.

“We’re stuck.”

“Right. Well, good luck with that.” Backing out of the room, I hurry back towards the stairs. Of all the ridiculous and improbable things.

“I told you we should have gotten the professionals to do this.”

Humphrey’s voice has an almost wailing tone, and I don’t hear Anderson’s response as I hurry down the stairs. Tanner enters the hall as I reach the bottom. He raises an eyebrow at me as he dries his hands on a towel. I point up.

“They’re tangled in the wallpaper.”

“Really?”

I nod.

“This, I gotta see.”

He drops a quick kiss on my lips as he goes past. I hesitate. Do I go back up or find something else to do while they sort themselves out? I should stay inside just in case they need my help. There is a chance that Tanner will get stuck as well when he tries to help them. I know he’ll help them. He has more mercy than I do.

The doorbell rings, its cheery tones making my choice for me. I wonder who it could be. We’re not expecting anyone.

Opening the door, I look around. Apart from a few people walking the streets, there is no one in sight. None of the bushes in the garden are giggling, so I am not the victim of a childish prank. I look up just in case, but there is no weirdo hanging above my door. It’s better to be safe than sorry. The supernatural elements of this town still surprise me. I look down. Thankfully, there is no height-challenged person waiting for me to notice them so they can kick me in the shin. There is just a box. A box with an envelope stuck to it that has my name written boldly in perfect cursive.

Picking up the box, I carry it inside, kicking the door shut behind me. Humphrey, Anderson, and Tanner enter the room as I put the box on the coffee table and kneel next to it. Both Humphrey and Anderson still have random bits of wallpaper attached to them.

“Who was at the door, Pet?”

“A box.”

“Ooo.” Anderson flops onto the floor on the opposite side of the table. “The sass is strong with this one.”

I roll my eyes and pull at the envelope. It rips open as it comes away from the box. There is a small tear in the folded papers inside. I stop and carefully pull them free. I unfold the two pages. They are full of the same cursive as the envelope.

*My dearest Sugar,*

*I trust this letter finds you happy and well.*

*I understand that you may have no desire to hear from Atticus or me ever again. I can only imagine the heartache and betrayal you must have felt the day we revealed our true selves to you. I hope that even if you wish to never hear from us again, you find peace, happiness, and healing.*

*Since leaving you, Atticus has stepped up into his role as heir and is fighting against all those who sought our downfall. He may not admit it, but I believe watching you live your life to the fullest despite the obstacles you faced taught him so much about resilience and strength of spirit.*

*Mere words cannot express how grateful we are for everything you did for us, nor can they show the sincerity of any apology that we could offer you for the harm we did. Please accept this gift as a token of these things.*

*My family runs a sanctuary where rare and endangered mythical creatures like this little one are cared for and bred. When I saw this little one, I knew without a doubt that his destiny was with you. He has been given no name, as that honor is for you.*

*Sincerely, and with great affection,*

*Daisy*

Putting the letter down, I study the box. I don't care that Humphrey picks up and reads the letter. It doesn't bother me when he passes it to Tanner. Anderson holds out his pocket knife to me.

"Are you going to open it?"

"I don't know."

Truthfully, I didn't want to. I'm working through everything with the help of a therapist, but there are times when everything hits me all at once, cracking the wound back open.

"Pet." Humphrey sits on the couch and lifts me onto his lap. "You need to open the box. Whatever is in there is innocent."

Leaning forward, I carefully slice through the tape holding the top flaps shut and pass the knife back to Anderson. Lifting the flaps, I peer inside. Sitting in the center of a blue blanket that lines the bottom of the box is a pool of darkness. A mouth opens in the inky blackness, revealing sharp white teeth and a curling pink tongue as it yawns. Two little golden eyes open and stare at me, then two more sets of eyes open. With three little faces watching me, I reach into the box. Sliding my hands under the little creatures, I lift them out. I almost drop it when I realise there is only one little body with three heads. Cats heads that have big ears. It gives a little shake and wings extend from its back.

Turning it this way and that, I assess its condition. Apart from the three heads and wings, it looks just like any other pure black housecat.

"Oh my god!" Anderson exclaims, slapping his knee. "It's a purrberrus!"

"A purrberus?"

"Yeah, like Cerberus but a cat."

"You can't just make up words like that."

I tune out Tanner and Anderson, lifting the three-headed kitten level with my face.

“What do you think, little one? Should Purrberus be your name?”

It meows, sounding happy, so I decide that Purrberus can be its name. Reaching out, it places its front paws on my cheeks, exactly where Daisy used to, then it bops my nose three times, once with each nose. Fighting back tears, I hug it close, and Humphrey wraps his arms around us. I think I love it already.



Thank you for reading Sugar! I hope you enjoyed her drama.

Check out the next book in the Silver Springs Pets series:  
Lizzy by K.Z. Merlin.

Read now. [Lizzy by K.Z. Merlin](#)



# *Silver Springs Pets*

Check out the other books in Silver Springs: Pets

[Minnie by Mia Harlan](#)

[Beaver by Eva Delaney](#)

[Delphine by Cali Mann](#)

[Joey by Jewels Arthur](#)

[Raven by Tabitha Barret](#)

[Sugar by Dolly Kalasin](#)

[Lizzy by K.Z. Merlin](#)

[Lila by Scarlett Philips](#)

[Basil by K. Rose](#)

[Allie by Lia Davis](#)

Find a full reading list of all past Silver Springs books at:

<http://silverspringslibrary.com/>

Join the Silver Springs mailing list to get updated about future

books: <https://silverspringslibrary.substack.com/>

# *Acknowledgements*

First thanks go, as always, to my husband and kids. We survived another book. High Five!

Thanks to the Silver Springs team for letting me play in their world.

Thanks to my reader team, who nitpicked and kept asking for more.

Thanks to the local fauna park. Your information on Sugar Gliders was invaluable.

Serafina and Christine for your medical knowledge.

And to my editing and proofing team. You ladies deserve all the chocolate, wine and maybe even some cat therapy.

And last, but not least, thank you everyone who reads this book.

## *Other Books*

## **Moonlit Jasper: Moonlit Falls Book 6**

I'm a rejected mate. That's it. Love life over. So why can't I get these three guys out of my head? Is it possible to have a second chance?

<https://books2read.com/MoonlitJasper>

# **Half Baked Runes: Magpie Marsh Book 1**

Broken hearted I move back to Australia, seeking a fresh start for my son and I. I didn't expect my handsome neighbours. They're both sweet and determined to prove that they are what my son and I need. Then my Ex finds me.

<https://books2read.com/HalfBaked>

## *About the Author*

Dolly Kalasin lives in a sleepy little country town in Victoria, Australia.

She spends her days wrangling her horde of children and keeping her husband in line.

She has always been a voracious reader across a wide variety of genres. When not reading or writing she spends her time baking or indulging in a random crafts and toy making.



# *Follow Me*

For all the latest news

Facebook

<https://www.facebook.com/groups/dollykalasinauthor>

Instagram <https://www.instagram.com/dollykalasinauthor/>