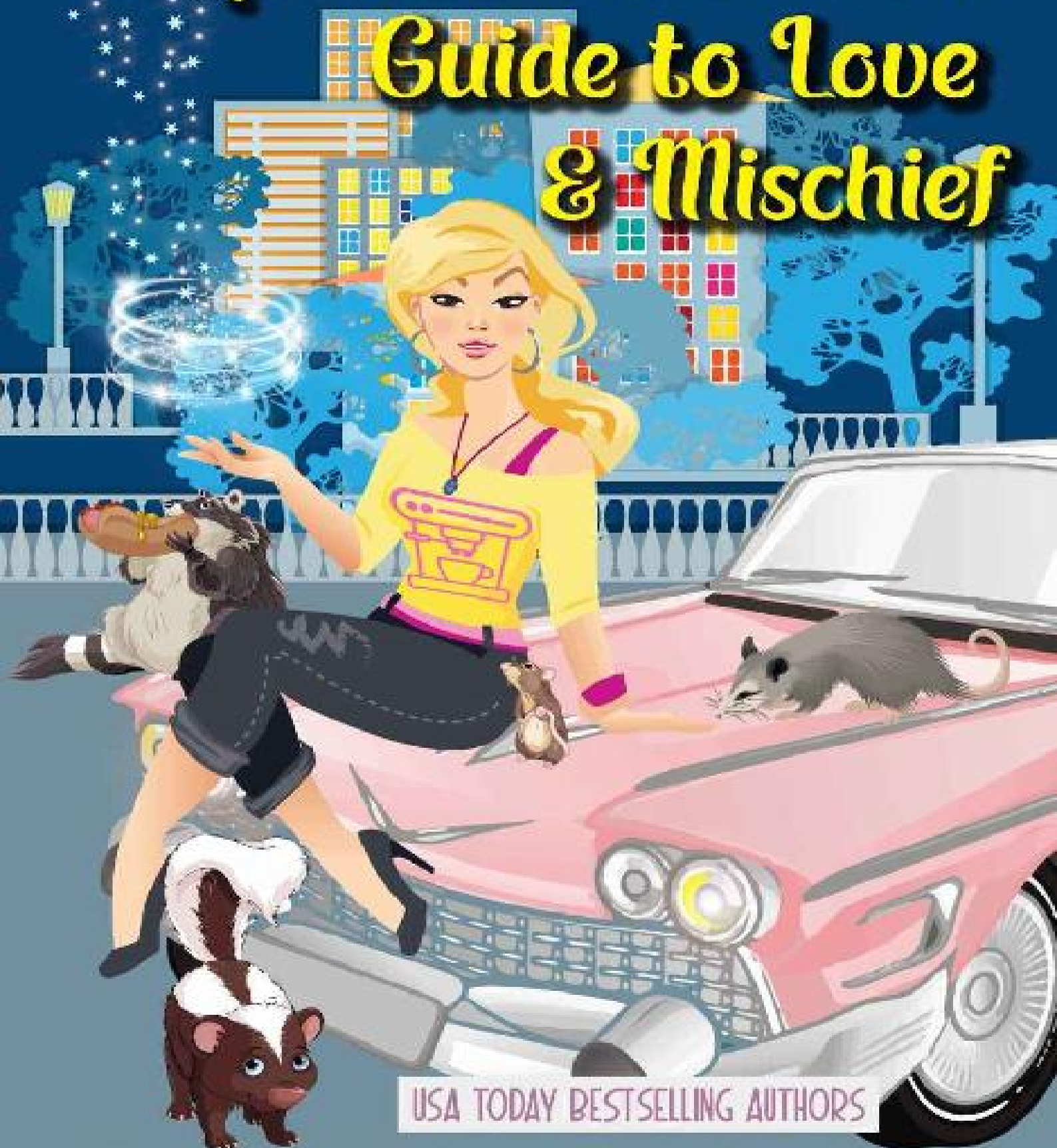


An

Espresso Machine's Guide to Love & Mischief



USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

MIA HARLAN & EVA DELANEY

An Espresso Machine's Guide to Love & Mischief

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Chapter 1

Fletcher

“**S**hit, Fletcher! Don’t look!” Ben gasps as we exit the subway onto King Street.

I immediately turn in the direction he’s looking and take in the semi-gruesome sight. Yes, there’s a dead Virginian opossum lying belly-up on the sidewalk—but she does look good. Maybe even better than she did when she was alive.

There are a few butterfly clips in her gray fur and her bald tail is wrapped around a single rose. Why is it that every time I’ve come across a dead shifter this month, there’s always a red rose?

A middle-aged woman is kneeling next to the body, painting her nails fuchsia-pink. It’s the shifter equivalent of dressing up the body—a sign of respect, and a way to help the possum transition to the afterlife.

My jaw drops and I show Ben my teeth. *Look how big and scary they are!*

“Oh, no,” Ben says. “Calm down, buddy, it’s okay.”

“Bu shiha kee daya,” I say with my mouth hanging open, like I do whenever I’m talking at the dentist.

“Shifters keep dying?” Ben seems to understand me, even though I’m not making much sense.

I nod.

He squeezes my shoulder and crouches to peer into my mouth. “Wow! You are scary! Look at those molars. So... ummm... teethy!”

I heave a sigh and close my mouth. After fifteen years of friendship, Ben always knows how to talk me down when my possum side takes over.

Wolves growl, cats hiss, bears attack, and I try to scare away threats by showing my teeth—or playing dead. Thankfully, that didn’t happen this time.

“I told you not to look,” Ben says.

“That’s like telling me not to think about a white bear.”

“What white bear?” He looks around like he might find one strolling casually through downtown Toronto.

“I don’t mean an actual bear. It’s this advice I heard on a podcast. Never mind. Forget about bears.”

“Well, now I can’t! What if she’s a bear shifter and she suddenly attacks us?” He points to the woman painting the possum’s nails.

We stare at her, but she doesn’t shift or growl or do anything bearish. Ben and I sigh in relief.

“Do you think the possum is just playing...” He pauses as though trying to come up with a different word so he doesn’t repeat himself. He finally shrugs and says, “Possum? Too many possums,” he mutters.

We’ve been friends since we were kids and roommates since college, so he’s probably seen me play possum more times than he’s seen me accidentally tent a blanket while watching TV. But when it comes to shifters, I know dead when I see it—which is fucking sad, come to think of it.

“She’s too stiff,” I say. “She’s probably been here a while, too. Look how many farewell cards and candles there are. She’s more popular in death than she was when she was alive.”

“You knew her?” Ben shakes his head. “I’m so sorry, bud.”

Ah, hell. “You don’t recognize her?”

Ben pushes his glasses up the bridge of his nose and squints. “I really need to get my eyes checked. What if there is a bear and I don’t see it in time?”

“There aren’t any bears,” I tell him. Though I can’t help but add, “That I know of.”

Ben looks around again, and I try to hide my grin. “How much longer until your insurance kicks in?”

“Three weeks. Stupid probation.” He shakes his head. “You going to tell me who the poor possum is?”

I take a deep breath. “Mrs. Ellis.”

“From upstairs?” Ben backs up a step, his eyes wider than when he thought there was a bear. “Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure. Haven’t you seen her shift?”

“Yeah but...” He squints. “Fuck, it is her...”

I step aside as a few humans walk past and stop to take a picture of poor Mrs. Ellis in possum form.

“She used to hit me with her cane whenever she saw me because I reminded her of her nephew.” I sigh. “I’m going to miss that.”

“Only you would miss getting beaten by an old lady. Let me guess... it made life interesting?”

“Damn right it did.”

Ben smiles sadly as he stares at the dead possum. “I’ll miss her cookies. She always had some ready for me when I got back from work. I reminded her of her son.” Ben nudges my shoulder. “And she liked him.”

“Figures.” I shake my head as I stare at more humans stopping to take photos of Mrs. Ellis. To them, she’s just roadkill, and the memorial is an amusing part of city life. I wish I could tell them all she was so much more—even if she did try to beat me up from time to time—but humans can’t know the truth. Not about her, or any of the others...

Ben raises an eyebrow. “What are you thinking about?”

“It’s nothing.”

“Buddy, dude, bud, bestie... ummm... pal. Dudeguy. I’ve known you since middle school. It’s not nothing.”

“I don’t know.” I shake my head. “It’s just that Mrs. Ellis wasn’t the type to jaywalk.”

“Maybe she was in a hurry.”

“What about the possum shifter I saw on Queen Street last week? Plus all the rat and raccoon shifters? The one squirrel near Union Station? Not to mention the skunk shifter—”

“Up in the Annex, yeah.”

“You think all of them are suddenly jaywalking? And how do drivers not see a possum? Rat shifters I get, they’re small. But Mrs. Ellis?” I shake my head. “Before last month, the only shifter roadkill we’d seen was that raccoon back in 2015... and everyone knows why that happened.”

“Tragic.” Ben purses his lips. “People are driving like assholes lately. My cousin is working on an anti-jaywalking campaign for the Skunk Council.”

“Drivers have always sucked,” I say. “That’s nothing new, but these shifter deaths are.”

“If you think there’s more to it, why don’t you bring it up to the PB&J?”

As in the Paranormal Bureau of Justice, not the sandwich, obviously. I shake my head. “I’m sure someone already has. How could they not know?”

Ben stares at his shiny black dress shoes. “Sometimes I wonder if we should move to a small town. Somewhere safer.”

“But then how would we order midnight burritos?”

“Or midnight sushi?” Ben suggests.

“Midnight curry?” I add.

“Midnight burgers?” Ben stares into the distance as though dreaming about said burgers.

His watch beeps, and he looks down at it. “Shit, I’m late! Bye, Mrs. Ellis! I’ll miss you,” he says before he starts to speed walk down the street toward his office building.

I pause to do a quick possum prayer to release Mrs. Ellis’s spirit into the great shifter beyond. Then I rush to catch up to Ben. I don’t have anywhere to be yet, so might as well walk him to work.

As I fall into step next to him, my phone vibrates and I pull it out of my pocket.

“Chore?” Ben asks as he adjusts his red bowtie.

“My first job of the day!”

“Yay!” Ben says and throws his arms into the air.

I chuckle and show him the request on the ChorePossum app.

“A pony shifter needs help carrying a talking espresso machine from the airport to an office building just down the street from here.”

“Double yay!” Ben says.

“Told you this job rocks. Easy possumysy.” I press the accept button. “Plus, I get to do arm day at the same time. Hauling heavy machinery through Pearson and on transit beats the gym any day.”

“I love the office gym. They have free juice. You can even mix them to make your own flavor! My favorite is apple, beet, and carrot. I call it ABC.”

“Oooh, I’d try that! Not that I’d ever want an office job.”

“Yeah, sitting still that long is definitely not for you, buddy. Just like I could never run around the city all day. For one, no free juice mixes and comfy office chairs. Plus, I’m stressed enough without insurance.”

“Just three more weeks.” I slap his shoulder. “You got this.”

“Thanks, man. Have fun doing espresso arm day.”

We do our secret handshake—which ends with me tapping his right dress shoe with my right sneaker—and then I head back toward King Station.

As I pass by Mrs. Ellis again, I pause to say another prayer, and my eyes drift to the subway entrance ahead. What was she even doing at King Station? In the three years that I’ve known her, I don’t think she’s ever left our North York neighborhood. Hell, she even complained about the noise and crowds downtown.

Why did she come out here? Presumably before sun-up, because she’s clearly been dead long enough for rigor mortis to set in.

I pull out my phone and tap the contacts icon to bring up her landline—yep, she still has one of those, and I've had to use it whenever her packages would accidentally get delivered to our unit instead of hers.

I tap the call button, since her wife would know, but hang up before she picks up.

What if no one's told her Mrs. Ellis is dead? Do I really want to be the bearer of bad news? Especially over the phone?

I bounce on my toes. I want to find out why Mrs. Ellis was jaywalking downtown in the middle of the night, but the right thing to do would be to express my condolences in person... after I'm sure the authorities have let her know what happened and she's had time to process.

I tuck my phone into my jeans pocket and head for the subway steps. I'll just talk to her in person tonight. I'm going to have to, because something about this situation feels off.

Chapter 2

Fletcher

After a short subway ride and a longer train ride, I arrive at the airport and head toward arrivals. I pass through the sliding glass doors when my phone rings. That must be Nephrite—fuck, am I late? I shouldn't have stopped for the coffee and donuts at Union Station. There's always such a huge line there!

I break into a run as I tap my phone. "Hello, sorry! I'm almost there."

"You're running late?" Mom asks.

"For what?" I should have checked the caller ID before answering. "I can't talk now, Mom. I'm on a job."

"Don't tell me you got the job without an interview?"

Oh, shit, the interview. Was that today? I race past a man lugging a giant green suitcase.

"I'm so happy for you, Fletchy! When do you start?"

"I don't. I'm on a ChorePossum job, Mom. We'll talk later."

She's quiet during the time it takes me to squeeze through a group of tourists wearing giant cameras around their necks. I should just hang up on her, though if I do, I'll never hear the end of it.

Mom lets out an exasperated sigh. "You didn't get the job yet? That's okay. You can still make the interview if I send you a cab. I can call Mary and make up an excuse. I know you'll get this job if you just apply yourself."

"I like being a ChorePossum, Mom." I dodge around a stroller with a wailing baby.

"You need to grow up, Fletcher! You're twenty-nine, you can't run around the city doing chores forever. Where are you now? I'll send you an Uber."

I grimace. "Mom, I don't want a desk job. You set up the interview, not me."

"Fletcher, it's a steady job with good pay, benefits, and a spiffy title. Do you want to spend your life barely making enough to pay your half of the rent? Didn't you want to buy a new Playboy?"

"It's a PlayStation, Mom! *Station!*"

"Didn't you have a Playboy once?"

"That was a *Game Boy*, Mom!"

"Yes, yes, of course. And you could buy another one if you get this job."

"I don't want a Game Boy."

“Well, you could travel... Haven’t you always wanted to see the world?” Mom asks. “I’ll send you a cab right now. Where are you?”

I stumble to a stop. I do want to travel. I’ve never even left the city. And this job is a shoe-in since the owner is my mom’s friend. I’ll probably get it even with my crappy interview skills.

Sure, I’ll get fired when I get distracted researching the Byzantine Empire or the history of jockstraps—but it might take them months to notice. I could save up enough for a small trip.

“Well? Where am I sending the cab?” Mom presses.

I open my mouth to reply and bare my teeth as anxiety grips my heart. Paralysis starts to set in, and I know that if I don’t calm down, I’m going to end up playing dead and missing my chore.

“I can’t, Mom,” I say, or try to. It sounds more like ‘acava’. Talking with your mouth open is hard work.

“I’m not familiar with that place,” Mom says.

I take a deep breath, then another, and remember Ben saying, *Your teeth are so scary and teethy* earlier this morning. I can do anything with teethy teeth! “I can’t make the interview, Mom.”

The anxiety instantly disappears like it was never there, and I break into a run again. I side step a family of four and crash into a man in a business suit.

“Watch it!” he shouts.

“Sorry!” I cry and keep running.

“You can apologize for letting me down, but you’re still letting yourself down,” Mom says. “And what girl is going to marry a toilet cleaner?”

“First of all, toilet cleaning is a legit job,” I huff as I run. “If no one does it, then how are toilets going to get clean?”

I spot a woman trying to lug a giant suitcase off the conveyor belt and pin the phone between my ear and shoulder.

“Let me help you,” I tell her.

“Clean my toilet?” Mom asks incredulously. “Does that mean you’re coming home?”

“No, I’m not coming home.” I grunt as I pull the heavy suitcase down.

“Thank you.” The woman smiles at me.

“You’re welcome.”

“Well, you don’t have to be rude about it,” Mom snaps. “You know I’m just trying to look out for you.”

“I know, Mom, but toilets are only one part of the job. Right now I’m going to help a pony shifter move a talking espresso machine.”

“You think I was born yesterday?” Mom huffs.

“It’s true. You don’t have to believe me. But I’m happy as a ChorePossum.”

“You were a chore possum when you lived under my roof—and you couldn’t do any of your chores right. I don’t see how anyone would actually pay you money to forget to take out the garbage and put off doing laundry.”

I spot a red-haired woman by the luggage claim eyeing a large box that’s sliding past her on the baggage carousel. *Fuck, I am late. I hope she hasn’t been waiting for long.*

“You have so much potential,” Mom cries. “Why are you wasting it?”

I dodge around other travelers as I dash toward Nephrite. I try to say, “I’m not wasting my life” to Mom and “hello, I’m your ChorePossum” to Nephrite, but the two lines muddle up in my brain. “Hello, I’m wasted,” I say to Nephrite, my breath coming out fast and short.

She blinks at me. “Excuse me?”

“You’re what?” Mom gasps. “In the middle of the day? This is what you’re doing while you’re working?”

I cringe. Great, now I won’t get a tip and Mom thinks even less of me than she already does.

“Horse manure,” the pony shifter says. “Are you too drunk to help me get that box on this cart?”

“I have to go,” I tell Mom and hang up on her, even though I’ll never hear the end of it.

“Go? But I need your help,” Nephrite says.

“Shit, no, sorry! I’m not drunk, and I wasn’t talking to you. I was on the phone.” I gesture at the cell phone before jamming it into my pocket. “I’m here to help.” I adjust my t-shirt and pull my shoulders back to look more professional. “Hello, I’m Fletcher, your ChorePossum for the day. How can I help you?”

She narrows her green eyes at me. “Are you sure you’re not drunk? We can’t risk dropping Diva. That’s the espresso machine.”

“Diva it is.” It’s not that weird that she named it. I call my PlayStation “Lord Dopa, Destroyer of Chronos,” after all. “I’m sober as a skunk! Well, at least if that skunk is Ben. He’s my roommate, and he doesn’t drink. Anyway, is this your package?” I don’t wait for her to answer and lean over the carousel to haul up the large box. It’s the only luggage here big enough to fit an espresso machine.

Fuck, no wonder she needed help, this thing weighs at least as much as I do. Nephrite must really love her coffee to travel with a huge espresso machine. I lower it onto her luggage cart.

“We have to take her out of the box,” Nephrite says.

I fish my keys from my jeans pocket and use them to slice through the tape. As I grip one end of the cardboard and rip it downward, Nephrite does the same on her side. The cardboard tears away to reveal a fancy red espresso machine.

Nephrite digs the power cord out along with a battery pack the size of a car battery. She plugs it in. Is she planning on making coffee here in the airport? I mean, I wouldn’t mind another cup, especially if it’s free.

The machine powers on, and my heart skips a beat. Then it starts pounding double-time. My palms get sweaty. I struggle to catch my breath. And I have no idea why the fuck I'm reacting this way to an espresso machine. All I know is I want her, and I want her bad. How, I do not know.

Chapter 3

Diva

My bestie Nephrite's voice echoes around me as I power on.

"Diva? Diva? Are you there?"

"Neph?" The last thing I remember is struggling to draw electricity as those bastards at the airport unplugged me from my battery. "I'm alive!"

"Thank the goddess!" She places a hand on my metal side, next to one of my knobs.

"They put me in a box," I wail. "I hate being a ghost trapped in a machine."

"I'm so sorry, Diva. I wish there had been some other way to get you to Toronto. Was it awful? How are you feeling now?"

"I'm..." I trail off when I notice the man standing beside her. "Wow."

Neph raises an eyebrow. "Wow?"

"I mean, great. I'm great." Especially when the man is hotter than all four of Neph's mates combined—and she's got herself some hunks. Weird hunks—one is literally a talking dick—but hunks nonetheless.

I'd like to see this guy's dick, even if it talks, too. I bet it's huge and he knows how to use it. He just seems like the type. He's tall and broad-shouldered, with muscular arms and dark eyes that can see right down to my soul... which is good, considering that soul is trapped in an espresso machine.

He's dressed casually in jeans and a t-shirt. Not my usual style, I have to admit, unless they happen to be designer, which his are clearly not—but he makes them work. I'd take him any way I could get him—even in one of those paper bags they put your designer purse in before you leave the store.

His black hair is too long and somewhat unkempt. There's also a leaf stuck in it, and I wish I had hands so I could use it as an excuse to touch him.

A wave of electricity zaps through me. It warms me from my knobs down to my nozzle, which is yet another reminder that he's a hunk and I'm a hunk of metal. He's hot, and the only hot thing about me are my coffees. He's the epitome of steam, and the only steam I bring is in one of those cups. I don't even have cups. Or breasts. Or a body. Or...

"Diva!" Nephrite shouts, and I realize that I'm shooting literal steam everywhere.

The hot guy jumps back as though I burned him. *Shit!* I've actually burned him.

His mouth drops open, his body grows tense, and he falls to the floor, stiff as the mast of a sailboat.

“I killed him!” I wail so loudly I think the entire terminal hears.

Something inside me shatters. He’s dead. The hottest guy I’ve ever met is gone because of me. I didn’t think my steam was *that* hot.

People start screaming and running away. A group of cops with red stripes on their pants and hats race toward us.

“You’re under arrest,” an officer tells Neph.

“But I didn’t do anything,” she cries as they pin her wrists behind her back and snap on handcuffs.

I need to help her, but talking to human cops is not the way to go. Whenever I’ve tried talking to humans, they’ve always tried to find a logical explanation—the most common being that there’s a hidden speaker somewhere or Neph is a ventriloquist. And I don’t need her to get into any more trouble than she’s already in.

Maybe I can spray the cops and take them down too? But I might hit Neph, and I can’t risk killing my best friend. Though she’s a barista... she should be immune to steam, shouldn’t she? Or did being unplugged for the flight mess me up?

“It’s not what you think,” she tells the officers. “The espresso machine malfunctioned. She didn’t mean to do it.”

Another officer crouches next to the hunk and presses two fingers to his neck. “He’s still alive,” he declares.

I sigh in relief, and a little bit of steam spurts from my nozzle. I didn’t kill the hunky hunk after all!

The officer presses down on the walkie-talkie on his shoulder.
“We need an ambulance at—”

The hunk sits up and the cop leaps back. “I’m okay! Just umm... the floor looked very comfortable, and I got very tired after lifting the espresso machine.”

“Are you saying I’m fat?” I cry.

“Who said that?” the cop demands.

The hunk starts to get to his feet.

“Sir, please remain still until the medics arrive,” the cop says.

“No, no, no, no,” the hunk says and reaches into his pocket to pull out a card. “It’s a medical condition. Narcolepsy.”

Woohoo, it wasn’t my fault!

An officer takes the card, examines it for several seconds, and hands it back to him. “That checks out. I think you should still wait to see a medic.”

“It happens all the time. I’m fine,” he says. “I must have startled Nephrite here when I fell asleep.”

The cops glance at each other, shrug, and uncuff Neph. She rubs her wrists as though the binds had hurt her. The cops don’t even apologize as they stroll away. If I wasn’t trapped in an espresso machine, I’d have my lawyers on them!

“I’m so sorry,” Hunk-o-matic says.

“You should have a warning about your narcolepsy on your ChorePossum profile,” Neph tells him.

He shakes his head. His hair hangs lank and damp from my steam, and his face is red from the heat. “I don’t have narcolepsy. I just said that so the human cops would leave.”

“So I did burn you so bad you passed out?”

He shakes his head again. “Nope, just startled me. Whenever that happens, I play possum. Didn’t you read the fine print?”

He pulls up his phone and turns the screen for us to look.

Disclaimer: ChorePossums may be prone to sudden bouts of wide-open mouth and playing dead if startled, scared or insecure. This is a defense mechanism that evolved from our animal form and cannot be controlled. Thank you for your understanding.

“That font is tiny. Does anyone even read it?”

Hunk-a-hunk shrugs. “It’s not usually a problem. This is the first time I’ve been steamed on the job.”

Shit. I can’t even giggle and touch his arm to make burning him seem like a cute quirk.

I used to be able to flirt my way out of any situation—from convincing guards at a warlord’s villa to let my friends and me go, to getting free drinks when I was underage—but ever since I became an espresso machine, nada!

I still have my voice, though. Maybe I can at least smooth things over. I giggle—or try to, anyway. It sounds strained, and much closer to a cough. “I’m really sorry about the steam. I just thought you’d look a little bit better... wet.” Since I can’t flutter my eyelashes, I twist my knobs instead.

“Really, Diva?” Neph snorts.

I shush her with a hiss—literally, because a bit of steam escapes.

Hunk Squared’s cheeks are flushed, but that could be from the steam. He runs a hand through his damp-but-still-gorgeous hair, knocking the leaf out. He doesn’t seem to notice it flutter to the floor. “It’s okay. I never say no to a free sauna.”

He laughs, but it sounds forced. My heart drops. He’s clearly not impressed with me. No one ever is anymore—except in the “oh look, a talking espresso machine” sense. If they ever bother to compliment the coffee I’ve made, they just give credit to Neph—or whichever one of her mates happens to bring them their cup of java.

Men used to line up to take me out on a date. I miss that. I miss getting compliments about my hair. My clothes. My curves. All I had to do was bat my eyelashes—

“Diva,” Neph cries as I let out a puff of steam.

“Sorry. Sorry!”

“No worries,” the sexily damp ChorePossum says. “Shall we go? The UP Express is just that way.”

I glance in the direction he’s pointing. As much as I want to go with him, I can’t. Not when there’s a good chance I’ll steam him again. Ever since I’ve met the man, I’ve had no control over my knobs and nozzles... and what if next time it happens, he doesn’t come to in time, and Neph ends up in jail?

If I had a head to shake, I would. “Actually, Neph and I can handle it from here.”

Chapter 4

Diva

The ChorePossum squeezes some of the water out of his shirt while Neph glares at the luggage cart where I'm sitting.

"I can't carry you by myself, Diva," she protests. "That's why we hired a ChorePossum."

"Can I talk to you for a minute? Alone?" I shoot the ChorePossum a pointed look, but he doesn't notice—because I don't have a face or eyes, and he has no way of telling where my gaze is trained.

Sometimes being an espresso machine really sucks. Wait. What am I saying? Being an espresso machine *always* sucks.

The ChorePossum seems to take the hint and moves a few feet away—though I guess for him they're meters—giving Neph and me some space.

"You like him," Neph teases the moment he's out of hearing range.

"Do not!"

"Do too," she fires back.

“What are we, five? And anyway, even if I did like him, I’m made of metal, in case you haven’t noticed.”

“You’re so much more than that,” Neph tells me. “And I’m not going to let you mess this up.”

“I already did!”

She waves her arms over her head. “Hey, ChorePossum, let’s go!”

“Neph,” I hiss.

She just grins and gives me a wink.

“Still need my help?” He runs a hand through his still-wet hair and then wipes it on his jeans, realizes his jeans are wet, too, and shrugs.

I cringe but say nothing. Maybe he’ll forget I’m the one who got him wet.

“I can’t lift Diva onto the train on my own.” Neph grabs the handle of my cart to wheel me through the airport.

“Let me do that,” Hottie Hotness offers. I try not to look at him so I don’t blow my load yet again.

“Nah, I got it,” Neph tells him. “Save your arms for when we reach the train.”

I’m pissed at her for a split second until the ChorePossum’s hot ass starts to lead the way. Well, all of him leads the way, but his ass is all I can look at.

Don’t steam-jizz him, don’t steam-jizz him, I think.

“So, Diva, I have a question...” He glances over his shoulders at me, and I know exactly what he wants to ask. The same thing everyone asks: *How does the espresso machine talk?*

“What brings you to Toronto?” he says casually as he looks directly at me.

Most people don’t even bother addressing me, but he’s different, somehow. And he’s talking to me like I’m a person, rather than a freak of nature—or part of the furniture.

When I don’t reply right away, he shoots Neph a questioning glance.

“It’s Diva’s story to tell,” Neph says.

But I don’t want to tell him why we flew here from Moonlit Falls, New York. He already thinks I’m a shitty machine who can’t control her own nozzles. He doesn’t need to know that I’m here because I’m broke.

Money can smooth over most any fuck-ups, but not if you don’t have any. Especially when some bastard stole it all... though he won’t get to keep it for long. I’ll steam up the entire city if I have to, because I plan on getting it all back.

“You don’t have to tell me,” Hunky McHunkster the Third says. Probably the third. Hotness this extreme must run in the family.

I wonder what he looks like naked. If I steam him again, maybe he’ll get so soaked he’ll have to take his clothes off.

I shove that thought away before I squirt on him. Fuck, who would have thought you could still get horny when trapped in

an espresso machine? I don't even have the body parts for it—
or a way to take care of myself.

He's watching me, waiting to see if I'll answer, but I've been
silent for way too long.

"It's no big deal..." I finally say. "We're in the city
because..." Why would anyone travel cross-border with an
espresso machine? "We're interviewing a mug. Yeah, that's it.
I have to meet him and make sure we get along when we'll be
working so closely together."

Neph's eyes widen at the lie, but to her credit, she says, "Yeah,
he comes very highly recommended."

She's a good friend.

"Cool!" Hottie Hottiestien Esquire says as though interviewing
a mug is perfectly normal. "I hope the mug is a good fit for
your cafe! I didn't know coffee accessories came in living
versions, but it must make for better coffee, handcrafted by an
artisan machine—" he winks at me, "and hand-served in a
friendly mug."

I'd cringe if I could. Machine. Accessory. I'm just an object,
and not a person, after all.

When I get my family's money back, I'm going to hire people
to carry me around the world to all the best beaches and
resorts. When I'm rich and paying them, they won't ever call
me a machine or accessory. Plus, I won't have to keep
inconveniencing Neph and her mates.

“You must come from a very high-end cafe to be so... shiny,” McHotterson pauses briefly, almost like he had planned to use a different word.

Jewels Cafe, high end? I snort, and a little trickle of water leaks from a nozzle like pee. Shit! Did anyone see that?

If Neph did, she ignores it. “We’re the best cafe in our town!”

“We’re the only cafe in our town.” I may love Neph, but I do not love the cafe prison I’ve been stuck in for the past year. It doesn’t even use real silver cutlery! The jewels on the cups are stickers, not real gems! Even semi-precious stones would be better than stickers.

“We’re so amazing, no one else would dare open a rival cafe,” Neph says.

“I’d love to check it out some time,” Sexy Sexanovich, MD, says. “Maybe I’ll visit. Small towns seem so... I don’t know. Different?”

I hold back a snort-squirt so I don’t wet him again. “Boring, you mean? I can’t wait until we get downtown and hit all the bars and clubs. Do you know how long it’s been since I’ve dined at a Michelin Star?”

“You can eat?” Spicy O’Spice asks.

“No... But a girl can dream. And I can hit up a party or two while I’m at it.”

“I hate to break it to you,” he says, “but the area we’re heading to isn’t known for its parties. The address you gave me is in

the Financial District, mostly suits and,” he shudders, “office workers. Everything closes by six.”

“Ohh, do you think we’ll get to see some designer clothes?” I say. I haven’t been within steaming distance of a good Armani since waking up in this body. If it can even be called a body.

“Umm....” Seductive Seductiveman runs a hand through his hair. I’d like to run a hand through his... everything. Maybe starting with his cock—which happens to be at eye level, and just within steaming distance—not that he would enjoy it. Too bad I don’t have hands. “There are some expensive stores in the area.”

Yes! Things are already looking up... mmm... I wonder if I can get his cock up? I eye his bulge as he walks alongside me. It doesn’t move. Of course it doesn’t; nobody gets hard from looking at a coffee machine, and his cock isn’t like Neph’s mate, August, the possessed penis. I’m assuming. It’s hard to tell if a cock is housing a ghost from outside a guy’s pants. I’d need to get closer to investigate.

If I had lips, I’d lick them. I settle for twisting some knobs instead.

When we reach the train station attached to the airport, Hunky Hunkosky picks me up in his bulging arms. His hard, muscular chest presses against my side. It sends electricity shooting through every wire and makes me feel alive for the first time since I died.

“Holy shit,” I say.

His jaw drops open and he looks around. “What? Where?”

“Nothing!” I say quickly. “Just... ummm... I like your shirt. It’s very soft.” I’m not sure if it’s soft or not, because I don’t have skin. My metal casing can feel, but it’s not sensitive enough to tell fabric apart, which doesn’t bode well for shopping.

“Thanks,” he says.

I snuggle against his chest—well, not really. I can only move my nozzles, and they’re not facing him, but I still feel like I’m cuddling against him.

I’m also starting to run out of sexy nicknames for Sensual McDude, PhD. “I didn’t catch your name,” I say as he carries me toward the train.

“Fletcher.”

“Fletcher,” I repeat, tasting the name on my... not mouth. Brain, I guess. Though I don’t have that either. Soul? “I’m Diva.”

“That’s a pretty name,” he says.

He almost sounds like he’s flirting.

“I like your name, too,” I flirt back. “It’s nice and strong... like your arms.” I wish I could snuggle closer against him.

“Thanks.”

Is it just me, or is he blushing?

I let out a puff of steam. I expect Fletcher to frown—or curse—but he smiles. His lips curve up, and my gaze drifts to his

mouth. His eyes sparkle, and I can't look away.

"Do you want to..." I trail off.

"Do I want to what?" Fletcher asks.

Go out with me, I think, but hesitate. And hesitate some more. Being in his arms feels so right, almost as though I belong here. And he was flirting with me... wasn't he?

Maybe I was just imagining it. I was definitely imagining it!

I'm an espresso machine and he's a human. We wouldn't be able to go on romantic dinners, since I can't eat. Walks on the beach would involve him carrying me. Clubbing... just wouldn't work. Yes, we could sit and talk, but what would happen after?

We can't make love. We can't even make out. He can kiss my metal sides, but what kind of relationship is that?

He lets out a soft breath. "What were you going to ask?"

"Ummm... I..."

Chapter 5

Diva

Before I can figure out what to tell Fletcher, Neph cuts in. “There’s the train. Hurry up!”

I’m glad for the reprieve. I’m still not sure if I should ask Fletcher out or not. Back when I was alive, I wouldn’t have hesitated for a second. Scratch that—he would have asked me out the first time I batted my eyelashes at him.

Now... I’m pretty sure he’ll turn me down, and it will hurt, but I want to do it anyway.

Fletcher breaks into a run. Well, more of a fast lumber because of my extra weight.

This is definitely not the right time to ask him out. Once we’re seated, we can talk. At least I won’t be cuddled in his arms when he rejects me.

The train is just up ahead. It’s kind of cool that it pulls right into the airport so we don’t have to go outside. It’s definitely not a private limo, but at least this time I won’t be trapped in a box in cargo because of overzealous security.

The thought of getting powered off—of having the electricity stop flowing through my wires, and the world around me fade to nothing—terrifies the espresso out of me. It's too much like dying all over again.

Being powered off is not at all like sleep. There are no dreams, no comfy feelings from a soft bed or fluffy pillow, none of the surety that I'll wake up if there's an emergency, and I don't feel rested when it's over. It's just infinite darkness. I just... stop existing entirely.

But once we get my fortune back, we'll charter a private jet that gives me my choice of seats. No cargo hold or boxes for me ever again.

"Hurry up," I cry, because getting on this train is the first step to getting my fortune back.

"I'm trying," Fletcher huffs as he plods after Neph. At least most of the people on the platform move when they see a guy with an espresso machine coming at them at... well, not full speed, but at some kind of speed.

Fletcher trudges through the UP Express doors and stops to huff and puff. His solid chest rises and falls against my metal side, making my nozzles shiver. Mmmm... "Fletcher, you and I should—"

"Here are our seats," Neph calls.

Damn it, Neph! Stop beaver damming me. Not that I have a beaver anymore, but still!

Fletcher grunts as he lowers me across two ugly brown seats. At least they're clean. Oh, wait, what's that white stuff? Please be mayo and not cum.

"Diva, we're in the seat directly behind you," Neph says. "We'll be close by, don't worry!"

"Fletcher?" I blurt out as he turns to join her.

He pauses and gazes down at me. For a split second, I forget that I'm a machine. I feel like a person again. A hot person who can seduce anyone she wants.

"Do you want to..." I trail off.

What can I invite him to do? Go for a cup of coffee? He'll have to make it with... well... me. Then he'll drink while I just sit there and stare at him.

I could look at the guy all day, and I'd love to feel his hands on my knobs and levers, but it's not how I long to be touched... and he doesn't want the kind of steam I bring. Case in point, that whole part where I burnt him earlier.

"Do I want to what?" he asks.

"Sit down? You must be exhausted. Thanks for carrying me."

He smiles, and I feel as warm as fresh coffee when it drips from my nozzle. "My pleasure."

"Sorry I'm so heavy," I add.

"You're not heavy." He flexes his biceps. "It wasn't any trouble at all."

Fucckk, I think.

Then, I blow my load of steam at him.

Fletcher startles. Then he stumbles. He takes one step backwards, trips over a duffle bag that belongs to the sketchy-looking dude sitting across the aisle, and hits the floor with a thud.

“Fletcher!” I cry. I try to jump up to help him, but all I can move are my nozzles, dials, and... steam. A blast of steam shoots out just as he sits up.

Double fucckk! I just jizzed him straight in his face.

Fletcher yelps and falls back onto the floor.

Maybe I can just pretend that my power ran out for the rest of this train ride?

“Are you okay?” Neph rushes over and kneels next to him. What I wouldn’t give to take her place. “Ponies, that looked painful! Do you need a doctor? Is there a doctor on the train?”

Fletcher chuckles, but his face is red from steam or embarrassment, or both. “At least I didn’t play dead that time.” He waves away the sketchy-looking dude—what kind of person wears Crocs with socks?—when he offers to help him up. “Everyone sit down, I’m fine.”

Oh fuck, did half the train jump up to help when he fell? I try to stretch out my body to get a better look, but of course, I can’t.

If anyone did watch me squirt on a man in the middle of a train, they didn’t think anything of it. No one says anything or hurries over. Makes me worry that this white stuff on the chair

is cum, since apparently no one cares if you ejaculate in public.

Fletcher gets to his feet and slinks past me to his seat without sparing me a glance. I don't say anything—every time I talk to him, I just make things worse.

The train ride into the city is silent—well, as silent as anything in a city can be. People around us listen to music without earphones, shout into their phones, laugh too loudly, and argue about everything from credit card charges to bananas. What kind of person gets angry about bananas?

I haven't tasted one in over a year, and you don't see me getting mad. Well, maybe a little. Well, more like a lot. What did I do to deserve a lack of bananas? Or apples? Or everything, really? I never asked to be stuck in an espresso machine.

Is it because I always ordered a skinny, sugar-free, soy latte with an extra shot, no foam, and a whisper of cinnamon?

“Diva!” Neph cries, and I realize I'm steaming again.

“Sorry. Sorry!” I cry, and spend the rest of the ride reminding myself to stay calm and not get horny or upset.

When the train pulls into the main transit hub, Fletcher leans over me to haul me up. I'm surprised he's willing to risk it after all the steaming.

Don't jizz, don't jizz, for the love of everything that is not espresso, don't jizz, Diva! I think as he cradles me against his hot chest.

He makes it a few steps down the aisle before he realizes he's made a horrible mistake. Yep, he's decided he's done with me and this job.

"Fletcher?" Neph says.

I brace myself.

"I think I twisted my elbow when I fell," he says. "But don't worry about me. I'm a shifter. Possums heal fast."

At least I didn't cause him permanent injury.

Fletcher starts to pick me up again, but Neph grabs my other side. "I'll help. I don't want you to make your injury worse."

"No, no, I got—"

I cringe as they argue about who gets to be more inconvenienced by my existence. I double cringe at the thought of cuddling against Fletcher's hot abs again. I'll get all hot and bothered with no way to find relief, and will steam him again. I might seriously hurt him if I keep losing control.

I want to tell him to stay far, far away for his own safety. I want to ask him out. I want to stay close to him. I want Neph to help carry me so this doesn't feel so intimate.

Honestly, I don't know what I want. But there's one thing I absolutely *need*: to get my fortune back.

Focus, Diva! Poor isn't a good look on you, I tell myself. The voice in my head sounds like my parents and sister rolled into one.

For a split second, I feel a wave of grief. Not because we were close—I knew the teachers at my boarding school better than I knew my own family—but because they're all dead, just like me.

Except I'm not really dead—I'm trapped in a lump of metal, and I need someone to carry me.

“Just share already,” I snap at Fletcher and Neph. “Let's go.”

Chapter 6

Diva

Fletcher presses his lips together but doesn't argue about letting Neph help carry me. She lifts one side of me while he wraps his strong arms around the other. I revel in his strong embrace, but having my bestie help carry me really puts a damper on things.

They carry me out of the train, across the platform, and down a connecting tunnel.

“Wait,” I say when I spot a sign pointing toward Union Station. “Why are we going this way? Doesn't this lead to the subway?”

“I hope so,” Neph says.

“It does,” Fletcher adds.

“We aren't taking a luxury Uber? Or—” I'd shudder if I could, “—a cab?”

“Between the flight, the hotel room, the battery packs, and the ChorePossum...” Neph trails off, but I already know what she's going to say.

We can't afford it. It's bad enough being trapped in an espresso machine. But now I'm making my best friend and... employee? Crush? Whatever he is... suffer because of it. The subway is probably full of rats and more gross stains.

"How much does it cost to take a cab? Poor people do it all the time! Turn around!"

"But we're almost there," Fletcher says.

"I said I want to go the other way!" My voice grows louder and my knobs twist in annoyance—mainly at my own helplessness. I survived that one time I had to roll my friend up in a rug to smuggle her out of a drug lord's private jet, but now I can't even get myself to a cab.

A few people turn and stare, but they just keep walking. Either they're used to talking espresso machines—which I highly doubt—or they think it's a gimmick.

"Come on, Diva, the subway isn't so bad," Neph says.

"But a cab is better. Take the money from my account!" I get a salary for working in Neph's cafe. I have money, just not enough to hire someone to carry me to all the fancy resorts in the world. It's enough for things like food and clothes and jewels, but I can't eat and nothing fits me.

Neph helped me order a necklace once, but I had no way of wearing it. I asked her to tape it to my side, but it wasn't the same. Plus, it kept falling off, so eventually I just let her keep it.

"It'll take longer to turn around and go back," Fletcher says.

“Ugh, fine,” I snap. It’s not like I have much choice, since they are literally carrying me—I don’t even get to decide where I go.

They carefully shuffle me down a set of wide stairs. People—many of whom are dressed in suits—race past us on their way to wherever it is they have to be. Meetings, I guess?

Most aren’t dressed in nice, designer suits, so I don’t really pay attention. Though I do notice the man wearing a shiny Rolex. He’s carrying a briefcase, but isn’t hurrying along like everyone else. At first, I figure it’s because he’s rich, but then I realize he’s keeping pace with us.

It’s weird, because we are moving slowly. You’d have to be injured to walk any slower—and he’s not limping or using a walker or anything. He just stays a few feet behind us, like those bandits did when they’d confused me for the princess of Lenolia. Not that I blame them. I looked good before I died, and my outfits were worthy of any royal.

“Guys...” I keep my voice down so only Neph and Fletcher hear me, “is that man following us?”

“What man?” Fletcher looks back.

Neph does, too.

“The one wearing the Rolex. He’s on our right, a few feet back.”

“Whose feet? My feet? Or Nephrite’s feet?” he asks. “We have different shoe sizes.”

“What?” Neph asks.

“Um...” I say.

“I was kidding,” Fletcher chuckles. “We mostly use meters here in Canada, though sometimes we use feet.”

I giggle and look for Rolex Man—but he’s nowhere in sight.

“I don’t see anyone wearing a Rolex,” Neph says. “Not that I’d recognize it if I saw one.”

“How could anyone not recognize a Rolex?” I ask in disbelief.

Neph shrugs.

“I wouldn’t recognize one either,” Fletcher says.

I gasp. “I don’t see him anymore, but from now on, I’m pointing out every single Rolex I see. How have you survived this long without knowing what one looks like?”

Neph laughs like I’m joking, and Fletcher joins her.

I sigh. “I guess that man wasn’t following us after all.” It’s not like the old days, when I was rich and hot and had men following me across the world.

“It’s not every day you see two people carrying an espresso machine through the subway,” Fletcher says.

“Maybe he wanted a coffee,” Neph adds. You can take the barista out of the cafe, but apparently you can’t take the cafe out of the barista. Or the barista out of the barista? Girl thinks about coffee more than I do—and I’m the one who’s filled with coffee beans.

For the rest of the walk to the subway, I keep a lookout for Rolex Man, but there’s no sign of him. I do notice a slightly

stooped gray-haired woman following us. *Way to act paranoid, Diva!* She's probably just walking as slowly as we are because of her age. And like Neph said, she's staring at us because she wants coffee.

"The subway's just through there," Fletcher says.

A man holds the door for us, and Fletcher and Neph carry me inside. There are turnstiles up ahead, and Fletcher swipes his black Presto card. Neph—who picked one up at the airport—does the same. Apparently, espresso machines, like pets and children, ride free.

The old lady is still behind us. She lets a couple through the gate first, then follows and heads toward the exact same stairs Neph and Fletcher do. Probably because she's going to the subway too.

Something about her feels off. For some reason, she reminds me of the elderly man who stole my vape pen out of my hand in a billabong and then jumped into the swampy water and swam away.

I watch her, and because I'm a hunk of metal, she can't tell that I'm looking her way.

She passes in front of a poster about cleansing the city of rats—*ewwww!* I'd shudder if I could. At least seeing rats is better than flying in the cargo hold, and it's good that the city is doing something about the problem.

I refocus on the old lady, who follows us down the stairs. I'm convinced that she's tailing us, but I was already wrong once. I

don't want to be known as the espresso machine who cried wolf. I don't need Fletcher and Neph to think I'm paranoid on top of being useless and steamy—in the unwanted sauna way, not in the way I was before I died.

Fletcher and Neph pause halfway down the stairs for a breather. The old lady does, too. Maybe she's just tired?

But if she is following us, and I don't warn them, it could be another disaster like the time I didn't tell my friend that the guy she thought was a hot prince was just a theme park entertainer in costume.

“Okay, don't look, but that old lady is definitely following us.”

Fletcher and Neph both turn to stare at the old lady, which is the last thing you do if you're being followed. *Shit!*

Chapter 7

Diva

I glare at Fletcher and Neph. “I said *don’t* look at the old lady. That gives us away!”

Fletcher stares at the old woman despite my warning. “Hasn’t anyone heard of the white bear?”

“Hasn’t anyone dealt with being followed before?” I fire back.

Fletcher and Neph don’t answer.

“You’ve never dealt with thieves? Bounty hunters? Kidnappers? Exes? People who think you should be a model and want to take your photo but when you ask what agency they’re with, they run away?”

“Umm...” Neph says.

“No...” Fletcher shakes his head. “That happened to you?”

“I’ll tell you about it some time,” I almost add ‘over coffee,’ until I remember I am coffee. Well, not really... but definitely not someone he can have coffee with. Plus, this is so not the time to ask him out. “That old lady is definitely following us. She looks guilty as hell.”

A teenager with a skateboard rushes past us. His gaze drifts to me, and he mutters, “I’ll come back for you.”

“That was creepy,” I say. “Not as creepy as the guy who tried to sell me giant Q-tips at the corner of Broadway and W 120 St.”

“Ignore him like I hope you ignored Q-tip dude,” Fletcher says. “People are weird in the city, best to let it go.”

I twist my knobs in agreement, realize Fletcher probably doesn’t speak knobs, and say, “I completely agree.”

“But what if the old lady is lost?” Neph pouts. “I’ll go talk to her.”

“No! The first rule of being followed is to pretend you didn’t notice so you keep the element of surprise! That’s how I managed to kick the Maldivan bounty hunter in the dick.”

“Umm...” Fletcher says. “Or you can ignore them. Just don’t make eye contact or talk to them, and you’ll be fine. That’s how we do things here in Toronto. We try to keep dick-kicking to a minimum.”

“Even that nice old lady who might be lost?” Neph says.

“She probably knows where she’s going better than you do,” I tell her.

“Still!”

“We have somewhere to be,” I add, because unlike Neph, I don’t feel the need to make friends with—or take care of—literally everyone I meet. Though I should be grateful. She

gave me a place to stay and brought me all the way to Toronto when I asked. Who else would do that?

“Look at her,” Neph pleads.

I do and realize that she does look pretty confused as she frowns and turns her head from left to right as though she’s not sure where she is.

“Okay, let’s talk to her,” Fletcher says. “On three, walk back up the stairs. One... two... three...”

They need to plan ahead just to move me around. How sad is that?

I can’t wait to get my fortune back. I’ll pay someone to design me a jetpack that I can control with steam. Then, I’ll be unstoppable.

We stop next to the old lady, and her eyes widen with panic.

“Ma’am, are you lost?” Fletcher asks gently. He sounds so kind and caring, and it warms my heart.

“I... don’t know how I got here,” the old lady says.

“You see?” Neph says triumphantly. “You have to check on people!”

I’d grimace if I could. I settle on turning my nozzles instead. The one time I’m wrong about a random weirdo, she’s a lost old lady.

“You don’t remember walking here?” Fletcher asks.

“No.” The woman’s voice is shrill with worry. “I was heading toward the Metro Toronto Convention Center and now I’m...”

She looks around, brows furrowed.

“You’re at Union Station,” he tells her.

“I didn’t mean to come here.” She sounds dazed. “Why am I here?”

Neph and I both look at Fletcher. The ChorePossum is a local, so if anyone would know, it’s him.

“I’m not sure, ma’am. Is there someone I can call to come get you?”

“My daughter...” the woman hesitates. “But I don’t want to worry her. I know how to get where I’m going. Thank you for checking on me.”

She turns away and heads back the way she came.

“That wasn’t normal, right?” I ask.

“Maybe it’s a city thing?” Neph suggests. “I’d be so lost without Fletcher.”

I feel an irrational wave of jealousy. Neph has four mates. Well, three considering one of them is the other’s dick—long story. But, either way, she wouldn’t have set her sights on my—I stop the direction my thoughts are heading in. Fletcher isn’t my anything, and he never will be. Not even when I get that jetpack.

Maybe once I can afford it, I can look into artificial lips? I shove the thought away. Who would want to make out with a machine?

“People don’t usually get lost on routes they travel often. Unless it’s in the PATH. Everyone gets lost in the PATH.” Fletcher says. “Could be memory loss from old age, though. One of my regular chores is to read a chapter a week to seniors at a nursing home—they’re really short-staffed right now—and there’s one man who keeps asking who I am and why I’m starting the book in the middle.”

“I guess memory loss would explain it...” I say. But something about the situation doesn’t sit right with me.

Like that time a merchant in Bangkok tried to pass off counterfeit bags as designer, and I knew right away something was off. My friend didn’t believe me and bought one, but then her bag fell apart and she dropped her phone into a squat toilet while she was peeing.

Fletcher and Neph didn’t see how intently that old woman was watching us as she followed us all the way here. They didn’t notice the man in the suit, either. My gut tells me something’s wrong—I just don’t know what. Or why anyone would want to follow us.

“I guess we should go?” I finally say.

“Aye, aye, miss,” Fletcher says and winks.

He really shouldn’t do that, because I almost steam him.

Neph and Fletcher set off downstairs. We reach the platform, and as we wait for the subway to arrive, I spot something small moving along the tracks. Something gray and fluffy,

with a long naked tail and adorable beady little eyes. And a wad of cash strapped to his back—way to go, little guy!

He's such a handsome little rat, I think. Look at his sexy bare tail and his one chewed ear. That must mean he's a strong fighter.

I want to pet him. I want to hold him close. I want to lick him, and kiss him and...

What the fuck, Diva? It's a tunnel rat!

He seems to feel my gaze on him,, because he stops scurrying and stands up on his hind legs to stare back at me. My nozzles feel tingly, and I spin them wildly so I don't blow any steam. Last thing I need is for Fletcher and Neph to drop me onto the dirty floor—or for them to stumble off the platform and fall on the tracks.

Tracks where that rat is. He could reach for me with his sexy little hands and turn all my dials. He could nibble on my nozzles while Fletcher sticks his tongue inside my water reservoir.

“Diva!” Neph gasps.

I stop the spray of steam shooting out of my nozzle and onto the train tracks. “Sorry, sorry. I saw a rat!”

“Someone wants a coffee,” Neph says cheerily. “That's so cute!”

I feel a wave of jealousy for a second before it dawns on me that Neph definitely means ‘cute’ in a pet sort of way and not in an ‘I'm going to claim that rat as my mate’ way.

There is definitely something wrong with me. Being switched off in the cargo hold must have scrambled my circuits. Do espresso machines have circuits? I honestly don't know what is inside me except for metal, water, and coffee beans.

Scrambled circuits would explain my attraction to the rat—and to Fletcher. It probably explains why I thought those people were following us around, too. And the best thing for me to do is to forget about all of it and focus on getting my fortune back.

Chapter 8

Rollo

My second-in-command, Aero, races across the train tracks toward where I'm standing. "What are you looking at, sire?"

"Would you please refrain from calling me that?" I twitch my whiskers and turn my gaze back to the espresso machine. Why has it captivated my attention thus?

"Whatever you wish, sire."

I grimace.

I've been the King of Mischief since my father passed away six years ago, but it still feels odd to be called sire by a gentleman twice my age. I grew up calling *him* sir. Aero was my father's second and my fisticuffs instructor when I was a young pup.

"What are you staring at, *King Rollo*?" Aero tries again.

"That's hardly better." I let out a sigh filled with longing. "I'm gazing at the espresso machine on the platform."

"The red one those two humans are ferrying?"

“It’s... beautiful, like the full moon after a snowstorm.”

Aero is silent for several long moments. “Are you craving a coffee, sire? I saw a discarded Tim’s cup on the tracks further down the platform. Would you like me to retrieve it for you?”

“It’s not that.” But what else could it be? Why else would a coffee machine be so enchanting? “I thought I had defeated that habit after I became ill from a spilled frappe, but I suppose not.”

Aero scratches his ear. “Unfortunate, that.”

I shake my head to clear the caffeine craving, but my gaze shoots right back to the espresso machine. I want to run my paws over its metal sides, feel its nozzles, and groom its beautiful metal casing.

“My liege...” Aero lifts his snout and sniffs the air. “The pizza is here. We had best get to it before we miss it again. You know how hard it is to convince anyone else to deliver here. We’re fortunate that business is slow at the Pizza Pizza on the corner.”

“I know, Sir-Aero... Serro! Aero! I mean Aero...”

“You are not acting like yourself, *sire*,” Aero says. I’m sure the use of my title is intended as a subtle reminder of our difference in status.

“I do not know.” I glance longingly at the espresso machine and lick my lips. I can almost taste its hot, bitter juices and—

“I shall intercept the pizza delivery and leave you to your gazing,” Aero says. He races toward the beam that lets us

climb from the track to the platform.

I'm almost tempted to abandon our quest and follow the espresso machine instead. But tonight's meeting is one that my Mischief shouldn't face on empty stomachs. I'm also troubled to realize that Aero can chase down the pizza fellow, but he cannot pay him. The paper currency is strapped to my back with a tiny belt that I chewed out of a much larger, human-sized belt—and pizza only comes to those who pay.

I wrench my gaze from the red metal beauty and scurry after Aero. I catch up to him on the main platform. A few people shriek and leap out of our way—the usual reaction to our presence when we're in rat form. No complaints from me, as the crowd clears a path for us—as is befitting rat royalty.

It would be more convenient to shift at times like these, but impractical. It is not safe for our kind to traverse the tracks in human form. To shift on the platform is pure folly. If anyone observes humans absconding into the tunnels, they'll take notice—but no one gives a whisker if rats do it.

To make matters worse, there are security cameras everywhere. Humans carry portable phones, too, and I know of the damage a single video on the world wide web can cause.

We cannot risk revealing that paranormal creatures dwell in the subway tunnels of Union-King and Union-Andrew. The last thing the rat community needs now is more angry humans.

“Over there, sire,” Aero calls. Quite unnecessarily, I might add.

The tall fellow with a mop of curly green hair is carrying the pizza box that houses our extra-large cheese pie. He stands out easily from the crowd—as does the delightful scent wafting from him.

Aero races toward him, but I hesitate. The espresso machine tempts me from across the platform, and my gaze drifts toward it. I long to lay my eyes on its metal casing, but my lower vantage point only allows me to see the legs and bottoms of humans crowding the platform.

Fuckwittle.

I almost race in the direction of the red beauty when Aero shrieks.

I whirl toward the sound.

“Flee, flee, you dirty human,” Aero shouts at a middle-aged woman who has one hand on our pizza box.

“Rat!” she screams, swinging her high heel to try to kick my second-in-command.

Aero parries, like a well-trained rat does. He sprints up her panty hose, and she caterwauls and does a ‘get him off’ jig with a lot of wild arm movements and leg kicks. She almost looks as though she’s drowning.

Aero tumbles off her leg and rolls into a furry gray ball as he lands on the ground.

“Aero?” My heart clogs my throat. Is he hurt? I dash toward him, swerving around heels, boots, flip flops, and toes that I wish I could unsee.

Aero uncurls from his ball and shakes it off. "I'm all right, sire. But our pizza is in trouble."

"I'll just take the food I ordered. Thanks," the woman directs the falsehood at the pizza guy.

That urine-soaked jolterhead.

"Okay, ma'am. That'll be twenty-four, ninety-nine. I don't have a signal down here, so I only take cash," the delivery fellow says.

I pick up my pace.

"What the actual fuck? You want me to pay for it?" the woman demands.

"That's how it typically works, you wagtail," Aero says as he scurries up her leg to her stomach in a flash. His rat game is an art.

She hears his words as squeaks, then screeches and skedaddles down the platform. "Get it off!"

"Ma'am, your pizza!" The delivery fellow takes off in full pursuit. "You owe me twenty-four ninety-nine!"

I chase after them. I need to pay him and recover my Mischief's dinner.

Every time we order a dratted pie, tomfoolery like this occurs. That's why it takes the King of Mischief and his second to pick up pizza. I'm not risking any other Mischief rats just so we can acquire delicious fresh grease for lunch.

As a train pulls into the station, the pizza-thieving woman darts inside in a crazy dance meant to dislodge a rat. People give her a wide berth—she looks like a complete blunderbuss.

Where's Aero? If he doesn't abscond soon, the train will pull away with him on it—and being trapped in an enclosed space with a crowd of humans is not a fate I would wish on any rat.

My heart nearly stops until I see him scurry out the door just as it slides shut. *Thank the gods he's safe.*

The pizza delivery fellow hangs his head and heads back the way he came.

Something draws my gaze back to the train, and I spot the espresso machine—as shiny as fresh pizza grease—through the window. And, suddenly, the train's doors open again.

This is my chance!

If I don't follow the espresso machine onto the train, I'll never see it again. If I do, I'm as good as dead. But the thought of never seeing it again and never finding out why I want to lick its nozzles and rub its dials makes my chest ache more than a day without any cuddles or grooming.

If it were just my own fate on the line, I'd board the train. But my presence is required at the Mischief meeting, and I need to retrieve the pizza for my people. They're counting on me.

As the delivery fellow trudges away from the train, I make my choice and race after him. I intercept him, stand on my hind legs facing him, and wave.

He stumbles to a stop and stares down at me.

I lower my front legs so he can get a better view of the money strapped to my back.

“Ohhh,” he says as it dawns on him.

He crouches down to slip the money off my back. “I had a pet rat when I was a kid. Tried to give him a dollar bill once, but he tore it apart and ate the pieces. I always did think he was a smart little guy, though.”

“He wasn’t a shifter,” I tell him. He doesn’t speak rat or understand me, but it seems like the polite thing to do. Better than standing here and staring at the fellow.

“Here you are.” He places the pizza box on the floor and takes a step back. “Would you like me to carry it somewhere else for you?”

I shake my head no.

“Okay then.” He watches me to see what I’ll do next.

“Aero?” I call.

My second scurries over, and we each grab a side of the box in our mouths and drag it to the edge of the platform. Letting go, we push its side with our noses until it drops onto the tracks.

“So that’s how you do it,” the pizza fellow comments.

Aero and I race down after the box, grab it again, and drag it into the tunnel, where our Mischief safely awaits to help carry it back to our home.

As they take over lugging the box, I pause to stare down the tracks towards King Station, where the train had gone. My

stomach twists, and I sigh. Even though I know leaving the espresso machine was the correct choice, some part of me dissents.

I have always trusted my instincts in the past. Should I have done so this time?

“King Rollo, King Rollo!” One of the little pups scampers past. He has hopeful, beady eyes that remind me of me when I was a youngin. He lost his dad, just like I lost mine. I know from experience how that changes a rat. “Is it true that there’s a general meeting happening now? The tunnels are quiet, and there’s a rumor going around that almost every rat who’s of shifting age is required to attend.”

I give his head a quick lick to comfort him. “You are years away from shifting, Smartie. You should not be thinking of such things.” And yet here we are.

“All the kids are talking about it, sire. They say there are posters in the subway declaring that the humans want us all dead. Is it true, sire?”

“We’ll keep you safe,” I tell him. Not much else I can say. “I promise.”

Smartie stares at me with trusting eyes that I’ve done nothing to deserve. This month alone, our Mischief lost nine rats, including his father. If we don’t come up with a plan, we may lose a whole lot more.

Smartie joins our small procession, and we head toward the meeting hall. The little rat veers toward the nursery in the

children's wing, while we turn right and keep going.

Our realm is a part of the subway that the humans started on but never completed. The rooms must have been used for storage at some point—but we've repurposed them for our needs.

We keep part of Union Station and all of King Station clean—picking up human litter and lost items and bringing them here to decorate our rooms. Abandoned coffee cups, boxes, gloves, and miscellaneous items found on the tracks serve as seating, bedding, and decoration.

Inside the meeting room, pizza boxes stacked almost as high as my six-foot human form serve as my makeshift throne. Over a hundred rats are in attendance—almost every adult, minus those who remain in the tunnels to stand guard or watch over the pups.

“What are we doing about the murders?” one of the rats in the crowd shouts.

A roar goes up, everyone starts shouting questions, and I take a deep breath. “You're not going to like what I'm about to tell you, but we don't have any choice.”

Chapter 9

Fletcher

My dick twitches as Nephrite and I carry Diva out of the subway. If she was a person, I wouldn't be surprised—but she's an espresso machine. I've seen some weird things as a ChorePossum, but this is something else.

We shuffle our way down King Street, careful not to crash into pedestrians. The crowd keeps our conversation to a minimum, which gives me a chance to process.

But by the time we reach the office building where Diva and Nephrite plan to interview the talking mug, I've come to a conclusion: I have the hots for a fucking espresso machine.

"I demand to see Milan Del Ray!" Diva declares a bit too dramatically as Nephrite and I carry her into the building lobby.

That must be the mug's name. Oooh, he must be made in Italy. Fancy.

"No." The receptionist's shrill, nasally voice echoes through the lobby. Her curly hair is piled high on her head. Her eyelashes are so long they're visible from across the lobby,

and her lips are painted a bright pink that takes me back to a childhood spent blowing way too many Hubba Bubba bubbles. “Now go away.”

She doesn't seem surprised that Diva is a talking espresso machine, but then again, she's a receptionist for a talking mug. I raise my eyebrows. “Isn't it your job to direct visitors?”

She looks us over and curls her lip. “*You* don't have an appointment.”

“This is important,” Nephrite says.

Diva starts spinning her nozzles wildly. “It's a matter of life and death and money!”

A bit dramatic, considering it's just a mug—unless that mug is her soulmate.

A crushing weight settles on my chest and makes it hard to breathe. Carrying the rather heavy Diva doesn't help matters much.

I hold her more tightly to my chest and focus on the feel of her pressing against my pecs and abs in a metallic caress. My heart beats against her cold, metal side while she crushes it with her desperation to see Milan.

I never thought I'd be jealous of a mug, but a part of me hopes the receptionist never lets us through.

“Oh, you want money? Sorry, but we don't help panhandlers here,” the receptionist says as she flicks her fingers at us. “Be gone from my—”

Hot water erupts from Diva's nozzles, and the receptionist lets out a shriek.

"How dare you call me a panhandler?" Diva shouts as she continues to spew water across the lobby.

This is one hell of an interview. If I thought mine was going to be like this, maybe I would have shown up.

"Turn that thing off!" the receptionist cries.

"I'm not a thing!" Diva shouts.

"She's a person!" I add.

"Diva, stop before you run out of water," Nephrite says. "You know how much you hate when that happens."

Diva lets out an audible sigh and stops spewing hot water all over the floor.

The receptionist reaches for something on her desk, and I realize it's a tissue box a split second before it hits me on the side of the head.

"What the actual fuck?" Diva cries as it thumps to the floor.

"I could have caught that," I tell her, "but I didn't want to drop you."

Diva lets out a hiss and her nozzles start to spin. I've gotten to know her well enough during the train ride to know that spinning nozzles are not a good thing.

"Are you going to clean up that mess or what?" The receptionist pointedly drums her long, pink, claw-like fingernails on the wooden desk. "Well? Get to work!"

I frown. “We’re not here to work. We’re here to interview someone for a job.”

“What?” Nephrite and Diva ask at the same time.

I glance between them. “Aren’t we?”

“Umm... Diva?” Nephrite says.

“Fine.” Diva huffs. “Okay, here’s the deal. I’m Diva Del Ray, heiress to the Del Ray fortune. Technically, my sister was first in line to inherit, but she died. Well, technically we both died, along with our parents, but I’m still here.”

I can’t even begin to process the fact that there’s a fortune she’s supposed to inherit, or the fact that she died.

“Thirty-three billion, and you know who got it all? Milan Del Ray. But Milan Del Ray doesn’t exist.”

I frown. “If he doesn’t exist, how did he inherit it? And aren’t we here to see him?”

“Mr. Del Ray definitely exists. He owns this entire building.” The receptionist curls her lip again. “I’m supposed to believe this working-class *machine* is the heiress to the Del Ray fortune? You’re a con artist, and a poor one, at that.”

“If I was a con artist, would I come here in an espresso machine? No! I’d come in a sexy hot body with designer clothes and a handbag that cost more than your house. Con artists have to look believable, like that super old lady who claimed to be Queen of England when she sold my friends and me LSD by the London Bridge.”

“Umm...” I say and trail off because I honestly don’t know how to react to that story.

I have about a hundred follow-up questions that I struggle to hold back. *When were you in England? You tried LSD? Why was an old lady selling it? Why did she pretend to be the queen?*

I know this isn’t the time, or the place... but I have a hell of a time holding them all back.

The receptionist’s nostrils flare. “Clean the floor or get out of the building before I call the cops.”

Diva trembles against my hand and my chest. I didn’t know an espresso machine could do that. “Put me down on the desk.” Her voice is cold as the lakeshore on a winter night.

“Maybe we should go,” Nephrite says. “I don’t want to get handcuffed again. No one should ever be handcuffed outside the bedroom.”

I nod in agreement. “And I can’t skip a job interview and get arrested in one day. My mom would have an aneurysm.”

Diva shakes even harder, and I worry I’ll drop her. “Milan stole my money. I’m not leaving until I get it back.”

Nephrite and I share a glance. Staying is important to Diva, but she can’t actually do it without our help. She can’t go anywhere unless we carry her.

But if we stay, we’d probably get arrested, and I’m not sure what the police do with possessed espresso machines who

break the law. Unplug her? Seal her in a box like they did at the airport? Throw her in a dumpster?

“Put me on the desk,” she repeats in that cold voice.

I glance between the desk and the door.

Chapter 10

Fletcher

The receptionist glares at us from her desk. “I’m going to count to five, and then I’m calling the police.”

“Please, help me,” Diva’s voice cracks. She sounds like she’s going to cry.

“One,” the receptionist says.

I squeeze my eyes shut.

“Two.” The nasally threat echoes through the lobby.

I know that staying is a terrible idea, but I can’t stand the idea of letting Diva down.

“Three.”

I tune out the annoying sound as the ache in my chest grows. I can’t be the monster who carries Diva out of the building steaming and screaming. Even if it means getting arrested and dropping my mom’s already low opinion of me another notch.

“Four.”

I glance at Nephrite, then down at the espresso machine who can make my chest tighten with a single please. “Let’s do

this?”

“Five.”

Nephrite’s shoulders droop in resignation. “I really hope my guys don’t have to fly to Toronto—”

“I said five!”

“—to bail me out of jail. They’d do it in a second, but they’ve got so much going on right now—”

The receptionist picks up her phone. “I’m warning you!”

“We should probably...” I gesture at the desk with my chin.

Nephrite nods.

We shuffle toward the receptionist, who glares at us as she hovers her finger over her phone. Our shoes slip and slide on the wet floor, but we manage to keep our balance and set Diva on the desk.

Now that we’re close, I can see that the woman is wearing a name tag that reads ‘Molly.’ I inhale sharply, and her scent wafts into my nostrils. *Penguin shifter.*

“I’m calling the cops,” the receptionist says.

“Nice hair,” Diva tells her. “It would be a shame if someone were to... steam it!”

“Shit,” I cry as steam pours out of Diva’s every nozzle—even ones that aren’t supposed to produce steam. Not that I’m an expert when it comes to espresso machines, though I definitely plan to be. I want to know everything about her—and each one of her knobs and nozzles.

The steam envelops the desk and the receptionist, blocking both from my view. I'm glad that when Diva steamed me it wasn't this thick, because the place is starting to look like a rave filled with fog machines.

“Aaahhh, my perm!” The receptionist—who's fittingly named after a drug—screams from inside the cloud of steam. For a split second, I see a penguin, but then she shifts back to human. “I'm going to press charges. I'm going to make sure you spend the rest of your lives in jail.”

The rest of our lives in jail? I thought we'd get arrested and sent home with a warning. At most, I pictured us spending a few hours behind bars until Ben could get away from work long enough to bail us out. *But actual jail? Jail jail? Jail?!?!*

Anxiety swirls in my gut, and my mouth drops open of its own volition to show off my teeth.

“Don't worry, they can't arrest an espresso machine,” Diva says.

“But they can arrest us!” I say. Because of my open mouth, it comes out mumbled and slurred.

I don't think anyone understands me. *We're doomed!*

My arms and legs go as stiff as concrete. The world tilts and I fall backward. *Oh, no! Not now!*

My back slams into the floor and pain reverberates through my spine. I'm getting too old for playing dead. But hey, at least it didn't happen while I was holding Diva—if she'd fallen on top of me, things would have been way worse.

I stare up at the ceiling, unable to move a muscle. I can't even manage to blink.

"Oh, god, is he dead?" Molly screams.

Diva's steam must have cleared already, or how else would she be able to see me?

"No, he's—" Nephrite starts, but Diva cuts her off.

"Yes, and you'll be next if you don't let us through to see Milan."

Yep, we're definitely going to be arrested now.

I hear the sound of water spraying from a hose—likely Diva shooting it from a nozzle—and the receptionist cries out. "Aaahh, hot. Hot. Hot!"

Something clatters to the floor. I hope it's Molly's phone.

"Nooo, I'm out of water," Diva cries.

"Security!" Molly screams at the top of her lungs. "Security, help!"

"There's security?" Nephrite squeals.

I'm surprised Molly didn't just call them earlier. She probably *wanted* to get us arrested instead. She seems like the type.

"Shift into a pony!" Diva cries. "They can't arrest a pony."

"They can call animal control on a pony," Nephrite shouts. "That's probably worse. I don't know where they would take a pony. I wouldn't even get one phone call as a pony."

I probably won't get one if I still look dead when security arrives. Maybe I'll end up in the hospital instead of jail. That won't be so bad. Now the morgue—I do not want to go through that again.

Nephrite must have taken Diva's advice, because a Shetland pony dashes past me on her short legs. I see her in my periphery as she circles around me.

“Molly has her phone again. Stop her!” Diva cries.

I have no idea if she's talking to me or Nephrite the pony.

I strain every muscle, urging my limbs to move so I can help her, but it doesn't work. I have no control over my possum paralysis—I can't decide when it happens or when it ends.

Ben is the only one who can talk me out of the paralysis. What does he always tell me? *You're brave and strong and scary, and the threats will run from you.*

My legs twitch, but I can't seem to get any other movement. *Fuckkk, come on body, come on!*

Nephrite—still in pony form—races straight at the reception desk, which looms over me directly in my line of vision.

She leaps into the air like she's trying to clear an extra tall hurdle, but her short pony legs can't quite do it. Her stomach slams onto the desk, and she lets out a pained neigh. Her legs hang over either side, and she kicks her hooves into the air. But she stays firmly stuck on the desk.

Shit. Now none of us are able to move—or do anything to get out of this mess.

“Get away from me!” The receptionist covers her face with her hands. She peeks through her fingers like she’s expecting to see something entirely different and lets out another shriek. “This can’t be happening. Please don’t kill me! I’m just the receptionist.”

“It’s going to be okay, Molly. You’re just on drugs and this is all a bad trip,” Diva tells her calmly. Guess I’m not the only one who’s noticed that the receptionist shares a name with ecstasy.

“We’ve all been there. Once I was at a club that used to be a CVS, and the shelves were all still intact. So I took some Flintstones Chewable Vitamins I found because I hadn’t eaten yet that day, and it turned out they weren’t Flintstones vitamins. I don’t know what they were, but I came to in a rice paddy in Malaysia with a guy who looked like an Asian David Bowie... but like, the young David Bowie, you know? Anyway, he wasn’t even that hot. The point is, you’re having a bad trip, and you just have to stay calm and find your Asian David Bowie and ride it out.”

Molly stares at her with wide eyes. I can’t move my own eyes, but my mind races with a gazillion questions I want to ask Diva, starting with: for real? Followed by: can we hang out more because you sound like fun?

Molly blinks at Talking Espresso Machine Diva, Pony Nephrite who’s stuck on her desk, and Playing-Dead-on-the-Floor me. Then she lets out an ear-shattering scream.

“Get me out of here!” she shouts and runs for the front door.

“Well, that’s one problem taken care of,” Diva says cheerfully. I can almost picture her dusting off her hands.

I’m not sure there’s anything to be happy about, but Diva’s bright tone makes me feel warm and squishy.

“Now, can we go refill my water reservoir and find Milan so I can steam him until he admits that he’s a fraud?”

Nephrite shifts back into her human form and slides off the desk. “Where am I supposed to get water?”

“The bathroom? A water bottle? Anywhere but the toilet!” Diva lists options in quick succession.

“You’re too big to fit in a bathroom sink! And I don’t see a vending ma—”

“What’s going on here?” A deep baritone echoes through the lobby.

Neph lets out a very fake cough that sounds a lot like, “Human.”

“Shit,” Diva mutters, then falls silent so she doesn’t freak out the guards.

Two security guards come into view and loom over my still paralyzed form.

Move, Fletcher, move, I urge my body. Diva needs you! She’s out of water and can’t burn the guards. My arms twitch and I manage to blink for the first time since I started playing dead. Ahhhh, that feels good.

“Umm...” Nephrite clears her throat. “I’m delivering an espresso machine to Mr. Del Ray. The receptionist was about to let us up, but I think she’s having personal issues today. She started crying and ran out.”

“What about this guy?” The guard nudges me with his boot. “And why is there water all over the floor?”

“Molly spilled her water everywhere. She had a bit of a breakdown?” Nephrite doesn’t sound very convincing.

“Do you think I was born yesterday?” the guard demands.

If I don’t do something, and fast, we’ll be tossed out. Our battle with the receptionist will be for nothing, and Diva may never get to confront Milan.

Come on, come on, you’re strong and scary and have big teeth—I repeat the only words that have helped in the past, but it doesn’t work. *Come on. Diva needs you.*

My fingers twitch at the thought of the espresso machine.

“I’m going to have to ask you all to leave the premises,” the guard says.

No. No. No. No. No. You’re strong and scary... I start to repeat Ben’s words again on autopilot as the guard stares down at me, but it doesn’t work. Thinking about Diva earlier did—at least, it made my fingers move—but that wasn’t enough. Should I try to think about her some more?

“Sir, you’re going to need to get up, or we’ll be calling the police,” the guard snaps.

I don't have much time. I need to think of someone, and I need to do it now. Diva or Ben? Diva or Ben?

I clench my jaw and fix my gaze on the shiny espresso machine. *Do it for her.*

Chapter 11

Fletcher

Diva sits helplessly on the receptionist's desk, but I can practically feel her eyes on me. *She needs me, and I need her.*

I picture her on the floor next to me, caressing me with short puffs of steam as she tells me about her adventures. I want to learn everything about her—from her childhood, to why someone decided to throw a party at a pharmacy.

I start to smile and realize that my jaw muscles move. The rest of my body is nice and relaxed, and when I try to sit up, my muscles instantly comply.

The security guards take a startled step back. "I was starting to think you were dead," he mutters.

"Wasn't going to be the one to say it," the second guard, who actually seems like a pretty chill guy, grins. "What were you doing on the floor, man?"

"I was just... ummm... looking for a loonie I dropped. Oh, there it is." I pretend to pick up an invisible dollar coin and jam my empty hand into my pocket.

Nephrite gives me a weird look. I wonder if she thinks it's a terrible excuse or if she just doesn't know what a loonie is.

"I thought you might have slipped on the water the receptionist spilled," the guard says. "But hold on to that loonie. There's one bag of ketchup chips left in the vending machine, and it could be yours."

The grumpier guard, who's clearly in charge, groans. "Go back to your post, Donovan. I'll take it from here."

"Yes, sir." Donovan grins. "Need a hand up, man?"

"Thanks, man." I take his proffered hand and climb to my feet.

"No problemo." He grins again and strolls off at a leisurely pace.

I turn to face the other guard. Nephrite's clearly a terrible liar, but I have decades of experience. I've been deceiving authority figures for as long as I can remember: making up excuses to teachers about why I forgot to finish my homework; telling bosses why I was late for work; telling other bosses why I forgot about my shift; convincing my parents I had a good reason for not doing my chores, for getting bad grades, and for getting fired—again.

"Sorry about the mess. Molly spilled her water bottle as she ran outside. I think she's not feeling well." I drop my voice conspiratorially. "Stomach issues. She sounded embarrassed."

"Oh... she shouldn't have just left. There are protocols for these things," he grumbles.

I shrug as though to say ‘it’s not my problem.’ “We’re here to deliver this espresso machine to Mr. Milan Del Ray. It’s a special custom-made Italian coffee machine designed specifically for his upscale needs.” I hate talking about Diva as though she’s an object, but I get the feeling that she appreciates the fact that I’ve called her upscale. That and it’s the only way to get the very human guard into letting her see Milan. “You know how these high-flying executives love their overpriced coffee.”

“True. What’s wrong with a simple double-double?” he complains.

“I hear ya, man.”

I think we’re connecting here and I’m winning him over until the guard eyes me. “Why are you damp?”

Oh, right, the steaming. “Molly spilled water on me when she rushed out.”

“That’s a lot of water.” He doesn’t look convinced.

“We also jostled the espresso machine carrying it here. I forgot all about that after the whole scene with your receptionist. It was a bit traumatizing... and quite frankly, unprofessional. I’m considering lodging a formal complaint.”

The guard looks a bit taken aback. “I can assure you that the matter will be handled.”

“I sure hope so!” I say.

The guard seems to decide that I’m too weird for his tastes. “You, leave.” My heart drops. Despite my best lies, I failed to

help Diva get to Milan.

He turns to Nephrite and Diva. “You can take the machine upstairs.”

Yes, success! I start to smile before forcing it away so the guard doesn’t notice.

“I can’t carry her myself,” Nephrite says. “I need Fletcher’s help.”

“Donovan,” the guard snaps. “Get back here and help the lady with her delivery.”

“Whatever you say, boss.” Donovan strolls back at a leisurely pace. I like the guy.

“Keep an eye on them,” the guard tells him before shooting me a dirty look and heading back the way he came.

“Can you give us a moment?” Nephrite asks Donovan.

“Sure thing, miss!” Donovan strolls to the other side of the lobby.

“You sure you’re going to be okay going up there without me?” I ask.

“We’ll be fine,” Diva says. “Thank you for getting us past Molly and the guards.”

“Anything for...” you, I want to say. But that will sound too forward, won’t it? Especially when we only just met. “For a client,” I finish instead.

“We’ll be sure to give you a five star-rating on ChorePossum,” Nephrite adds. “And a tip.”

For once, I don't even care about the rating or the money. "Are you staying near here?"

"Yes, we got a hotel. It has a jacuzzi. I'm going to try to use it!" Diva says.

"Won't you sink?" I say. "Or get electrocuted?"

"It's not so bad. I was electrocuted in a hot tub at a Bar Mitzvah."

"Umm... that sounds painful."

"I was too high to notice. Long story." Diva laughs, and I can't help smiling even though I have no idea what she's talking about.

"You'll have to tell me all about it after you're done here. I'd be happy to wait outside and help you guys get to the hotel, and we can talk on the way?"

Diva doesn't say anything. I can't tell if she's thinking, or frowning, or smiling, or what, because she doesn't have a face.

She twists her knobs, and my heart starts to race. Then she turns her nozzles, and my palms start to sweat.

I don't speak espresso machine, but my gut tells me she's agitated. I must be wrong, though, because she sounds perfectly calm when she says, "That won't be necessary."

My heart drops into my gut like a stone through rotten ice.

"Are you sure, Diva?" Nephrite hisses.

"I don't mind waiting," I add. "You don't even need to hire me for another chore. Consider this one on the house."

“I’m sure,” Diva’s voice is tight. “Thank you for your help, Fletcher, but we’ve got it from here.”

“Diva,” Nephrite hisses.

“Neph,” Diva hisses back.

“*Diiii-Vaaaaaaa!*”

“Neeeeppphhhhh.”

I glance between them. *What the hell is going on?*

Nephrite sighs. “Thanks again, Fletcher.” She waves Donovan over, and he skips across the lobby to join us.

“You’re welcome,” I try to sound cheerful, but it comes out as flat as a can of pop that’s been left out for too long. Something that seems to happen every time I get distracted.

I head toward the exit and pause to look over my shoulder. I can’t tell if Diva’s looking back at me, but I school my features into indifference just in case she is.

Donovan and Nephrite pick her up and slowly make their way toward the elevators. How dare this random man touch my Diva?

Except she’s not mine. She didn’t even want me to stick around. But I still wish those were my hands on her cool metal surface.

I want to race after them and take his spot hauling my beautiful espresso machine. But if I do, she’ll never get to confront Milan—and somehow, in the span of a few hours, her happiness has come to mean more to me than my own.

Sighing, I turn and head through the sliding glass doors back onto the street. Sirens wail just down the street. Flashing emergency lights reflect off nearby building windows. It's not an uncommon sight, but I'm still curious to know what happened.

Police cruisers have blocked off a section of the road, and two ambulances are parked behind them, next to a red car that's halfway on the curb.

Shit, it must have been an accident. Fucking drivers in this city, man. First Mrs. Ellis, and now this.

I take out my phone and open the ChorePossum app. My throat closes up like that time I tried to swallow a jawbreaker whole. I'd like to say I was a kid, but I was not. And yes, Ben did pay me ten bucks when I won that bet.

My finger hovers over the 'mark chore as complete' button for Nephrite and Diva's job. If I tap it, I'll never see her again. If I don't, I won't get paid—or be able to take on another chore.

I'm already short on this month's rent, so I force myself to hit the button and accept my two hundred dollars, plus tip. Nephrite left twenty percent. I feel a wave of guilt at accepting money for carrying Diva, even though I've earned it.

A new job pops up almost instantly. Help a guy coordinate a flash mob for his proposal for five hundred—easy, fun, and just enough to cover rent.

But if I go, I won't be back by the time Diva's done confronting Milan. What if she leaves and I never see her

again? Or something goes wrong and she needs my help?

What if Milan calls the police and Nephrite is arrested and Diva is unplugged and dumped in the trash and I never know, so I can't rescue her, and... and...

I stare at the office building's door as my finger hovers over the Accept Chore button.

Chapter 12

Diva

We exit the elevator on the top floor. Neph and Donovan carry me through a sliding glass door into a gleaming reception area. To the right, there's a floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the Toronto skyline. If I had any water left in me, I'd drool.

It's been so long since I was somewhere with a view of anything other than the cafe and the loch across the street. The shining skyscrapers stab at the sky like spears. The CN Tower rises above them all, looking the same as it did that time a Danish drag queen and I mooned people through the glass floor. Good times.

"Welcome to Del Ray Enterprises." The receptionist behind the desk greets us with a sunny smile.

She's the exact opposite of rude penguin receptionist Molly. Her hair is blonde, she's wearing zero makeup, and her style is understated instead of in-your-face like Molly's.

"Hey, Barb," Donovan greets her. "We've got a delivery for the big boss. Fancy coffee machine. Nephrite here says it comes all the way from Italy."

“That’s right.” Neph doesn’t quite meet Barb’s eye. “It’s super expensive.”

“Is that right?” Barb asks.

Oh great. Another gatekeeper and I’m all out of water. I feel all dried out, like that time I accidentally ate silica packs that had fallen into a bowl of tabouli. I may have been drunk... or stoned... or both.

“Very, very, expensive,” Neph says. “Custom-made.”

“Mr. Del Ray will love that,” Barb says. “ Please step right through the security scanner and come on in.”

“Oh... is it safe for the espresso machine?” Neph asks.

Ah, crap. I forgot about that. I’ve been through hundreds of scanners at airports all around the world, but never as a machine. Even in New York, I bypassed it entirely and ended up in cargo—an experience I’d prefer not to repeat.

“Of course,” the receptionist says. “Donovan, miss, just walk all through and stand right there.”

Neph and the guard shuffle into the center of the metal doorway with me in their arms and stand still as it scans us.

This Milan has a hell of a lot of security. He must be expecting trouble—for the first time, doubt creeps through me like a rat inside the walls of a house. I could always talk my way into or out of anything before now, but... what if Milan doesn’t listen? What if he responds by throwing me out—literally—and arresting Neph?

“All clear,” the receptionist says. “Come on in.”

“This way,” Donovan says to Neph, even though there’s only one way to go.

They carry me to the receptionist’s desk and place me down on its shining glass surface.

“I’ll just let Mr. Del Ray know you’re here,” Barb smiles and taps the bluetooth device in her ear.

There’s a loud, piercing scream.

Neph jumps. Donovan yelps. I look around wildly.

“Raccoon!” Barb screams. “Get him.”

Raccoon? I scan the floor, but there’s no sign of the creature. I check the couch against the wall and the... well, that and the desk and the scanner are the only things in this room. No sign of a raccoon.

“Security? We have a raccoon on the southwest side, penthouse level. I repeat, we have a raccoon on the southwest side, penthouse level.”

It takes a few seconds for me to process her words, and I snap my gaze to the window. I only see buildings, clouds, and—

My thoughts trail off as our eyes meet.

In that one moment, time stands still. The shouts around us fade into background noise, and it’s just me and the adorable little creature sitting on the outside window ledge.

He stares right into the office building, his eyes trained on me just like mine are on him—not that he can tell.

The raccoon's fur looks soft and fluffy and clean. His whiskers are long and give his face a softer, sweeter air. The black circles around his eyes lend him a mischievous look, and I wonder—

“How did it get up there?” Neph asks for me. This is why we're besties. The girl read my mind. I just hope she's not as attracted to the raccoon as I am.

“He. Is. Mine!” I snap.

“What?” Neph asks in surprise.

“That's your raccoon?” Donovan asks. Loudly. Very loudly. He spins around to look at Neph and me.

“Security!” Barb shouts.

As if on cue, the elevator opens behind us with a ding. A dozen security guards rush out and race across the office floor, heading straight for the window, guns drawn.

“Shoot to kill!” one of them shouts.

“But it's just a cute raccoon!” Neph cries.

“Don't hurt him!” I scream at the same time.

“They're a plague on this city,” one of the guards snaps. “Help me open this window.”

“Leave him alone,” I roar. I didn't know windows this high even opened up.

I try to shoot steam from my nozzles. All I do is make a sputtering noise, and nothing comes out. All my tubes feel like a throat with strep now, rough and raw. Even heiresses get

strep throat—and that was a very unpleasant way to spend the New Year in Paris.

Wait. I still have coffee beans left inside me!

I turn my attention inward and find the tube that sends the beans to the grinder. If I throw ground coffee at them, it would be the equivalent of slinging mud with an extra dose of pick-me-up. If I'm going to do damage, I need to attack with actual beans!

It takes effort—like weightlifting, just without any of the good post-workout burn. I jerk the tube so it faces outward and take aim.

“Beans, away! Pew pew pew!” I shout, but nothing happens.

Fuck. Okay. I need to push!

I bear down like I'm... well, going to the bathroom. The beans tumble into the tube and fly out, right at the guards.

“Take that!” I yell as I fire bean after bean.

Baseball was never my thing in life, and coffee-bean throwing isn't really my thing in death. Beans bounce against arms, legs, backs, butts, ears and temples. They fly everywhere.

The guards don't react. I focus and shoot them faster.

“Donovan. Get Mr. Del Ray out of here,” Barb orders.

“What should I do with his coffee machine? Did you see how it's programmed to talk? It must be really, really expensive!”

“Just do as I say,” Barb snaps. Donovan salutes and rushes through the sliding door and down the hallway.

A guard slides the window open and a gust of wind roars through the room. He sticks his gun out the window, aiming at the raccoon.

I scream and aim my beans at him, but he doesn't lower his gun.

“Neph, do something!”

Chapter 13

Diva

Neph glances between the guard aiming a gun at the raccoon and back to me. “What do I do? There are armed guards everywhere!”

“Something! Anything? Get me water! I’ll burn them.”

“I... um...” Neph looks around and shakes her head. “There’s no water! Wait, I know.” She pulls out her phone and points it at the guard. “Going live from Milan Del Ray’s personal office, where he’s just ordered security to kill Toronto’s unofficial mascot.”

I can see her phone screen from my vantage point on top of Barb’s desk, and it’s not even on. It’s a clever lie, though. Nobody wants the bad press of killing the cutest raccoon I’ve ever seen.

“Wait!” Barb shouts.

The guard with the gun aimed at the raccoon pauses and looks over his shoulder at us. It’s a huge mistake, because that’s when the raccoon strikes.

He leaps at the guard and clamps down on his wrist with little raccoon teeth. Little raccoon hands grab the guard's sleeve and hang on for dear life—literally, since he's hanging off the guard's arm fifty stories above the city.

The guard screams and shakes his arm, trying to knock the raccoon off. "Fuck, it's rabid!"

My heart nearly stops; or it would, if I had a heart. Fear races up every electric nerve ending, and the urge to run into the fray and save the raccoon is almost overwhelming. The only thing that saves me from getting shot—or tossed off the fiftieth floor—is the fact that I'm an espresso machine, so I can't move.

"Go, little guy!" Neph calls, cheering the raccoon on. "You can do it!"

"You got this!" I add my voice to the cheer.

The raccoon gnaws on the man's arm like I did the first time I gave a blowjob—what? My date called it a boner. I thought I was supposed to treat it like a bone. That's why it's important to be more specific.

A second guard rushes forward and grabs the would-be raccoon killer. He yanks him—and the raccoon—into the office, and I feel a wave of relief. Until he raises his gun.

I scream even louder than I did when I met my favorite boy band on a cruise to see the shark sanctuary in the Bahamas. Then, I aim my coffee beans at the guard. I try to hit him in the

eye, but his head is turned to the side and they bounce against his temple instead.

Nephrite screams, too. She grabs the wireless keyboard off Barb's desk and throws it at the guard. It thunks against his head, and he lets out a curse. Why didn't my beans have that effect? I shot them as hard as I could!

The keyboard is enough of a distraction for the raccoon to leap off the man's arm and back out through the open window.

I let out another scream.

To my relief, he lands on the ledge and runs along it and around the corner of the building.

"He made it!" He's safe!

"Raccoon is on the move, I repeat, raccoon is on the move," Barb says into her earpiece. "Heading north along the west side of the building."

Half the guards race down the hall Donovan took. A guard grabs Neph's wrists while two more haul me off the desk.

"Let us go!" I demand. "Or my lawyers will hear of this." Okay, I don't have lawyers anymore, but that line always worked before.

Neph struggles against the man pinning her arms. When that doesn't work, she shifts into a pony and kicks her hind legs.

Her hooves collide with his nuts, and he screams in pain as he falls to the floor. *Yes, go Neph!*

Two guards rush at her.

“Watch out!” I shout, but it’s too late.

They grab her mane and yank hard. She lets out a pained neigh. My heart clenches at the sound of my bestie’s suffering, but all I’ve got that’s of any use are coffee beans.

I push down hard so I can shoot some at the guard, but nothing happens. *Fuck! I’m all out.* “You will be charged with assault,” I shout instead.

“Get these raccoon lovers out of here,” Barb says, her once-friendly tone now as cold as a chair in an ice hotel. I sat on one naked when I dated a nudist, and that shit hurt. The worst part was when my vag stuck to it because I was already wet—long story about a long man.

The guards pull on Neph’s mane again, forcing her to hobble backward toward the elevator. Two others carry me while I shout, “You will lose your jobs over this. Don’t you know who I am? I’ll sue you into oblivion, you pieces of shit!”

I wish I hadn’t used up all my water on Molly. She wasn’t even worth it. How was I supposed to know security would be so tight up here? I guess when you steal someone’s fortune, you hire lots of guards. Lesson learned.

As Neph and I are hauled into the elevator, a man surrounded by armed guards marches into the reception area.

Boiling rage takes flight in my circuits.

I recognize him from the cover of Forbes’ Top 30 Under 30 list. He’s wearing a ring on every finger, each with a gem as big as an eyeball. I wouldn’t be surprised if he stole them off

the cups at Jewels Cafe like he stole everything else. His skin is so perfectly tanned I bet it was spray painted on—and he probably skipped out on the bill. He’s wearing an Armani suit—assuming it’s not a counterfeit.

A hissing growl escapes all my nozzles.

Milan Del Ray.

“You!” I roar. “You thieving, lying shithead!” A Rolex peeks out from beneath his right sleeve. “That’s my fucking fortune, you fuck!”

He turns his head and stares right at me. His eyes widen, and I feel a wave of triumph.

“I’m here to get my money back, you fucking douchebag!” I shout as the elevator door starts to slide shut. “Open the elevator door! We have to go back. He stole my money. He’s a lying thief. An impostor!”

Neph shifts back to human form and tries to reach for the elevator button, but the guards grab her. They completely ignore me. They don’t even dignify my words with a response.

I silently fume for the remainder of the elevator ride. When the door opens on the main floor, the guards take Neph and me to a door that exits out into the alley. For a split second, I wonder if they plan to kill us, but they just lower me onto the ground and head back inside.

”Get back here and take me to see Milan!” I roar, but they just lock the door behind them.

Neph sighs and sits on the ground next to me. “I’m so sorry, Diva.”

I wish I had water left so I could cry from my nozzles. But I don’t, so I just sit there, unable to do anything.

“We’ll think of something,” Neph says. “I mean, yes, most of your ideas are crazy—but crazy is good! Milan won’t expect crazy. You’ll find a way to get your fortune back.”

I have crazy ideas, shit tons of them, but they all require a body—and money—to carry them out. I don’t know how to best a rich asshole when I’m so helpless I need people to carry me. But Neph is giving me a forced smile to try to cheer me up, so I force some cheer into my voice. “Hell, yeah. We’ll think of something.”

Neph pats my side. “In the meantime, I’ll call Fletcher to come get us—”

“Don’t bother,” I say.

What would be the point? It’s bad enough I’m trapped in an espresso machine—but without my fortune, I’m completely worthless. I can’t afford the steam-powered jetpack that would help me get places on my own. I can’t hold Fletcher or kiss him or go on dates. Why torture myself by keeping him around as a constant reminder of what I can’t have?

“But I can’t carry you on...” Neph trails off when a minivan pulls into the alley and squeals to a stop in front of us, and she jumps to her feet.

I open my water reservoir lid in a gape. “What the?”

A man wearing off-brand short-shorts, flip flops, and nothing else leaps out of the passenger side door and picks me up. Fuck, the guy has to be on steroids.

“Let me go,” I shout. “Who the hell are you?”

He tosses me into the backseat of the cheap-ass van as though I’m as light as an empty tote bag. Thankfully, the seats are cushy—though I don’t even know if falling would hurt. Neph and her mates have always been super careful. A bit of rainbow fluff sticks up above the driver seat. What the fuck?

Steroids slides the door shut, and panic grips me. I feel like I’m locked in a coffin. Like that time when a magician asked me to be his assistant, but then ran off with my purse and left me in the box.

“Neph!” I scream. “I’m being kidnapped! Espresso-napped? Whatever! Help!”

Neph grabs Steroids’ arm as he climbs into the passenger seat, but he shoves her away. She stumbles backwards, then launches herself at him again while I scream.

Chapter 14

Ben

I pay the Korean street food vendor for lunch and meet up with Fletcher in front of an office building on King Street.

“How was your chore, possum?” I chuckle at my own joke. I swear, it never gets old.

Fletcher doesn’t laugh, even though I’m hilarious. “An espresso machine gave me a boner. She’s in that building.”

That’s a new joke. “Haha, good one.” I hand him the topokki and a bottle of juice. “I made it myself at the juice bar in my office’s gym! Just the juice. I tried to make topokki there once but they told me I wasn’t allowed to bring a hot plate into the gym.”

“Makes sense.” He bites into the spicy rice cake. “This is great. Thanks! And I’m serious about the boner. I think I’m the first possum to get an erection while holding an espresso machine.”

“Boners happen everywhere,” I tell him.

A bearded homeless man passing us on the street pauses and does a double-take. I try to wave at him, but I’m holding

topokki on a stick so I just end up waving the food in his general direction.

He gives me a look and walks away.

“Scratch that...” Fletcher takes another bite of food. “I’m probably the first man in the history of mankind to get aroused by a hunk of metal.”

“Wouldn’t be so sure about that. Not that I’ve done it—but I’m sure someone has.”

Fletcher grins. “Okay, what about a hunk of metal that belongs in a coffee shop?”

“Wouldn’t be so sure about that, either. You really gotta find a girlfriend, man. Someone sweet.”

“Says the guy who hasn’t had a girl since Veronica. How long ago was that? Two years?”

“Three. I’m waiting for the one. My soulmate...” I stare up at the sky and smile as the word makes my insides warm. “Besides, I’m not the one who gets turned on by a hunk of junk.”

“Junk? I dare you to say that again!” Fletcher opens his mouth wide to show off his teeth—and his unchewed food. It’s the possum equivalent of a glove slap across the face.

“Whoa, man. I’m not judging.” I raise my hands defensively in front of me, juice in one and topokki in the other. “Your kink isn’t my kink. I get it.”

Fletcher's brows furrow and he purses his lips. "Don't know why I reacted that way. Just got this sudden urge to defend her."

"Her who?"

"Diva."

"Who's Diva?"

"The espresso machine, man. Keep up."

I grin. "You named her." I mean, dude named his PlayStation, so I'm not surprised. He's got a whole machine fetish going.

"I didn't name her. She had a name already."

Of course! The machines at work all have names. The printer's called Xerox, and the coffee maker's Keurig, so why wouldn't the espresso machine be Diva? "Hey, whatever floats your boat and warms your heart, man. Just don't try to hump a coffee machine in public—or the one at home. Not that I drink coffee, but—"

"I wouldn't do that! I... think?"

"Mmmhmm," I say, unconvinced. "So why are we standing out here? Oh! Let me guess." I've made a game of figuring out Fletcher's chores, since there is no rhyme or reason to them.

"Rating the smells of different street corners?"

Fletcher snorts. "Try again."

"Catching window washers if they fall off buildings?"

"Not this week."

I spot a cargo van with the words ‘Movin’ On’ painted on the side in big bold letters. “Helping someone move in exchange for free beer and pizza?”

“I only did that one time! And it was worth it. The pizza was gourmet and the beer was... a little off. They brewed it themselves, but it was still worth it!”

I make a face at the idea of slightly off beer. “Tasting juice?” I ask hopefully and raise my eyebrows at him—left, then right, then left, then both.

He chuckles and holds his topokki in his mouth while he untwists the bottle cap. Removing the topokki, he takes a swig of my concoction and swirls it around in his mouth. “Not bad. What is it?”

“My personal ABC blend.”

“Oh yeah.” Fletcher grins. “What was that again?”

“Apple, beets, and carrots.”

“Urgh, why would you mix those three things?”

I frown. “You don’t like it?”

“I mean... it’s... healthily delicious?”

I wiggle my eyebrows again. “Wow. That’s exactly what Ellen from the cubicle next to mine said! But then I saw the bottle in her trash can with all the juice still in it.”

“Ummm... she must have dropped it.”

“That’s right! She probably did!” I grin. “And I still need to guess your chore.” I glance around.

“Actually, I—”

“Oh, I know!” I gesture to the woman playing guitar on the other side of the street. “You’re out here listening to buskers to learn new songs for that old woman you sing lullabies to?” I trail off as I think of a different elderly woman. “Poor Mrs. Ellis.”

Fletcher’s face falls. “She deserved better.”

“I’m really going to miss her cookies. And her tea. She’d always put a bit of milk in it. It really brought out the cookie flavor. We should have some tonight in her honor.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Fletcher nods morosely. “You know, I’ve been thinking about it, and it seems strange to me that she was out here in possum form, and not human.”

“Maybe she liked the feel of the night wind on her fur? I like to be naked outside sometimes, but humans can’t do that, so I shift and walk around. Maybe she was doing that.”

“Mrs. Ellis doesn’t seem like the type.”

“She could have been a nudist, you don’t know that.”

“Could be.” Fletcher doesn’t sound convinced. “But she hated downtown.”

“She did. She liked to say that there’s nothing good south of Sheppard—except me when I go to work, of course. And you, Fletcher. I’m sure she meant both of us.”

He shakes his head. “Something feels off. I’ve been thinking of talking to her wife tonight, but... I don’t know. What do

you think?”

“I think you should trust your instincts,” I tell him. “Plus, we should offer our ordinances—”

“Condolences,” Fletcher corrects.

“Right, condolences, to Mrs. Jones. We can bring oatmeal raisin cookies. Mrs. Ellis always said they were her wife’s favorite.”

“We’ll go as soon as you’re done working—and I’m finished helping Diva.” Fletcher nods. “That’s why I’m out here. I’m waiting for her and Nephrite.”

“Oh, there’s a second espresso machine? Or is Nephrite a... a... teakettle?”

“What?” Fletcher finishes his topokki and tosses the stick in the trash. “No, Nephrite is her friend.”

“Her mug friend?”

“No, Nephrite is a pony.”

“Ponies like coffee?”

“Pony *shifter*, man. Pony *shifter*. She owns a cafe in the States. That’s where Diva’s from.”

I scratch my head. “So you plan to buy Diva from Nephrite?”

“I... I don’t know. I haven’t thought that far ahead. I just want to see her again and be with her, you know?”

“Oh...” This machine fetish is getting a bit weird, but I would never kink-shame someone, so I turn my head away from Fletcher before he notices my ‘what the fuck, man’ expression.

As I do, I spot a minivan pulling out of the nearby alley. Normally, I wouldn't even notice a random minivan in a city full of them—but there's a clown with a puffy red nose and a rainbow wig behind the wheel. Shouldn't he be in a very tiny car?

The shirtless, tattooed bodybuilder in the passenger seat grips the dashboard. He looks like he'd enjoy my special ABC juice.

And then I spot it—the large, red espresso machine on the back seat.

Chapter 15

Ben

I turn from Fletcher to the minivan and back again. “Your espresso machine... is she red?”

“Yeah,” he says with his mouth full.

The espresso machine in the minivan is red. I can’t seem to take my eyes off it. “Hmm... is she very shiny?”

Fletcher sits up a bit straighter. “Yeah, that too.”

A Shetland pony races out of the alley and chases after the van. “And does Nephrite have a round stomach and short little legs?” I ask.

“In pony form, yeah. How did you know all that?”

“They’re right over there.” I point down King Street, where the van skids to a stop behind a street car. Nephrite the pony catches up to it and lifts her front hooves onto the back bumper like she’s trying to hold the car in place.

Fletcher stands and gazes at the van with wide eyes. “That’s Diva!” He breaks into a run, dropping the open bottle of ABC juice I made for him. Sticky red liquid pours out onto the sidewalk. It looks a lot like blood.

“What a waste,” I say as I bite into the remaining topokki. Why is Fletcher chasing after Diva? Wouldn’t it make more sense for her and her odd-looking friends to join us instead? Maybe he’s asking them to come over.

“I could make ABC juice for everyone!” I shout after Fletcher.

“They’re stealing Diva!” he shouts back.

I blink in surprise. How dare that clown take my best friend’s... girl? Machine? Sex toy? Whatever she is, she matters to Fletcher, so I break into a run toward the minivan.

Luckily, I do my best thinking at the office gym, so I have no trouble catching up to Fletcher. We’re halfway to the van when it tries to change lanes. A cyclist zooms by, and the sound of squealing brakes echoes down the street as the van stops on a diagonal, nearly hitting the middle-aged man in spandex.

Our sneakers echo on the pavement as Fletcher and I race toward the van, and I finally get a closer look at the shiny red espresso machine.

She makes my heart race. Like I’ve been running a whole lot longer than I already have.

The entire world comes to a halt in that one moment—and I do, too. Mouth agape, I stand and stare at her, transfixed by her beauty.

“Soulmate,” I say.

Wait, what? Is a fetish for coffee machines contagious? Did I catch it from Fletcher?

I don't have time to wonder about it now, because Diva is being kidnapped. I break into a run again.

I stop to hand my untouched ABC juice to the homeless man from earlier and race after Fletcher, who's almost reached the van, the pony, and my beautiful espresso machine.

I can't wait to wrap my arms around her and nuzzle her cool metal side. I don't drink coffee—I've never liked it—but I'd learn to, for her.

Fletcher pounds on the passenger side window of the minivan. "Open up!"

I reach the side of the van and stop. What do I do? What do I do? The last fight I was in was in elementary school—I skunk sprayed a bully and nobody ever tried to fight me again. They called me Smelly Ben, though. So it wasn't a complete success.

Fletcher opens his mouth wide to show the kidnappers his teeth—his possum's way of convincing the enemy to back off because he's one scary fucker. The shirtless bodybuilder in the passenger seat stares at him, but doesn't open the door.

Nephrite turns around and kicks the back door with her little pony legs, making the van shudder. The clown still doesn't let Diva out.

I need to help my soulmate espresso machine, so I grab the driver's side door and pull.

It opens several inches before the clown yanks it shut and the lock clicks. So much for that.

Then, my skunk instincts kick in, and I stomp my feet at the van and the kidnappers inside it. Stomp. Stomp. Stomp. I feel like a motherfucking godzilla—if he was a skunk.

The clown behind the wheel stares at me for a second and then shouts at the traffic to move. Who tries to make a getaway on King Street anyway?

I finally realize the stomping isn't working—or it's working too well, and the kidnappers are too scared to come out. My skunk side sure seems to think so.

Escalation time!

I drop to a crouch, place my hands on the pavement, and flip into a handstand. In skunk form, it makes me look bigger and scarier to scare off predators—and warns them that stink is coming. In human form, my feet don't quite make it, and I drop them back to the ground.

My skunk wants me to shift—since the move is much easier that way—but then I'd be too short to reach the van's windows.

Handstand! My skunk side shouts.

“Neigh!” Neph shouts as she continues to buck against the bumper.

“Open up!” Fletcher shouts.

He bangs on the van door while I throw my weight forward again. I almost get my legs up to a hundred and eighty degrees before they drop back to the pavement. *Fuck!*

The streetcar blocking the van in starts to move. The kidnappers hit the gas and pull away down the street. Nephrite races after them, darting between two lines of traffic so she can follow alongside it.

“Nooo!” Fletcher screams, but instead of giving chase, his whole body goes stiff. *Fuck!*

“Not on the road!” I yank him onto the sidewalk so he doesn’t get hit by a car while he’s playing dead.

Then, I race after the van. “Get back here with my soulmate! I think! Maybe!”

I stop yelling because I need to save my breath. I dart between the two lanes of traffic. Horns blare and people shout at me out their windows, but I don’t stop because I have an espresso machine to save!

I manage to catch up to the van in no time. Partly because traffic is always slow downtown and partly because I can run really fast. I can’t wait to tell my boss! And to think he was ‘concerned’ I was spending too much time at the gym. *Take that, Billy!*

When I reach the driver’s side door, my skunk urges me to get into another handstand. But that didn’t work last time—and I’m worried traffic will start moving again and I’ll get hit by a car.

Which gives me an idea.

I race in front of the van and block its path. “Stop!”

The clown narrows his eyes at me, but I can't help but chuckle at his bright red nose and painted-on smile. I always wanted a birthday clown.

The van shoots toward me, and my heart leaps into my throat. The clown is going to run me over! I'm a goner, just like poor Mrs. Ellis.

Then my shifter instincts kick in again.

Skunk shifters are good jumpers. We have powerful back legs, and the leg press at the gym is an added bonus. I leap and land on the hood of the van.

Momentum slams my body onto the windshield, and my face hits the roof, right next to the open sunroof. "Take that!" I scream.

I grab onto it and hold on for dear life as the van swerves through traffic.

From here, I get the perfect top view of my espresso machine soulmate, and I gaze down at her and take in all her glory. She's got nozzles and dials that I wouldn't even know what to do with—and she twists and turns them in a way that makes me dizzy.

"I swear if you don't let me go I'm going to sue!" she screams at the kidnappers.

I guess the clown and bodybuilder have lawyers on retainer just like my boss, because they don't seem the least bit spooked.

“I’m going to save you, sweetheart!” I shout at the espresso machine.

“Shit. Where’d you come from?” she shouts back.

“I’ll tell you after I save you!” I shout back.

Now, how do I save her?

I glance behind the van, but there’s no sign of Nephrite. The pony shifter must have gotten left behind. But I spot a raccoon racing across a car roof further down the street. It runs from the roof to the front hood, then jumps on the car in front of it, slowly gaining on us.

I’d be more shocked at the sight if I wasn’t hanging off a car roof myself.

“Close the sunroof,” the clown yells in a gravelly voice that sounds like it would scare children.

Crap! If I don’t do something fast, they’ll crush my fingers or I’ll fall off the van into traffic.

“I don’t know how this fucking car works,” the bodybuilder says as he pushes buttons at random. The windshield wiper squeaks, then slams into my leg.

“Ow!” I cry.

“Turn that off and close the roof!” the clown snaps.

“Fuck, fuck!” The bodybuilder hits another button, and pop music blares.

“What the fuck, man? That’s clearly the radio.”

“Vans still have radios?” He flips the music off.

“I like Q107,” I offer. If they’re going to play music again, it might as well be something good, especially since the next song I hear might be my last.

The van comes to a sudden stop, and I nearly fly off the hood. *Anal glands!* I should jump off while I can. It’s the smart thing to do. Next time, I might fall into traffic and become shifter roadkill. Then, instead of paying condolences to poor Mrs. Ellis’s wife, people will be bringing meatloaf to my dad and Wife #12. But if I leave, I won’t be able to rescue the espresso machine sitting helplessly at the back of the van.

Instinct tells me we belong together. She’s mine, and I’m hers, and I can’t leave her behind. I know she’s made of metal. I made fun of Fletcher because a coffeemaker gave him a boner—and I feel a wave of jealousy and rage, because Diva is mine, and even my best bud in the whole wide world can’t have her. I’d give him anything—except her. She’s mine.

And if I don’t want to lose her, I have to act fast and risk it all. Because what I’m about to do might just get me killed.

Chapter 16

Rollo

“Are you sure this is a wise plan, sire?” Aero whispers as we scurry along the dimly lit tracks toward Union Station.

The subway is eerily quiet. There are no echoes of human conversations, no distant music from buskers, and none of the hum of electricity from the subway tracks like there usually is during the day.

“Please refrain from calling me sire,” I scowl at my second. “Don’t tell me you’re experiencing second thoughts. Everyone at the meeting concurred that this was the best course of action.”

“I would never act against the will of the Mischief, my liege. I am merely reminding you that I wouldn’t trust the Union-Andrew rats as far as I can throw them.”

“Are we throwing Union-Andrew rats?” Glosette, one of my soldiers, perks up.

“We are not throwing anyone. We are negotiating an alliance.”

Glosette flattens her ears, the rat equivalent of pouting. “But I distinctly heard Sir Aero say that we would throw them.”

“It was a turn of phrase,” Aero says. “Though I wouldn’t be opposed to a good throwing, if the king were so inclined.”

“Toss the Andrews, toss the Andrews,” Glosette chants.

“There will be no Andrew-tossing,” I snap. “We need this alliance. The city’s anti-rat initiative is killing us off. The Union-Andrews are our only hope—and we are theirs. We need to join forces.”

“I hope they concur with your plan, sire,” Aero says. “However, I cannot help but feel that it is... unbecoming to deal with those gollumpuses after our sixty-year schism.”

Of course my fisticuffs teacher would focus on the old rivalry between the Union-King and Union-Andrew Mischiefs. I twitch my whiskers in annoyance. “Why should we keep fighting for control of Union? It is an old, unnecessary battle. We have King and they have St. Andrew now.”

“That is not the reason for our tiff,” Aero says as he scurries along the top of the track as though it’s a tightrope. “Everyone knows it commenced when the Union-Andrews stole our delivery of a party-sized pizza. The bastards!”

“No, no, no,” Glosette shakes her small, furry head. “It began when they composed an insulting poem about our Mischief! Then we composed an insulting opera about theirs. Then they performed a play that called us flapdoodles. Of course, we

responded with an interpretive dance about their ailments and ___”

“Attention customers,” a robotic voice echoes through the subway, interrupting Glosette’s monologue. “Line 1, Yonge-University, has no service both ways between King Station and St. Andrew Station due to an electrical problem at track-level at Union Station. Shuttle buses are on the way...”

A cheer echoes through our delegation. Skor and Crunchie did a good job at chewing through electrical wires to shut down the station for the duration of our meeting. They were careful not to cut the lights though, since we’ll need to keep a close eye on the Union-Andrews.

I turn to face our delegation. “Regardless of how our feud began, it ends today. It is time, my rats, to convene with our sisters and brothers of Union-Andrew. Raise the flags!”

Glosette and three other rats rush ahead of us, carrying Starbucks stir sticks topped with brownish-yellow triangles. They were stained to match the walls at King Station and embroidered with a K sitting proudly atop a crown.

Behind Aero and myself, a dozen rats bang together cymbals made from bottle caps. They create an intricate symphony, a beat unique to our Mischief. It makes me puff out my chest and raise my chin in pride.

Across the tracks, the Union-Andrew rats advance. They carry their own stir sticks, with black and white flags that feature embroidered A’s sitting beneath angelic halos. It is difficult not

to roll my eyes, as there is little angelic about the Andrews during our rare interactions.

My father would roll in his grave if he knew we were forming this alliance—but it is the only way I can protect my Mischief. I just hope I haven't miscalculated and led my Mischief to our doom.

The queen of Union-Andrew leads her delegation toward us. A tiny cape embroidered with her Mischief's A sits on her gray shoulders, and a halo made of yellow wire is perched on her head.

“King Rollo of King,” she says, her voice echoing through the empty station. She purposely leaves out Union from my title as though the station isn't mine as well as hers. “'Tis been many moons since we laid our eyes on ye, has it not?”

I'd forgotten that Queen Lettuce has always spoken in the royal we. She sounds like she's a century or so behind my Mischief and our allies on this side of the subway line. I debate if I should speak to her in the more formal language of our forebears, but I don't wish to sound like a pompous back-biter.

“Queen Lettuce of St. Andrew,” *and not Union*, I silently add, “it has been some time. I'm grateful you have come this far to speak with me.”

“Twas no trouble for us. Tis only two steps from our kingdom.”

“And only one step from ours,” Aero says.

I shoot him a warning look.

“By virtue of your proximity to the exit.” She raises her nose higher in the air. “Why doth thou calleth this parley, King Rollo of King?”

“You’ve heard of the city’s anti-rat plans,” I tell her.

“How couldth we not? Those cursed banners sour the walls of our kingdom. Tis cruel to put photos of our dead cousins and parade them thus.”

“I wrote pro-rat poetry on one of them with a marker!” A young rat standing behind Queen Lettuce raises her little chin proudly.

“Hush, Princess Kale,” Queen Lettuce says. “Thou art here to learn statecraft, not converse in such shameful modern tongue.”

Kale’s ears press against her head. “My apologies, Mother.” She pouts and mutters, “It was a good poem, though.”

I try not to smile. I want to tell Kale that I’m sure her poem was inspired, but I need to stay on her mother’s good side.

I clear my throat. “The anti-rat plans pose a threat to both our Mischiefs. We have lost too many rats. In order to survive, we *need* to combine our strength as rats and fight back.”

“Doth thou wisheth to wage war against the City of Toronto?”

My whiskers twitch and I shake my head. “We already tried protests, to no avail. Have you not?”

“Of course we have. The human defenders of animals care not for subway ratkind.”

Around us, rats of Union-King and Union-Andrew nod in agreement, realize they’re agreeing with each other, and start scowling.

I hiss. “We have forged alliances with the Mischiefs on this side of the subway line. The Yonge Rat Collective has devised the RIES—the Rat Information Exchange System—but we can’t stop the threats against our kind without the help of the University Avenue Mischiefs.”

“What is this RIES you speak of?” Queen Lettuce’s whiskers twitch. “Do you propose a Mischief summit? Or a council, perhaps?”

“I propose we use the Ratanet. Aero?” I turn to my second, and he hands me the small device he’s been hiding in his paw.

Gasps echo through the Union-Andrew delegation.

“Queen Lettuce of St. Andrew, may I present the Rataphone,” I speak loudly, my voice squeaking far and wide so her people can hear. “The device I hold in my paw is sized perfectly for rat use, and scratch-proof so our claws do not need to be filed down. It is also connected to modems positioned strategically through our tunnels, allowing every rat to communicate in real time with the touch of a finger.”

Queen Lettuce wrinkles her nose distastefully. “Thou speaketh of a cellphone.”

“Rataphone,” Aero corrects.

“Cellphone,” Queen Lettuce repeats. “Do not lie to us!”

“A Rataphone is not one of those human devices made for entertainment,” I tell her. “It allows us to form a communication network so we can monitor the movements of city workers and pool intel about threats to ratkind. Our intent is to warn each other when traps are set or poison is sprayed.”

Queen Lettuce inclines her head to the side to indicate that I should keep going.

“Someone at City Hall is responsible for this campaign, and the Osgoode-Andrew and Osgoode-Park Mischiefs may have overheard something of use.”

“Thou wishes for us to call upon our allies?”

“Yes. And in return, we will bring forward the Eaton Center Mischiefs. If we pool all our resources, we may be able to get to the bottom of this.”

“An interesting proposition...” Queen Lettuce nods.

“And...” This is the part that was hardest to convince my people of. I know it may not go over well, and think back to Aero’s words. Am I sure that this is a wise plan? Truthfully, no. But I know it’s the only way to keep my people alive—assuming it doesn’t backfire.

I take a deep breath and face Queen Lettuce. “Any rat under threat can take shelter in an allied Mischief.”

“What?” Her squeak of shock—or possible dismay—echoes around her.

“If the city is spraying St. Andrew Station, we will welcome any Union-Andrew rats into our Mischief until it is safe to return.” I pause, waiting for her to see the benefit. “You will return the favor and welcome us if King Station is being sprayed.”

The Union-Andrew rats erupt in angry squeaks.

My Mischief answers with squeaks of rage and rushes forward to stand around me, ready for an attack.

Chapter 17

Rollo

Queen Lettuce recoils. “Thou asketh us to allow thou into our realm?”

My Mischief squeaks in outrage. I raise a hand to signal to them to stand down. They back up, all except for Aero, who stands guard between the queen and I.

A Union-Andrew rat scurries forward and stands nose to nose with my second. They stare each other down while I address the queen. “We shall allow you into our realm whenever the city is spraying or trapping.”

More angry squeaks echo from the Union-Andrews.

“If we don’t band together, we will keep dying,” I say over the clamor. “We need to share information and provide safe spaces for each other. It is the only way we will survive these difficult times.”

“This beith a thinly veiled excuse for an invasion,” Queen Lettuce says.

“It’s time to put our feud behind us.”

“I heard thou chanting about tossing Andrews,” the queen counters.

Fuck, Glosette’s chant must have echoed down the tunnel.

“A jest,” I say.

“Hehehe,” Glosette says, clearly not regretful of her chant.

I hadn’t planned on this part, but I’m left with no choice. “As a show of good will, your people are welcome to enter our realm first—”

Aero hisses in outrage. It’s a reminder that my father would never have allowed a Union-Andrew rat into our kingdom. Doing so now is a hefty risk.

If Queen Lettuce decides to use my invitation as a chance to invade, we could be exiled from our own station and rendered homeless in a city that already despises our kind. Or worse, forced to bow to her rule and grovel at the paws of Union-Andrews for the remainder of our lives.

Yet, if we do not work together, we may all end up dead at the hands of the city. “If the city chooses to spray poison along the University Line, your Mischief and your allies will have nowhere to flee. If the same happens along the Yonge Line, me and mine shall fall to that very fate.”

Queen Lettuce nods. “I seeith thy meaning. Seeking asylum beith one method to survive the city’s unjust cruelty. However —”

“My liege!” A hiss echoes from the back of the Union-Andrews.

“What be it, Applepeel? Come forth!”

A rat missing their right ear scurries up to Queen Lettuce.

“Another shifter is dead.”

She raises a paw. “Not one of ours, then?”

“No, my queen. The killer doth run over a penguin shifter—”

“A penguin?” No one rataphoned me about the dead shifter, so none of my rats must have been in the area. This is why we need an alliance. “Why would anyone shift into a penguin to cross a downtown street?”

“Indeed, why?” Queen Lettuce says in agreement.

“It has to be the Roadkill Killer,” Princess Kale gasps.

“*The Roadkill Killer?*” I turn to Kale’s mother. “Queen Lettuce of St. Andrew, is your daughter suggesting the recent roadkill shifter deaths are connected?”

“’Tis not a suggestion, ’tis a fact.” She inclines her head.

“Doth thou not know that every serial killer leaves a mark? The Roadkill Killer’s is a single red rose.”

“A single red rose...” I repeat, remembering one next to Smartie’s father. “Hell and damnation.”

My Mischief squeaks in worry. Fuck! First the city targets rats, and now someone is killing shifters, too?

My heart races with anxiety like a rat fleeing a cat. But I have to remain calm for my people. I have to remember to breathe.

“How long ago was the penguin killed?”

“At least forty-five minutes ago,” Applepeel says. “It doth happened on King, betwixt our station and yours. It hath taken me this long to run here.”

I groan. “If we all had the Rataphone, we could have alerted each other sooner. Perhaps even tracked the killer, if we were to work together. One of our strengths as rats is to observe, to go anywhere we please without anyone noticing. But that only works when we have many rats watching everywhere at once and pooling our knowledge. Then we can evade the city’s workers and track this killer.”

“Thou asketh us to use that demon-bedamned phone that humans use? They walketh like zombies born of the earth, yet already dead.”

I shake my head. “A Rataphone holds no such power over rats,” I say, holding up the device for her to see. “It is merely a tool, developed by the rats of the Yonge line.”

“I want one,” Princess Kale says. “Can it take selfies?”

“Where doth thou learneth such a phrase?” the queen snaps.

I decide the princess is my best chance. “It can take photograms so we can record any problems we discover to share with our fellow rats.”

“Or to spy on our Mischief with thy mechanical trickery,” the queen says.

“That isn’t our intention,” I say—dagnabbit, now I’m beginning to speak in the royal we.

The queen raises an eyebrow. “We art to take thou at thy word?”

As if on cue, my Rataphone begins to ring. I’m not an overly religious rat, but surely the goddess is smiling upon me. “Allow me to demonstrate,” I tell Queen Lettuce. I flip open the Rataphone and touch the plexiglass screen with a claw to answer the call. “Cheerio!”

“Oh!” the rat on the other line gasps. “I did not expect you, sire.”

I hate to put her on the spot, but we need to show the Union-Andrews how this works. “You shall be on ratspeaker in a moment,” I tell her and tap the icon with the rat holding a megaphone. “What news have you for us?” This time, I mean us as a Mischief—not us as in the royal we—thank heavens.

She swallows audibly. She knows where I am and must guess the Union-Andrews are here. “Sire, we have witnessed a kidnapping on King—a clown in a car... not a clown car, sire, a minivan, driven by a clown... kidnapped an espresso machine.”

My insides lurch. “Was she red?”

“The espresso machine? I don’t know, my liege. A pony and a skunk tried to rescue her. And she appeared to speak and be possessed.”

“A pony and a skunk?” Princess Kale pouts. “I miss all the cool stuff.”

“Daughter,” Queen Lettuce gasps. “You shall go to bed without berries—”

“Me, my liege?” a rat says from somewhere behind her.

“No, Berries, not thou. We speaketh of the food.”

Princess Kale lowers her head as her ears press flat. Poor thing. But then she whispers, “Perhaps the espresso machine is a Bayan...”

“A what?” Queen Lettuce demands.

No one else replies, so Princess Kale raises her head slightly.

“A shifter from Shifter Bay. They shift into objects, not animals. My witch fr... um, that is... maybe the espresso machine was targeted by the Roadkill Killer. Maybe they kidnap the shifters before they... you know...”

I suddenly feel sick.

I should be reminding Queen Lettuce that this is a most splendid demonstration of the Rataphone. Instead, my heart races and my stomach flutters like moths around a bulb.

It must be the same coffee machine I was drawn to earlier. I *know* it is one and the same. I am not certain how I know it, but I do. Call it instinct, call it fate, but I know it like I know my own name or the feel of my own whiskers.

I hold the Rataphone closer to my mouth and demand, “Which direction did they go?”

“They turned south off King, sire.”

They're heading this way. I can head them off and save the espresso machine shifter! But to do that, I shall have to end the summit with Queen Lettuce. If I snub her this day, she will never agree to another meeting. She'll lose any trust we might have begun to build between our Mischiefs.

I glance at Aero, who eyes the Union-Andrews as though he expects an attack at any moment. Glosette stands by his side, waving our flag above our heads as a reminder to the Union-Andrews of who we are.

I think of little Smartie, who stared at me with such trusting eyes. He believes I will keep him safe—even after I failed to protect his father.

If this alliance fails and the city sprays our stations, we will have nowhere to run. My people will die, choking on the very air around them. I need to stay here and convince Queen Lettuce to work together.

I squeeze my eyes shut. I can't abandon my sweet espresso machine. But that's crazy talk. Even if she's a shifter, not just a simple coffeemaker, she is a stranger. She is not family. My Mischief is. They are my priority.

If I am so desperate for coffee, I can raid a Tim's after hours and brew myself a fresh pot.

"Thank you for your prompt report," I tell my rat, then turn to the queen. "You see how quickly and easily information and warnings can be shared? Your Applepeel would not have needed to run here to inform you about the dead penguin. You would have known the moment he saw the new victim."

The princess glances at her mother hopefully, but the queen harrumphs. “We shall discuss this with our Mischief.”

She turns her back to us, and her delegation gathers around her in a tight circle. They start to whisper, but I can’t make out any words.

Finally, she turns back to us. “We have tookth a vote and shall accept some of thy mechanical squeak talkers for sharing warnings of poisons and traps.”

I feel some of the tension leaving my shoulders as the heavy burden of protecting my Mischief begins to lighten.

“However, we shall not allow thou to access our realm, and any attempt to do so will be considered an act of war.”

“Queen Lettuce—” I start to argue.

“We *toss* thy proposal back at thou,” she adds.

I sigh. Dagnabbit Glosette and her Andrew-tossing chant! Even if it was catchy. And becomes more and more tempting as Queen Lettuce and her delegation haughtily accept some Rataphones from my people before marching away to the beat of their bottle-cap drums.

“Do you believe they will provide accurate intel?” Aero whispers as we watch the Union-Andrews scurry back down the tunnel. “Or lure us into a trap?”

I swallow a lump in my throat like a piece of unchewed pizza crust. “Only time will tell.”

Chapter 18

Diva

The clown kidnapper takes a sharp right, and Steroids Man grunts in the passenger seat.

I slide across the minivan's back seat. The hottie on top of the roof lets out a yelp and holds on to the sunroof for dear life.

I can't hold on to anything—or help him—because I don't have hands. What if he falls? What if I fall?

If some part of me breaks, will it hurt? Will it cause permanent damage? What if my levers and knobs no longer work, and I can't do anything—not even make coffee? Or what if my would-be rescuer dies trying to save me?

I let out an outraged cry. “Hasn't anyone ever taught you how to drive? Get me out of here before I sue you into oblivion, you... you... clown!”

Why the fuck is a clown driving the getaway car? What happened to kidnappers wearing ski masks? Not that ski masks are a better fashion choice than pasty white makeup, a red felt nose, and a funky wig that sticks out over the top of the driver's seat—though, I do want to run my non-existent hands

through that rainbow hair. Maybe kiss that red nose—or, I guess, blow some air at it?

The fuck is wrong with me? Did the kidnappers slam whatever the equivalent of my head is against the side of the minivan without me noticing?

“I’m trying to help you,” the clown shouts—his voice a lot deeper and more gravely than one would expect from a children’s entertainer.

My nozzles twist like nipples hardening at the sound of his voice. What the fuck? I ignore it. “How is kidnapping helping me?”

Who kidnaps an espresso machine? What are they going to do? Force me to make them unlimited coffee?

“I’m fucking rescuing you!” the clown shouts.

“No, I’m rescuing her!” Car Surfer shouts. “She’s my soulmate!”

His words melt my metal insides... until I remember I don’t even know the guy. Claiming we’re soulmates is a bit much when we’ve never talked beyond shouting through a sunroof.

Focus, Diva!

“Hold on,” Sunroof Ninja says. Then he pulls his hot face closer to the sunroof and dives headfirst into it. But the window is too small to fit a man, so he hangs half in and half out with his legs kicking in the air.

And the worst part is that I can't quite get a look at his ass from my vantage point, and when his shirt falls down over his head, he's facing away from me, and I don't even get an eyeful of abs.

"This is so unfair," I wail.

"Fuck," the clown shouts a second later.

The car's brakes squeal. I almost fall off the seat, while above me, the Windshield Hunk starts to swing back and forth like a human pendulum.

"Shit!" I shout. "Shit, shit, shit."

Pendulum Hottie screams.

I wish I could help, but all I can do is shout at the clown.

"You're going to get us killed, you fucking maniac!"

"I'll save you," the Rooftop Spider-Man above me shouts.

Suddenly, he shifts. An adorable, fluffy skunk drops onto the parking brake. He looks like an adorable, tiny surfer trying to balance on his back paws. I try to smile at him, but can only turn some of my dials upward.

"Shift back and grab the wheel!" I shout at the skunk.

He jumps on the parking brake instead.

"You have to press the button!" I scream.

He raises his tail, stands on his front paws and aims his ass right at the clown.

For the first time ever, I'm glad I'm an espresso machine. I guess there are times when it's nice not to have a face—or

nose.

The clown coughs and starts to swear. So does the Steroids Man in the front passenger seat. Guess the skunk must have done his thing.

I do a mental happy dance. “Go skunk go!”

“Stop!” the clown shouts. He sounds like he’s in pain. I shove away the urge to help him.

“Fuck, fuck, fuck!” Steroids Man shouts. I don’t feel the least bit bad for him.

“Pull over before my skunk bodyguard sprays you again!” It’s always good to pretend you have a bodyguard when dealing with thieves and kidnapers. It tends to scare them.

“Skunks can only spray once,” the clown says.

Can they? I’m glad I don’t have facial expressions, or my frown would have given me away. “Skunks can spray all they want,” I say with a confidence I definitely don’t feel. “You show him, bodyguard... McGee!”

The clown—despite being, you know, a clown—might be right, because the skunk doesn’t spray. He stomps his little feet instead and clamps his teeth down on the bodybuilder’s arm.

I let out an internal grimace and pretend I’m not relieved he didn’t choose to bite the clown.

Steroids Man grunts in pain and grabs the skunk by the tail. He hauls the little guy into the air and forces him to let go of his left arm... and then, shit. His window starts to slide open!

“Shift!” I scream at the skunk, but it’s too late.

Steroids Man tosses my would-be skunk rescuer out of the car window.

I scream and watch his little fluffy body hit the sidewalk as we zoom past. He shifts into a man, but then we’re gone before I can tell if he’s even alive.

Is he hurt? Did he hit his head or break any bones? I can’t even turn my head to look out the back of the van to catch a glimpse of him.

“You monsters!” I roar at the kidnappers. “I’ll have my entire team of lawyers on your asses. You’ll spend the rest of your lives in prison for this! I’d kill you myself if I had arms!”

The clown driving the getaway car glances over his shoulder at me, and I gasp. That bright red smile painted on his face is the sexiest thing I’ve ever seen. The rainbow hair makes me want to drip from my nozzles, but I’m all out of water. Maybe the kidnappers cast some kind of Stockholm Syndrome spell on me. Why else would I be attracted to a murderer? Or at the very least, a murder accomplice?

“Don’t worry. Everything’s going to be okay,” he says.

“Don’t you tell me what to feel! I should tell you how to feel. I eat clowns like you for breakfast. I hire and fire party entertainers like... like...”

“Can it, Maxwell House. I’m taking you somewhere safe.”

“Safe, my ass. You kidnapped me and possibly killed my skunk.” Okay, he’s not really *my* skunk, but that’s not what’s

important here. “Get me the fuck out of this unwashed and uncouth piece of crap car!”

I stare out the windows and sunroof, searching for more rescuers. No skunk. No Neph. No Fletcher. The car must have outpaced them. Or maybe they stopped to help the skunk. I hope so.

Is the skunk man safe? Maybe Fletcher and Neph stopped to help him? Maybe they’re taking him to the hospital? Or bandaging up his cuts and scrapes? I hope so. I hope he’s okay.

Whatever the case, they’re definitely not coming for me. From the looks of it, no one is.

Maybe I should make the best of a bad situation, like the time I got kidnapped by a pair of professional mermaids—that is, humans who pose as mermaids, not actual mermaids. I didn’t know mermaids were real back then.

Though that time, I managed to break out of the handcuffs despite being underwater—a handy trick I learned during those two weeks I dated a cop who was into BDSM. But this time, I don’t even have arms or legs.

Now I’m an espresso machine, and I have no way of getting out of here on my own. No way of finding Neph, or checking in on that poor skunk, or seeing Fletcher again—even if I did tell him to leave.

And I still need to get my fortune back from Milan. I can’t spend the rest of my life as a poor, kidnapped espresso machine.

“Help!” I scream. “Somebody help.”

Chapter 19

Diva

I'm still screaming for help when the minivan squeals to a stop next to a parking meter. The kidnappers open their doors, and a few people glance our way, but they just shrug and keep walking.

"I'll carry her," the clown says. "You distract the people from Movin' On."

The what on what and where? The clown isn't making any sense—or even speaking proper English. Did he hit his head on the steering wheel when he braked? Or maybe getting skunk sprayed messed with his head.

"Look at your body," Steroids Man says. "You can't lift... wait... seriously? You want us to swap? Fuck, man, you know I hate clowns." That doesn't make much sense either—except for that last part.

I definitely get not liking clowns. Or I did—before I met this one and his voice started doing funny things to my circuits. But I also don't like the effect he has on me, so, "Hell yeah, I hate clowns, too!"

“Fucking hell,” the clown says.

Steroids Man gets out of the car. He slides the minivan door open and leans in to grab me. Wasn't the clown going to do that? I guess he must have accepted he can't lift me.

My gaze drifts down to Steroids Man's bulge. It's pretty attractive in those tiny off-brand short-shorts.

What the hell? Since when am I into unfortunate fashion choices? Have I lost all sense of taste since coming to Toronto? You'd think the big city would have the opposite effect and make me *more* stylish!

Steroids Man wraps his arms around me. It feels like curling up in a warm bed on a cold night.

I forget about everything else as my insides melt. Not literally—it would take a whole lot of heat to do that, and I wouldn't enjoy it this much—though Steroids seems to be packing a whole lot of heat.

Mmm... I snuggle into his rock hard chest. This is as pleasant as being carried by Fletcher—but also different. Still nice... *wait, what? The fuck am I thinking?* The guy is *kidnapping* me! I hated him a moment ago, and now I want to pull his short-shorts off with my non-existent teeth.

I must be broken! I need Neph to take me apart and clean all the pieces. Maybe I've got some espresso buildup or something messing with my circuitry.

Steroids clutches me against his bare chest and hurries down the narrow downtown sidewalk. The *crowded* narrow

downtown sidewalk.

“Help, help!” I cry.

No one even looks my way. Not the elderly man wearing a stylish neon pink sweatsuit and matching bandana. Not the couple in spandex zooming past on matching bikes. Not even the homeless man feeding bread crumbs to the seagulls—which, I know for a fact, is a terrible idea. I was chased down a beach by an angry flock of seagulls after I had a one-night stand with a surfer. Long story.

The only one who looks my way is the adorable raccoon perched on a patio table. I meet his eyes, and my insides flutter and do backflips like they’re in Cirque du Soleil. Somehow, I know he’s the same raccoon from earlier with the same certainty that I know my own nozzles.

“I’m being kidnapped!” I shout at him.

He nods once and hops off the table, disappearing behind a massive potted plant. Maybe he’s coming to help! Is he a shifter? Or are Torontonians raccoons just super smart?

“Shut it, Folgers,” Steroids snaps. “You’ll never be free of this hunk of metal if you keep that up.”

“Hel—wait, what?” I say while I keep an eye on the potted plant.

The raccoon peeks out, then ducks back out of sight.

“We can’t talk here.” Steroids Man looks around. “Just be quiet until we’re somewhere safe.”

He's just bullshitting me to keep me quiet. If there was any way to escape this espresso machine, I would have found it by now. Or Neph would have—since one of her guys is stuck in a freaking penis.

Unless Steroids Man means moving on to the afterlife. That is an option, if I can figure out my unfinished business, and believe me, I've tried.

"I'm going to help you," he lies—stupid, muscular kidnapper, "just don't draw any more attention to us."

As if I could. Humans only see an espresso machine, not a woman in danger. They don't realize they need to help me. Maybe if I keep shouting, I'll attract the attention of a shifter or witch. I'm not sure a single raccoon can save me even if he tried, but maybe if he had help?

"I'm a possessed espresso machine being kidnapped! Help me! Call the... umm... supernatural police? Do you have that here?"

"Urgh, I wish you had a mouth so I could gag you," Steroids Man groans.

"I wish I had legs so I could kick you in the nuts." The sexy nuts in those tight... never mind. "I would kick your nuts into your fucking torso."

He heaves a sigh. "Look, I know it's stressful being trapped in an object but..." He trails off as he drops me into a homeless woman's cart.

“What are you doing? This is my stuff!” She tries to shoo him off.

“Hey!” I cry in protest. At least until I realize he’s ditching me.

I’m not being kidnapped anymore. I’m free!

The homeless woman runs a hand through her long, matted hair. It reminds me of that witch in the Peruvian mountains who told me I’d win American Idol. I didn’t get past the auditions, but I had fun and made some friends, which was definitely a win.

“I’ll give you the address to my hotel,” I tell her. “If you take me there, my friend Neph has a bunch of cash.”

The woman doesn’t reply.

Steroids Man stares at me with wide, confused eyes. He glances around and blinks several times. The look on his face kind of reminds me of that old lady in the subway.

“Get away from my cart,” the homeless woman tells him.

I try to ignore the fact that her voice makes my insides flutter like that time a fly got into my casing. That was an uncomfortable ten minutes until Neph finally got it out. But this is both uncomfortable—and not. I feel drawn to her, I just don’t want to be.

My circuitry is definitely messed up. I was attracted to that clown, then Steroids Man, now her? Not to mention Fletcher—who’s hot, I’ll give him that—a subway rat, the raccoon currently hiding behind a tree trunk, and the gorgeous skunk

shifter who may or may not be dead. I need to get back and make sure he is okay.

Steroids Man frowns, turns around, and walks away. *Finally!*

“Haha! Good riddance, you ass!” I shout after him. Speaking of... the way his short-shorts dig into his butt crack makes me internally cringe. Who wears clothes like that? Gross! Plus, his ass is all flat.

It’s such a relief to be over my random horniness for his ass.

The homeless woman pushes her cart down the street, taking me with her. “Urgh, what is with my clothes?” she says. “What brand is this?”

I guess even homeless people must worry about clothing brands. I know fashion! That gives me a chance to win her over. “If you take me back to my hotel, I’ll buy you a Chanel suit,” I tell her.

The Homeless Fashionista shakes her head. “You’re coming with me.”

Chapter 20

Diva

Shit. Is the homeless woman kidnapping me now, too? I twist my knobs in agitation. “What is it with Torontonians and espresso machines? Don’t they have any good to-go coffee here?”

“Better than wherever you’re from. But never mind about all that,” she says. “We have a plan.”

“We?” There’s no one else here except me. Well, and the raccoon who’s still tailing us—not that she knows that. And she and I definitely didn’t come up with a plan—yet!

“Just be quiet for a while,” she says. “We’re almost there. Our place is nicer than anywhere you’ve been. Trust me.”

“You wouldn’t know nice if it bit you in the ass.” Hmm... I could bite her ass, though I haven’t seen it yet. I shove the thought away. “You don’t have to help them kidnap me. Help me!”

“I am help—never mind. I give up,” she snaps. “Shout all you want. Nobody will look twice at a homeless woman talking to herself. They’ll just think I’m a ventriloquist. Maybe they’ll

even give me some cash. Not that it would be a lot of cash. Wouldn't even be enough to buy an espresso con panna."

She's acting just like Steroids Man. Fuck! They must be working together. "Gah! How do you know the clown and Steroids Man anyway? And why are you helping them?"

"Seriously?" The Cart Kidnapper shoots me a weird look. "You should have figured this out by now. And my name is Trevor Brock."

"You don't look like a Trevor," I tell her.

"It's just a body. Steroids Man was just a body. I haven't looked like me since I died."

I'd gape if I could. Instead I just stare at the woman that is Trevor in silent shock. "You're... him?" Shit, if he's telling the truth, that means body hoppers are real. But it might explain why I'm attracted to both the homeless woman and Steroids. They're all the same person. Which means... "You were the clown too, weren't you?"

"Slow on the uptake, aren't you, Starbucks? But yeah."

I try to steam him for insulting me, but only manage to blow air out of my nozzle like a dry fart. Why is it that every time he gives me a fun nickname, it always follows an insult? "You're a rude asshole, aren't you, you... you... body-stealing brain parasite!"

Trevor groans. "Takes one to know one."

"Whatever, Short-Shorts the Clown."

“Okay, look...” Trevor glances around to make sure no one is nearby.

The raccoon darts behind a trash can and out of sight. Trevor doesn't seem to notice him.

“We're working on a way to help people like you,” he says.

“You mean people being kidnapped? Well, that's easy. Let me go.”

“For the last time, I'm not kidnapping you.” He frowns. Though his lips are thin and chapped and he's a flaming dickweed—not to mention possessing a woman's body—I want to kiss him.

Did he cast some kind of spell on me? Well, it won't work! “Taking someone somewhere against their will is kidnapping, you douche canoe. Once I'm free, I'll make sure all the police or Mounties or whatever you have here track you down and tase you. They better have tasers in Canada!”

“Fuck, can't you see that I'm helping you?” Trevor shakes his head. “We rescue people trapped in objects. We've been working on a way to free you.”

“You mean by helping us move on? Been there, done that. Many times. I tried everything I could think of. Kissing a hot guy. Eating lobster dinner—well, getting it smeared all over my knobs and nozzles. Even going to a ballet. None of it worked.”

“Wait, you *tried* to move on? Willingly?” Trevor gapes at me like I've grown a second head—or a second espresso machine,

I guess? Extra nozzle?

“Of course I tried to move on! You think I want to be stuck in an espresso machine? I would love to go to heaven and get pampered and wear all the Gucci I want! You think it was fun watching everyone else move on?”

“You watched others move on?” Trevor’s voice grows soft.

“Yeah. Dozens of mugs, tables, spoons, and chairs. Neph and the gang helped them all find their unfinished business.”

“Neph?”

“The pony shifter.”

“Then it’s a good thing I rescued you.”

“No, you didn’t—”

He cuts me off. “Look, make a bucket list.”

“A what?” I stare at the homeless woman claiming to be Trevor Brock and try to figure out if he’s all there. “Are you planning to kill me? Is this a last meal sort of thing? Because I’ll have you know—”

“No, I’m not going to kill you. Now make a bucket list, the crazier the better. Like... wanting to ride an alpaca.”

“That’s cruel!” I gasp. “I wanted to do that once when I was traveling through the Andes, but they can’t carry the weight of a human. My ex, who was a snake milker, tried anyway and the alpaca bit him. So of course I broke up with him.”

Trevor Brock scratches his matted hair. “Okay fine, then think of something else. Something they’ll never be able to think of,

or find for you. Like, traveling to Nepal.”

“Oh, I did that—”

“Is there anything you haven’t done?”

“I never got carted down the street by a homeless woman before,” I tell him. “Oh, wait... yes, I did. That time I got wasted with some people under a bridge in Chicago.”

“Okay, well, think of something, Tim Horton’s. Because if you don’t, you’ll never get a body.”

“Get a body? You mean steal one like some parasite?”

“Not steal. *Borrow.*” Trevor stops the cart and throws his gloved hands in the air. ““Fuck, you are annoying, Nescafe.”

“Fuck, you are rude, Brain Thief.”

“Look, enough. We need to get on a ferry to get to the others. Once you meet Alicia and Wyatt, you’ll see. They’re trapped in a broom and a towel.”

“Wow, that’s even worse than an espresso machine. At least I can steam matted clowns like you. Speaking of, mind pouring some water into my reservoir... I could really use a drink after listening to you talk.”

“Same here, Nespresso. So be quiet or I’ll unplug you.”

He sounds like he’ll do it, and a cold dread fills me like a pipe broke and flooded my circuits with ice water.

If he unplugs me, I’ll be plunged back into the empty darkness, just like on the flight to Toronto—and when I died in that yacht accident last year. It’s a fate I’d do anything to

avoid. Plus, if I'm unplugged, I won't be able to do anything to stop him—even if all I can do is talk or yell. At least I'm annoying the body out of him.

But my only other option is to play along with this kidnapping, body-stealing piece of shit. Maybe I can stay quiet and bide my time until I find an opening to call for help—or the raccoon finally helps me escape. I spot him peeking out from behind a fire hydrant. He's still here!

“Fine.” I force myself to sound happy about it as I add, “Truce?”

Trevor blinks as though he didn't actually expect me to accept the offer. To be fair, I didn't expect to accept it either.

“Truce,” he agrees. “Now, let's find a boat that will take us to Mugg's Island.”

Chapter 21

Asgard

The water taxi pulls away from the dock with my espresso machine. I can see her form outlined beneath the tarp, and I feel her getting further and further away from me in my gut.

I've no doubt that she's my fated mate. My parents are fated mates—they got married two weeks after meeting—and my cousin Devon found his fated mate before he landed in jail. He'll be out in five years, and she's willing to wait.

Yeah, an espresso machine and a shifter aren't the same, but she's still my girl. I gotta rescue her—even though she distracted me from my mission to kill Milan. But the last guy who tried to help her got his skunk ass tossed out of a van. I've been beaten and bloodied by the side of the road before, and I'd rather not do it again. I need to know what sort of shit I'm getting into.

I study the man driving the small boat. He seemed jittery when he first docked the boat, but now he's standing straight and tall. Something isn't right. I don't know what—yet—but I will.

I note that the man's tall and built, with thick-ass arms and thin legs. Kidnapping bastard skips leg day. So swiping at the legs will make him fall like a tree, then I can slam my foot onto his throat to incapacitate him.

"Excuse me," I call to the homeless woman as she pushes her cart away from the dock. It sounds like chittering. Fuck, I'm still a raccoon.

Focus, Asgard. If you were this distracted in Black Ops, you would have never come home.

I scan my surroundings to make sure the coast is clear before I jump behind a park bench to shift.

"Hey," I try again as I jog after the homeless woman. "I need to talk to you for a second."

She glances my way and speeds up, pushing her cart faster. She has long matted hair that would be easy to grab so I can throw her to the ground. Once they're down, beating them is simple.

I don't intend to smack around an older woman—but my training has taught me to be ready in case she strikes first. You never know who will jump you, like that sweet old grandmother in the Columbian drug villa who figured out I was there to assassinate her grandson.

Instead, I pull out my wallet. "Twenty bucks for a few questions, ma'am?" Being polite often works to put people at ease. Money helps, too.

The homeless woman stops her cart and eyes the bill before grabbing it and tucking it into one of her many coat pockets. I assess her for possible weapons. Two pockets are large enough to hold knives, but the slight hunch in her back would make her slow—and my training makes me fast. Being a raccoon shifter doesn't hurt either.

She scowls at me. “What do you want?”

“Where is that water taxi going?”

She doesn't even glance back at the lake. “I ain't know about no water taxi.” She starts pushing her cart again. “I got somewhere to be.”

I follow alongside her. “You gave an espresso machine to the boat driver. Why?”

“Do I look like I have an espresso machine to give?”

“Not anymore.” I open my wallet and pull out another five.

“Who hired you and why?”

She narrows her eyes at me. “Are you a cop?”

I scoff. “I'm not sitting around in a Tim Horton's parking lot, so no.”

“You ask questions like a cop.”

I clench my hand into a fist. “A cop wouldn't bother to track an espresso machine. That's why you're talking to me instead.”

She doesn't answer and keeps walking.

“Look...” I grab her cart and force her to stop.

“This is mine. Let go!” she snaps at me.

She seems like she’s willing to throw down after all. I turn my side to her so she’ll only hit my arm if she decides to jump me. “Someone hired you to carry an espresso machine to that boat, and I need to know who it was, why they did it, and where they’re going.”

“That there is a lot of questions.”

I sigh and hand her another twenty, which she quickly stuffs into her coat.

“Last thing I remember was eyeing a sandwich on a patio. Then I was by the water and you came after me jabbering like a crazy person.” She glances back toward the dock. “Stranger things have happened, but not by much.”

She’s lying, though she shows none of the telltale signs. Maybe she has training, because no one forgets carting around a talking espresso machine.

I get the feeling she isn’t going to tell me anything—not easily anyway. If I waste time questioning her, I might miss a chance to follow the boat.

Retrieving my mate is a clear priority, but I have to do something about the homeless woman first. She might also alert the people she’s working for that I questioned her. A quick, hard hit to the base of her skull would knock her out cold and solve that problem—I’ve done it dozens of times before.

Only time it backfired on me was the time a Mexican wrestler beat my ass at a bar. He took a pool cue to the back of the head and just kept fighting.

I shake my head at the memory and regard the homeless woman. I have no doubt I can handle her, but someone on the busy lakeshore is bound to notice. I don't want to have to deal with beat cops, so I let her go.

The water sparkles in the sun like it costs a fortune to look at. I head for the dock and squint in the general direction the water taxi was headed in, but I can't pinpoint it among the ferries, motorboats and sailboats on the inner harbor.

I let my gaze roam along the quay as I try to determine what my next step should be. A bike zooms past—I could take the rider down with a kick to his back wheel and a blow to the head. Lucky for him, he means me no harm.

A streetcar rattles in the distance as it heads down Queens Quay as I continue to look around.

A tall ship is moored a bit farther down the quay, its sails furled on its yards. My little brother, Odin, had a pirate obsession, so I took him and his friends on a harbor cruise on one of those things. I had to sing on the streets until 2am for a week to pay for it, but it made for one hell of a birthday.

My lip quirks up in a small smile as I jog down the quay. The ship's gangplank is roped off because it's not giving rides right now, but I jump the rope and race up onto the deck.

"Hey, you can't be here," a man in pirate garb shouts.

“I can’t, but maybe my friend William Lyon Mackenzie King can.” I slip out my wallet and pull out a fifty dollar bill. “I need to borrow a spyglass... and the crow’s nest.”

He glances around to make sure no one is watching and sticks the bill inside his hat. Then he places it back on top of his head. One jab to the throat, and I could have him choking, the hat in my hand, and the money back in my wallet. Just like I did to that Somali pirate who betrayed me when he was supposed to smuggle me into Mogadishu. That’s not likely to happen here, but I need to be ready if it does.

The faux pirate unhooks a spyglass from his belt and hands it over. “Don’t fall or I’ll be in trouble.”

“Thanks, man.” I slip the spyglass into the inside pocket of my leather jacket.

The mast sports a rope ladder, and I have plenty of experience with those. As I climb, I inwardly cringe at the amount of money I just handed off. I promised my little sister, Freyja, a trip to Chapters Indigo for new books—and now the money for that is gone.

Growing up, I thought secret agents made bank. Then I got recruited and realized I barely make enough to support my parents and siblings.

There would have been a bonus in it for me if I’d killed the heir of the Del Ray fortune like I’d intended. But then my espresso machine mate showed up and distracted my carefully laid out plan.

I focus on climbing. My arms burn as I pull myself up the ladder. I got weights in my basement, and I use them, but no amount of lifting can make a climb in human form as easy as one in raccoon form. It'd be a relief to shift, but it would draw too much attention when I'm in the open like this.

With a grunt, I pull myself into the crow's nest and flick the spyglass open. Holding it up to my left eye, I peer out over the lake and scan the boats.

There! I feel a wave of triumph when I spot the water taxi carrying my fated mate. It's halfway between where I'm at and the islands, so I track it until it motors into the marina on the other side of the harbor and docks next to a big-ass yacht.

Of course the kidnappers are heading to the yacht club. Assholes probably made their fortune taking whatever they want, but now they've gone and crossed the wrong raccoon.

I see a flash of red as the dark-haired driver hauls the espresso machine out of the water taxi. Even through the spyglass, there's something beautiful about her—the way her red metal sparkles in the sunlight, and the way I'm sure she's hurling insults at her abductor, demanding to be set free. I feel a certain sense of pride at how brave she'd been during the kidnapping ordeal. My mate's got guts.

I close the spyglass and scramble over the edge of the crow's nest and down the ladder to the deck. "Thanks, man," I tell the pretend pirate. I toss him the spyglass and race down the gangplank to the quay.

My running shoes pound against the pavement as I run toward the ferry terminal. There aren't any other water taxis along the quay, just party boats, and the ferry is much less conspicuous. If I blend in with the crowd, I'll have the element of surprise.

As I get in line at the ticket booth, my breath slow and steady despite the jog, my gut tells me that something isn't quite right.

What was my espresso machine doing at the Del Ray offices in the first place? She and her friend helped me then, which is definitely a good sign, but the mishmash of kidnapers I've seen so far doesn't sit well with me.

Clown, bodybuilder, a water taxi driver, and a homeless woman who could pass a lie detector...

Someone must have hired them all. Someone with a lot of money and power. Someone who can cause me a lot of trouble when I still have a family to support.

My gut says I need backup, but if I contact my handler, she'll tell me to stand down. So if I'm doing this, I have to do it on my own. If I don't help my mate, no one will.

When I get to the front of the line, I slide a bill across the counter. "One ferry ticket, please."

A heavy feeling settles in the pit of my stomach. For the first time in my life, I choose not to listen and get in line for the ferry.

Chapter 22

Trevor

I drop the espresso machine onto the yacht club's dining room table. "Fuck, you're heavy."

"Fuck, you have weak arms," she snaps back.

I can't help but be impressed by her. If I was stuck in an espresso machine, I'd probably be flipping the fuck out right about now. But this one's got spirit—and corners for days.

"Wait here," I tell her even though she can't move.

"Haha, very funny, Bozo the Clown," she says dryly.

"Right back at you, Hamilton Beach." Cheapest fucking coffeemaker there is.

I leave her and stroll to the kitchen. There's a big dude in a hairnet in front of the stove, frying vegetables. Never seen him in my life.

"Trevor," I tell him.

"Janet," she replies in a deep, booming voice. "What's the last thing I said to you, huh, Trev?"

I have to think about that for a second. “That you hate clowns. Or... wait... fucking hell?”

“Right on.”

I take a second to think of a question. “What did you run out of on Tuesday?”

“Arugula,” Janet replies, confirming she is, in fact, Janet.

“I’m glad you found a new body and made it home. So, what’s the special for today?”

“Pad Thai. But I’ve also got some leftover Shepherd’s Pie from yesterday.”

“I’ll take Pad Thai and a whiskey... actually, make it a double.”

“A double serving of Pad Thai?”

I scowl at her, and she starts to laugh.

“What? That body of yours looks kind of hungry.”

“Now that you mention it, I could eat double... but you know I meant the whiskey.”

“It’s not even five yet.”

“I’ve had a day.”

As if on cue, Starbucks shouts, “Get me out of here! Waiter! Help me.”

I groan.

“The hell is going on?” Janet pushes past me and sticks her head out of the kitchen to look at Nescafe.

“Another Movin’ On victim, but this one is... *difficult*.”

“They’re all difficult.” Janet slams her hand on the doorframe, and it cracks. “Shoot. I forgot I was a strong-ass dude today.”

I shrug. “It happens.” Done it enough times myself. Punched a hole through the wall a time or two.

“Can’t imagine getting trapped in an object.” Janet shakes her head. “Not being able to eat or drink or fuck. Some life that is.”

As if on cue, Tim Horton’s starts to rage. “I demand you listen to me! Free me this instant. I’m going to sue.”

I sigh. “She keeps saying that.”

“Maybe she’s a lawyer,” Janet suggests.

“Hell if I know.”

“Go find out. Or keep her company or something. I’ll bring you the food.”

I can’t help but smile to myself as I stroll back across the dining room to Nespresso. She’s a fighter even when she has so little to work with. Then again, most body hoppers are. How else would we be able to subdue the body’s resident and take control?

But I have to say, this particular spirit has got more spark in her than most.

“Quiet down, Keurig,” I say as I sit across from her. “I didn’t go through this much trouble to bring you here just to throw you back out.”

I wouldn't actually throw her back out. Something about this sassy pretentious Black and Decker draws me in like a... well... a caffeine addict to a coffee machine. But I get the feeling this is about more than my love of artisan roasted espresso. It also goes far beyond my need to right my wrongs and set all the Movin' On victims free.

"Once I eat, we'll find a medium to match you with," I tell her. "You'll be back to your old body-hopping self in no time."

She's quiet for a moment, which is a first. Stranger still, I kind of miss her voice. Then she starts to shout, "Fuck you! You think I'm some body thief?"

"Body borrower," I correct.

I'm not one of those damn supposedly 'moral' body hoppers who stay in one body until it's on its deathbed... or until they go insane from lack of body hopping. Fucking stuck-up cranks are full of shit anyway. How is it better to take over someone's life until they die than it is to borrow a body for a day or two?

"Thief," she snaps.

I fucking hope she isn't one of them. She doesn't seem like a nut, despite all her shouting. But sometimes those moralists pass as reasonable people until you get to know them. Can't trust those fuckers, or they ruin your entire life and everyone else's with it.

There is one other possibility, though. "Were you born a body hopper?"

"Were you?" she fires back.

“No, but if you were, and your body’s alive and well, we’ll track it down. But if you don’t have a body of your own, drop the ‘ooh, body hopping is so evil’ bullshit.”

“Sure, when you drop the whole ‘ooh, look at me, I’m an asshole’ bullshit.”

She doesn’t mention a body, and I wonder if she even remembers. Those poor Movin’ On victims all come back a little messed up. Evelyn still wakes up screaming and shouting things about demons, and sometimes when I pass by Petey’s room I catch the poor granola bar-trapped soul sobbing.

This confused amnesia situation Starbucks has going on doesn’t really surprise me, but it does remind me to be patient.

“Look—” I start to say. Janet sticks her head out of the kitchen and interrupts.

“Order up!” she says.

“Help, I’ve been kidnapped!” Tassimo shouts.

I roll my eyes.

“No, sweetie,” Janet says. “We’re going to help you.”

“Ah, fuck, another kidnapper,” Keurig cries.

I mean, what did I expect? “You’re getting a little predictable, Balzac’s.”

“What did you call me, dick head?” she snaps.

“It’s a coffee company.” She’s definitely not local if she doesn’t know that.

“Oh, that’s fine then.” She snickers, “You’re still a dickhead though.”

I can’t help but laugh, though I’ve never laughed about being called a dickhead before.

Janet pushes a cart with a plate of food and tumbler of whiskey up to the table. “Here’s your Pad Thai, Trev.” She turns to Tim Horton’s. “Sorry I don’t have anything for you, sweetie.”

She twists her knobs. “I’m used to it.”

“Sad fucking thing to be used to,” I tell her.

“Word.” She twists her knobs again.

I wish I knew her well enough to understand what that meant. Scratch that, I wish she had a face, so I could see if she was frowning or smiling. So I could look into her eyes and... *what the fuck?* I start to scowl.

“Does he always look pissed?” Nespresso asks, presumably talking to Janet.

The chef sighs. “Usually. He’s had a rough go of it this past year. Used to be—”

“Janet!” I snap.

“What?” She bats her eyelashes innocently—which actually looks hilarious on the giant dude she’s possessed.

A part of me wants to take the opening she’s giving me and just get all the shit that’s happened out in the open now. I

consider it—for the amount of time it takes me to pick up the fork and spear the Pad Thai.

Fuck. I don't want to be airing out my business after the shit day I've had. I don't want the espresso-possessing pain in the butt soul on the table judging me.

"That shit's personal," I snap at Janet.

"Touchy touchy." She winks and turns to Nescafe. "Don't be too hard on him, all right? He's got his reasons."

"Don't need you advocating for me," I snap at her as she strolls away, leaving the cart behind. "Damn nosy soul."

I debate storming out of the room and taking my food upstairs. I'd much rather eat in my goddamn room where no one tries to argue with me or make my life a living hell. I glare at Coffee Time, then soften. This shit ain't her fault. She's the victim in all this. Least I can do is keep her company until the medium gets here.

Chapter 23

Trevor

Nespresso stares at me from across the dining room table. Well, I assume she's staring at me. She doesn't actually have a face, or eyes.

"You may be hot," she says, "but you're ruder than the goose who stole my Jimmy Choo sandals and locked me in a phone booth."

I roll my eyes. "You're just making shit up."

I like that she thinks I'm hot, but she's attracted to this body, not the real me. I lucked out possessing this hot fucker—even if the dumbass hasn't eaten all day.

She snorts. "You're just grumpy as hell."

"Hangry," I say. "I hate it when a body's starving. Then I gotta deal with this fucking nausea and lightheaded bullshit before I can get him fed."

"At least you can eat," Starbucks complains.

"Touché. But fucking hell, even that homeless woman ate more shit than this dude. Good on her." I shovel noodles into my mouth and let out a satisfied sigh.

“Gross. Don’t you have any manners?” she snaps.

“Sorry, did I forget to offer you some?” I hold up my plate and raise an eyebrow. “No? Suit yourself.”

“Har-har,” she says as I go back to eating. “But tell me what whiskey you’re drinking. That way I can at least imagine.”

I lift the glass and give it a sniff. Perfection. I take a small sip and swirl it in my mouth, enjoying the feel of it. “Glenfiddich.”

“Good choice. I can almost taste it.” Her voice is filled with longing. “Kalimotxo was my drink of choice.”

“The fuck’s that?” I ask as I return to my food.

“Red wine and Coke. Do you live under a rock?”

“No, I live in Toronto.”

“Then you need to get out more. One time I drank the Sourtoe Cocktail in Dawson City. Accidentally swallowed the toe.”

“The what?” I stop with my fork halfway to my mouth.

“They had to find a new toe because of me.”

“Why the fuck was there a toe?” I demand louder this time.

“You never heard of it? Aren’t you Canadian?”

“What does it have to do with being Canadian?” I glare at her. Why can’t she ever give a straight answer, damn it?

“Dawson City’s in the Yukon. You haven’t been?”

“Fuck no, that’s on the other side of the country.” I frown.

“Now, back up. What kind of toe?”

“Human.” I swear there’s laughter in Maxwell House’s voice when she adds, “It’s a rite of passage up there. Yukon Jack whiskey in a glass with a mummified human toe. Don’t worry. It’s always a toe that fell off naturally.”

I drop my fork and it clatters onto my plate. “Well, now you’ve ruined my appetite.”

“Good, because you chew loudly. And you eat too fast.”

“Better than drinking a toe.”

“Swallowing it was an accident!” she snaps. “Makes for a good story, though, so I don’t regret it.”

“You don’t seem like someone who visits the Yukon. You have family there?”

“No, my family is from the Upper East Side.”

“Of...?” I feign confusion just to mess with her. Serves her right since she messed with me about the toe. There’s no fucking way that drink exists, and if it does, there’s no way in hell she tried it or swallowed a fucking toe.

“Obviously New York. Does that body lack a brain, or are you always this slow?” She throws my words from earlier back at me.

I chuckle. “So how did you end up in Toronto?”

“It’s a long story.” She lets out a drawn out sigh. “Let’s say I’m... on a quest.”

I perk up. “What kind of quest?”

“That got you excited.” I can almost picture her rolling her eyes. “Are you a gamer or something?”

I rub the back of my head. “Mystery novels.”

Tim Horton’s twists her knobs in what I’m starting to guess is confusion. “What?”

“I grew up on The Hardy Boys and Nancy Drew. My friends and I used to draw treasure maps and... never mind. It’s stupid.”

“No, tell me.” She genuinely sounds interested.

“Okay, well, a few kids in my building used to host scavenger hunts. We’d take turns saving up our allowances for an epic prize—”

“Like a diamond necklace?” Balzac’s interrupts.

More like a fancy notebook. “Yeah, something like that.”

“And then what?”

“We’d hide clues all around the neighborhood. Finders keepers.” I feel myself grow hot. “We were ten at the time.” Plus seven, but no way in hell am I telling her that.

“My friends and I used to do something similar, actually,” she surprises me by saying.

“Yeah, right.” I roll my eyes.

“No, really. I grew up at a boarding school, and it had tons of storage rooms and hidden passages. We’d explore them after lights-out. No treasure though. But one time, when I was in LA, I bribed a guy at the docks for a pirate treasure map.”

“Did you ever find the treasure?”

“I’m getting to that.” She pauses dramatically. “It wasn’t easy, you know. I had to hire a crew to help me find the island. That map was not easy to follow.”

I lean forward in my seat.

“We sailed to four separate islands. Dug up the entire beach on every single one. It took us weeks.”

“And?”

“We found the island. But the only treasure on that rock was buried rum. It was at least two centuries old and mostly evaporated.”

I roll my eyes. “That didn’t happen.”

“Sure it did. I even tried it. Drank the small amount left, but it made me think I was some kind of monkey. I climbed a palm tree and stayed up there for two days. Come to think of it... that probably wasn’t rum after all.” She sighs. “I can still taste it. I miss tasting things.”

“It can’t be easy, being stuck in an espresso machine.”

“It’s not. Though it can’t be easy having to hop bodies.” Starbucks twists her knobs several times. “You really don’t have a body of your own?”

Ah, so she is a born hopper. “No, I don’t. Haven’t since I died...” I try to mentally count the years. “Fuck, has it been ten years already?”

“Was it scary?” Tim Horton’s asks.

“Was what scary?”

“Dying?”

I tense. “I don’t like to think about it.”

“Me neither,” she admits. “but... I can’t help thinking about it. Whenever my battery runs out, it feels like dying all over.”

I glance at the battery pack taped to her side. I didn’t realize a spirit could just... cease to exist when their object loses power.

“You’re scowling again,” she tells me.

“I just don’t like to think about dying.” Or to think about the assholes who put her into that machine. It’s a good thing Missy overheard them at Union Station and alerted me to come rescue poor Starbucks.

“I know what you mean,” she whispers. “It was terrifying when the water closed in around me.”

“You drowned?” Fuck. I’d been so sure she was a born hopper—how did I get that wrong? Poor Tassimo. Drowning is a painful, scary way to go. Missy died that way, too, and she still gets panic attacks sometimes.

“Yeah, everyone did when the cruise ship sank.”

“Cruise ship?” I feel a tightening in my gut. “You died on a cruise ship?”

“Yeah, it was all over the news last year. It was my family’s cruise line, the Del Ray.”

A cold vise tightens around my heart like the moment when it stops for good. I jump to my feet and slam my palms on the

table. "Fucking hell!"

Chapter 24

Diva

My gaze snaps up to Trevor's. Poor guy looks so agitated on my behalf. Not that I blame him. "It really sucked when I found out, but I don't actually remember it. I passed out right before the storm hit and woke up with my lungs full of water—long story."

"I don't want to hear your fucking story," Trevor bellows. His voice echoes through the dining room.

"Ouch." Since I can't roll my eyes, I twist my nozzles at him instead. "Don't tell me you're hangry again, clown-stealer. Maybe finish your noodles instead of shouting at me. Yeesh."

"I'm not eating this fucking Pad Thai." He picks up the plate and throws it on the ground. It shatters to pieces. Noodles spill everywhere. And his nostrils flare.

What the actual hell? "To quote my bestie: what the horse manure's gotten into you?"

"I don't want to hear about your bestie. I can't believe I ever fucking talked to you or listened to your bullshit, you... you..." He waves his hands in the air... "Shitty taint."

“Right back at you, flat ass. Stop being such a dick.” And though I would never, ever admit it aloud, I’m actually a little hurt.

Hanging out with Trevor wasn’t all bad. Probably just Stockholm Syndrome or whatever. As if I’d actually start to like a guy who’d kidnapped me. Even if he did come up with the best cafe nicknames for me, admitted he likes scavenger hunts, and was kind of fun to banter with... for like a moment.

“Stop talking!” he snaps.

“What happened, Trevor? It’s like you suddenly flipped a switch. I don’t get it.”

“Stop trying to manipulate me, you coffee-sucking parasite.” Trevor scowls at me.

I push away the hurt and try to sound blasé when I say, “And to think, I was starting to like you.”

“Well, I would never, ever in a billion years like a bitch like you.”

I gasp. “What did you just call me?”

“You heard me, bitch!”

Oh no he didn’t! I’d steam the asshole if I had a drop of water left. I don’t. I glare at him instead. Oh, right, I’m an espresso machine, so that does jack shit.

I can’t even take deep breaths to calm myself, so I twist my nozzles. *One Mississippi, two Mississippi...*

Okay Diva, you're calmer than the time you meditated in the Himalayas and the spirit of Elton John came to you with advice. Then you woke up and found out he wasn't even dead, but who cares.

Three Mississippi. “Can we just forget about how we died? It's clearly a sore subject and...”

“I don't care how you fucking died, Del Ray. I care that you're a fucking shit-eating bitch.”

“Fuck off, dickweed! Do you, like, have multiple personality disorder? This shit is getting weird.”

“You're so predictable. So fucking predictable. I can't believe I fell for your tricks. Goddamn it!” He picks up his whiskey glass and throws it at me.

“Ahhhh.” I scream a split second before it slams into my side. Glass shatters everywhere and the whiskey spills all over me. Thankfully, I don't feel pain—physical pain, anyway. “What the hell? You hit me! Janet, help!” I cry for the cook from earlier, but I don't hear a sound from the kitchen.

“You're just a hunk of metal,” Trevor snaps. “The glass can't hurt you.”

“You're just an asshole!” He's probably left scratches on my flawless paint. “If I find out there's a dent, I'm going to sue your ass. *Fuck!* What the hell happened to you? Did someone else take over your body?”

I want to believe it's true. That if Trevor hopped from body to body—or clown to bodybuilder to homeless woman to hunk—

someone else could have hopped into the body currently shouting at me. But some part of me knows it's still him. It's still the same guy. And that's what hurts the most.

"You are so not Trevor," I say anyway. *Please be true. Please be true. Please be true.*

"I'm more myself than ever; that's why I'm not falling for your tricks, Del Ray."

"What tricks?" I glance around the yacht club dining room as it suddenly hits me. "Is this a business thing? Did you own a cruise line or yacht company that my family bought out? Is that it?" I don't give him a chance to reply because it's the only possible explanation. "Look, if you feel like you could have gotten more money, it's not my fault, okay? We always pay market value."

Trevor scoffs. "Everything is money and business with you, isn't it, Mrs. Coffee?"

The nickname would be cute if he didn't sound quite so disgusted. "You don't know me," I snap.

His voice drips with sarcasm as he replies, "Oh, actually, I do."

"No, you don't. How can you accuse me of only caring about money when I've lived without money, or food, or a body, for over a year." Never mind that I'm in Toronto to get my business back, that's more of a matter of principle and he doesn't know about it anyway.

"Probably deserve to be trapped," he mutters.

I desperately want to steam him. Fucking hell. I should have saved my water to use on this dingleberry. “You deserve to have a piano dropped on your head like that top-hat guy in Prague who—”

“Enough with the lies, enough with... with... *you*,” he says the word as though it’s a curse.

I can feel hatred oozing off him, and the worst part is—it hurts. I really thought we had a moment—maybe even several moments—talking about severed toes and sharing stories. Was he just playing me so he could get information? Well, it didn’t work. The only thing I told him was how I died... and my last name.

“I’m not Rumpelstiltskin,” I hiss. “If you wanted to know my name, you could have just asked.”

“I don’t care about your name. It’s as disgusting as you are, Del Ray!”

That stings, but I cover it up with anger. “Screw you, I’m hot,” I say. “And Trevor isn’t exactly an elegant, beautiful name either, you know.”

“Shut—”

I cut him off. I don’t need more insults. “Besides, you’re the one who kidnapped me! If you don’t want me around, take me home. Or call my friend—”

“Oh, your friend, of course.” He scoffs. “I should have guessed it from the start when I saw you by that building with that pony.”

“You leave Neph out of this,” I hiss. Nobody insults my bestie—especially when she’s been hauling my ass around the city all day. It also reminds me of Fletcher, and my heart hurts just a little bit more. “Why would you even bring her up?”

“You know very well, princess,” he says with disdain.

“Janet, are you here?” I cry to the cook. “Trevor has lost his fucking mind.”

Janet doesn’t answer. Either she’s gone or she doesn’t care—or whatever’s happening to Trevor got her, too.

“You’re not turning anyone against me. I’m not going through that again.”

“Make sense already! Fuck, you’re gibbering like the monkeys in that temple near Jaipur after they saw I had a banana in my bag. Just noise noise noise.”

Trevor’s face reddens with rage, and a vein in his temple throbs. “If you don’t shut the fuck up,” he says between clenched teeth, “I’m going to unplug your power source entirely and never plug you back in.”

If I could tremble, I would. If he were to unplug me, I wouldn’t be able to stop him from doing... well, anything. I’d just... die. All over again. Darkness and nothingness forever.

No one will ever know what happened to me. Neph would never think to look for me on a random island with a creepy name—and no one will ever rescue me and plug me back in.

But I’m not going to show this piece of shit Trevor I’m afraid.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

He laughs, a bitter, cruel sound. “What are you going to do to stop me?”

The only thing I can do: Shout! “You keep your filthy hands off me. I will not be threatened, you hear me?”

“Goodbye, Hamilton Beach.” He leans over me and his hand grabs my cord.

Why did he suddenly turn on me? What did I ever do to him? I don’t understand. “No, please,” I cry, my voice turning small and scared. “Don’t do this. I can’t—”

He yanks on my cord, and everything fades to nothing as my power goes out.

Chapter 25

Asgard

I race along the water's edge in raccoon form. It's a lot more inconspicuous than a six-foot, dark-skinned man running at full speed—and almost twice as fast.

The hot midday sun beats down on my fur. The cool lake water calls to my shifter side, but I stick to the mission: rescue my fated mate before the kidnappers take her apart bolt by bolt.

“Daddy, Papa, it's a raccoon,” a kid shouts as she jumps in front of me.

How did I not notice a family of civilians? Until I met my fated mate, I never got distracted. Now, it's twice in one day. First up in the Del Ray tower, and now here. I cannot let it happen again.

I stumble to a stop and eye the girl. I could shift and throw her in the lake in three seconds flat— I shove that thought away. My training has taught me to be ready for any threat, but this is a kid.

“Stay back, honey bunch.” One of the fathers scoops up his daughter into his arms. “Raccoons don’t come out during the day unless they’re sick.”

I hiss at him because that’s a damn myth. There are plenty of reasons for masked bandits to be out before dark—like finding something to eat. And the way this one’s talking, he’s practically begging to be on the menu.

“Maybe it’s a shifter,” the girl suggests. She’s a smart one.

The family aren’t shifters, but they are supernatural. And I’m nearing the yacht club, so there’s a good chance they have ties to whoever kidnapped my fated mate.

“A shifter would shift.” Her second father starts nudging them away from the water. “We should get out of here before it bites us.”

“Raccoons don’t bite unless they feel threatened!” I snap, which is a complete waste of effort since it comes out as chittering and he doesn’t speak raccoon.

I could tie all three of them up—their clothes could easily serve as bindings and gags—and leave them out here until my mission is complete. But I’m not one to traumatize children unless it’s necessary.

I decide to let them go and focus on my mission. The yacht club is just up ahead. Get in, get out, and get the fuck off this island.

I keep to the shadows and weave between trees until I reach an open stretch of grass. The fancy-looking building has floor-to-

ceiling glass walls, which will make sneaking up a challenge. One of the patio tables outside is occupied, and I frown at the mishmash of people eating together.

A twenty-something with purple hair, dressed all in black, is at a table with an old lady who's in her pajamas. I could take them out with a single chair—a blow to their heads, and done. But I won't need to, they're just enjoying their lunch.

Their third companion, a large, angry looking man in a pink apron, would be my biggest challenge. Kitchen staff aren't usually trained in hand-to-hand combat, but I thought the same thing about that cook in a noodle bar in Japan, and I won't make the same mistake again. I could snap off a chair leg and break his knee cap. Slice his carotid artery with a splinter from the chair. But I doubt it will come to that.

But my gut tells me something isn't right. These people aren't the usual sort to frequent a yacht club. They don't look similar enough to be family members—yet they're different enough that it's unlikely that they're friends.

There's no sign of the water taxi driver who kidnapped my mate, so I don't need to bother with this mismatched group—and it's not fair to smack around people who can't fight back. Keeping to the trees at the edge of the lawn, I run past the patio and around the corner to the back of the building.

The walls are still floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the club's dining room. I spot my mate sitting on a table and smirk. Never doubted that I'd find her.

She's alone in the room, but when I look at her, something's off. The pull I've felt every time I've seen her before isn't there.

They did something to her!

Anger courses through me. Without thinking, I race toward the building. I stay in raccoon form until I reach the door, then I shift and throw it open.

My running shoes pound on the dining room floor as I rush toward my espresso machine. I reach for her, my fingertips just brushing her sparkling side, when something slams into the back of my head.

I crash onto the table next to my mate, but she doesn't make a sound. Given how vocal she was with the kidnappers earlier, it just doesn't seem right.

My skull throbs like a bad hangover and my vision blurs, but muscle memory takes over and I roll to the side. I fall to the floor seconds before something slams into the table where my head was seconds earlier.

My vision cuts in and out as I take in the water taxi driver. His face is twisted with rage as he looms over me, a wooden chair raised above his head. It's well-made to have survived an encounter with the table and the back of my head.

He swings the chair toward me. Without hesitation, I slam my foot into his knee.

The kidnapper stumbles backward and drops the chair with a curse. I climb to my feet. The world spins around me and I

probably have a concussion, but I stalk after the man anyway. I throw a punch to his gut, and he doubles over with a grunt.

My vision comes in and out of focus, but I don't need to see in order to fight. I grab the back of his head, raise my knee, smash it into his nose, and feel something crack.

Blood splatters onto the floor. His somewhat blurry face doesn't look quite so handsome as he stumbles away from me.

I'd knock him out, but I need answers.

"What did you do to her?" I demand as I stride after him.

He presses his hand to his nose to stop the bleeding. Blood pours out past his fingers anyway, which gives me an odd sort of satisfaction. It's always nice to get one up on an asshole.

"Answer me," I demand.

His nasal voice is muffled as he says, "I shut her up for good."

My vision turns red. My hands shake with fury and my blood boils.

I rush the kidnapper. He turns and runs, bursting through a door into a kitchen.

I charge in after him and leap toward his legs. As I slam into him, he falls face-first into the kitchen counter, and his body goes limp.

"Motherfucker," I shout even though he can't hear me. "I'm going to kill you for what you've done."

My entire being fills with rage. He deserves to die for murdering my fated mate, but I've never killed a man while he

was down before. I always waited until they woke up again.
This won't be self-defense or a hit ordered by my handler.

Revenge. It will be revenge.

Chapter 26

Asgard

I stare at the unconscious person on the kitchen floor. He deserves to die. He has to pay for what he did to my fated mate.

Killing him while he's unconscious, though? I shake my head. It would be too easy. I'd be letting him off the hook, and I want him to suffer for killing my mate. I want him to spend the rest of his life paying for it—first at my hands, and then in jail. I'll make sure he rots behind bars and regrets what he's done for decades until he draws his last breath.

“You are going to suffer for what you did,” I growl when I hear a soft whoosh of a knife being pulled from a block.

The old woman in pajamas who I'd originally spotted on the patio is now standing on the other side of the kitchen. If she's had the time to cross the yacht club, I've been here way too fucking long.

Her stance is wobbly—probably arthritis in her knees and hips—which makes her easy to take down even if she is holding a knife.

I jump to my feet, and my vision swims. I'm going to make the water taxi driver pay for that, too. I take a step forward, and the old woman grabs the knife by the edge of the blade and pulls her arm back to throw it.

Pfft, everyone thinks they can throw knives but it takes skill, practice, and—

The metal flashes through the air and fiery pain shoots through my arm. The blade embeds into my bicep, and I glance at it in shock. *How did she know how to do that?*

She grabs another knife from a block, and I dart behind the kitchen's center island. Her knife clatters against the wall behind me and hits the floor.

I clench my teeth, and with a grunt, pull the knife from my arm. Blood gushes out, soaking my jacket, but I ignore it for now and shift into raccoon form.

I heal faster this way—shifter magic and all that. I move faster, too. And a raccoon is a much smaller target for flying knives. The downside is that my front leg feels like lava from the wound, but I can run on three legs just fine.

I peer around the edge of the island just in time to see Knife-Throwing Granny shuffle through a back door and out of the building. She's probably running for help. I can chase after her and stop her, or I can take this chance to grab the espresso machine in the hopes that I can somehow resurrect my mate. I don't feel her anymore, but maybe... just maybe... she's still in there somewhere. Or maybe she's already gone.

What I know for sure is that with my injured arm, I won't be able to lift her. Not even onto the rolling cart in the dining room. And I definitely won't be able to haul her onto a water taxi or yacht for a while—I need time in order to heal.

I round the corner of the island and rush toward the back door. Leaping into the air, I grab the handle with my good paw and use the momentum to swing the door open. *Fuck, that still hurt.*

I drop down to the ground and limp after Knife-Throwing Granny across the grass. Once I catch her, I can use her as a hostage. I'll get whatever security is left to stand down and help me get my fated mate onto a boat. I'll get them to talk, too. Make them tell me what they did to her.

I don't enjoy threatening people—or hurting them to make them talk—but I've done it enough that it's easy.

“Intruder, intruder,” Knife-Throwing Granny cries in a shaky voice.

She races across the grass, taking small quick steps, but she's no match for me. I rush her and clamp down on the back of her knee. I'm still in raccoon form, but my sharp teeth are enough to tear her flesh and topple her. She cries out and drops to the grass with a thump.

“Get away from her!” a large man in an apron shouts in a booming voice.

He's clearly the biggest threat of the bunch, so I let go of the old woman and leap at him. I aim for his crotch—it's closer

when I'm in raccoon form, and will take him down just as well as aiming for the nose or throat. It's a low blow—but effective—and I've long since learned that when your life is at stake, you don't fight fair. You fight to win.

My teeth clamp down on his goods, and he lets out a bellow that echoes across the lawn. I wouldn't be surprised if the sound reaches Queen's Quay.

I let go of his nuts and twist so I can land in front of the next most likely threat: the young woman with purple hair.

She pulls out a wooden tube from her hoodie and lifts one end to her lips.

I recognize it immediately. It's a blowgun used to shoot poisoned darts. What the fuck?

I'd encountered them before, among the tribes deep in the Amazon jungle. Where in hell did this pale-skinned twenty-year-old in Toronto get one? How did she even learn to use it?

I dash to the side, but with the injuries I've sustained, I'm not quick enough. The dart hits my side and I feel a piercing pain.

My eyes become heavy as the poison floods into my bloodstream. Fuck, if she shot me with curare, I will suffocate and die.

I stumble forward, my feet tripping up one another, and land forward on my injured leg. A pained cry slips past my lips before I can stop it.

Move, I urge my limbs, move, move, move!

Nothing happens.

I need to get out of here. I need to get to my fated mate on the off chance that I can still save her. I'm her only hope. The only one who even knows that she's here. And no one has a fucking clue I'm... I'm...

My thoughts become as thick as London fog and slower than a Galápagos tortoise. I try to climb to my feet, but my legs feel far away. They aren't quite a part of me anymore.

Then everything goes dark.

Chapter 27

Diva

Electricity floods me like a good, strong drink rushing through my blood.

The world returns to full color and sound as though it had just been created out of nothing.

“Please, don’t unplug—” I cry, only to stop myself because it’s too late. I was already unplugged.

I still don’t understand how Trevor went from slightly tolerable to a complete asshole in under half an hour. Usually, people become nicer after they eat. You know, hangry to angelic or whatever. But this guy took the complete opposite turn.

Thankfully, he’s not here—though part of me wishes he was. Then I could give him hell for plunging me into a deep, dark death.

Instead, a young woman with purple hair stands over me. Whoever dyed it did a damn good job. I can’t see any hint of roots. She has a youthful face, and the hoodie and hair make

her look even younger—but she’s probably in her twenties, even if she can pass for a teenager.

“You must be Diva Del Ray,” she says cheerfully.

I glance around. I’m still in the yacht club’s dining room, which means she’s probably another kidnapper.

I gaze out the floor-to-ceiling window overlooking the water and realize it’s dark out. I search for my raccoon rescuer, hoping he’s found me by now, but there’s no sign of him. It’s just me and Purple-Hair.

“Don’t try to be nice to me,” I snap back, then realize something else that really bugs me about her words. “How do you know my name?”

“There aren’t many Del Rays whose family owned cruise lines,” she says. “The ship accident was all over the news.”

If she knows I’m a Del Ray, then she spoke to Trevor. That means they’re on the same side, and I can’t trust her.

I twist my knobs. “What do you want?”

“Just to plug you back in. Trevor should have never unplugged you.”

“Damn right, he shouldn’t have! I can’t believe that too good-looking for his own good bastard just left me here. He’s a good for nothing, chews his food way too long, whiskey-drinking shithead.”

“He does chew way too long, doesn’t he? I thought I was the only one who noticed!” Purple-Hair says. “And he’s always in

a bad mood. I call him Sour Patch Kid.”

I chuckle. “I bet he hates that.”

“What doesn’t he hate?” she says with a laugh. “He’s still unconscious, by the way. I thought it might cheer you up knowing he took quite a beating.”

“From whom?” I feel a pang of... something... even though the bastard unplugged me, so he most definitely deserves it. “Is he okay?”

“He’s going to be. Once he wakes up, he can hop into a new body.”

“Oh, great. And then he can come back here and unplug me again.”

“I won’t let him,” Purple-Hair pats my side. “I don’t know why he did that. Janet said he had his reasons, but...” I start to protest but she cuts me off, “it’s still cruel.”

“Thank you! All I did was talk to him about how I died, and he went berserk.”

Purple-Hair shrugs. “Some spirits can be very sensitive about that stuff.”

“I guess,” I say before I remember who I’m dealing with. “You’re one of the kidnapers, aren’t you?”

“I’m McKay. And we’re not kidnapers. We’re the good guys.”

“Mmmm ’kay,” I drawl.

“Good one.” She rolls her eyes. “Like I haven’t heard that one before, Prima Diva.”

I sigh. “You’re not going to help me get out of here, are you?”

“That’s exactly what I’m going to do.” McKay takes a seat next to me.

“Bullshit,” I snap. She may seem nice, but so did the guy in a Pluto costume at Disney World who pickpocketed me. “If you’re friends with Trevor—”

“Actually, we’re colleagues. I’m a medium, and he hired me to help free the spirits who are trapped in objects.”

“By moving on?”

“Hell to the no. Though I can see why you might think that. Trevor told me your supposed friends convinced you that you wanted to move on.”

I try to spray her for implying Neph isn’t a real friend, then remember I’ve steamed myself dry. “Mind pouring some water into my reservoir?”

To my surprise, she nods. “Sure thing.”

She gets up and strolls to the kitchen. She returns a few minutes later with a jug of water. Lifting my lid, she pours it in.

I almost groan as the sweet, cool water fills me. It’s like that time I found a well after being lost in the Kalahari Desert for twelve hours. Turned out it was a mirage and I was eating sand, but for the first minute or two, it felt like paradise.

“It must suck being trapped in an espresso machine,” McKay says. “I get why you’d think moving on is better than this.”

“Plus, you know... heaven.”

“Is that where they told you spirits go?” she asks as she pours the last of the water into my reservoir.

“Isn’t it?” I ask her.

She closes my lid and sits back down. “I’m actually not sure. Some say it’s heaven. Others think you get reincarnated or go to some underworld.”

“Those sound like pretty good options to me,” I tell her. Better than being trapped here, worrying Trevor will come back and unplug me.

“If you consent, yeah. I help spirits find their unfinished business when they ask for my help—but what Movin’ On is doing is wrong.” She sighs.

“Who’s Movin’ On?”

“Dickweeds. They pose as a moving company, but they’ve got every medium in the city convinced that spirits are better off in the afterlife, no matter how much they plead or protest.”

“Haven’t they heard of consent? That’s fucking messed up.” I twist my nozzles. “But you know what’s more messed up? Unplugging me. I’d rather move on than just cease to exist any day.”

“I’m definitely not justifying what Trevor did, but at least he didn’t trap you in an espresso machine like those Movin’ On

assholes.” She scowls. “They think they’re fucking heroes. Even my sister.”

“Actually...” I trail off. Should I tell her Movin’ On didn’t trap me in the espresso machine?

Neph’s mate Bas sticks spirits into objects all the time without meaning to. Guy’s powers are so wonky he’s got an opera singer trapped in his penis.

Maybe if she realizes the whole thing was a complete accident, she’ll let me go? But I don’t know if I can trust McKay—especially if it puts Neph and her mates at risk. What if these kidnapers target them next? Her guys are across the border, so they’re probably safe, but my bestie’s in Toronto. No way am I risking her life for a chance to free mine.

“Actually what?” McKay presses.

I decide to keep her talking. “I was just wondering if your sister works for Movin’ On.”

McKay nods. “I tried explaining everything to her, but she’s convinced she’s doing the right thing. She’s not listening—but I’m not giving up on her. And I’m not giving up on you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That your pony shifter friend and whoever else tried to get you to move on aren’t helping you.”

I almost spray her. Almost. But I need her to keep my reservoir full so I can deal with real threats—like Trevor.

If I had more ammo though... “You don’t happen to have some coffee beans you can add to my bean hopper?” I ask.

“I’ll check the cupboards.” She heads off to the kitchen.

Now we’re talking.

A few seconds later, she returns from the kitchen with a bag of coffee beans. “Let’s get these sorted, and then I’ll introduce you to Alicia.”

“Who’s Alicia?” *And why is McKay being so helpful?*

The only adversary who ever gave me a weapon before was that guerilla who said he’d only let me and my friends go if I could defeat him in a sword fight. I stabbed him before he stopped explaining the rules. His buddies thought it was hilarious that a skinny, hot heiress beat him, so they drove us back to the city and let us go.

“She’s trapped in a broom,” McKay says. “Once you hear how she ended up there, and what Movin’ On did to her, maybe you’ll understand that we really are the good guys.”

“Maybe,” I say noncommittally as she opens my hopper.

She pours in the caffeinated bullets I plan to launch at Trevor’s sexy but hateful ass, and I start to feel a bit more in control.

“Feeling better?” she asks.

“Actually, yes.” I’m glad I don’t have to fight to hide my triumphant smile, since I don’t have anything resembling a face.

McKay smiles. “Good. Now let’s see if we can get you out of this espresso machine.”

I gasp. “You can actually do that?”

McKay’s face falls. “I mean, I haven’t managed to with the other hoppers, but we’re working on it.”

“That sounds promising. Not.”

“I’m sorry, Diva. But how about I walk you through the technique and leave you to practice while I get Alicia.”

Shit. I don’t want McKay leaving me for Trevor to find and shut off. And I’m not actually a body hopper, so her technique or whatnot probably won’t work. But what if it does? What if, with enough practice, I can finally be free?

I twist my nozzles. The only freedom I need is to get out of this place and back to Neph. Once I prove that Milan is an impostor and get the Del Ray fortune back, I’ll get a freaking jet pack. Scratch that, I’ll get an army of bodyguards *and* a jetpack. If it means humoring McKay and pretending to practice her ‘technique,’ then so be it.

I try to sound as excited as I can and say, “Walk me through the technique!”

She sticks her hand into her hoodie pocket, and a wooden stick tumbles out and clatters onto the floor. She lunges for it and quickly jams it back into her pocket.

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Drumstick,” she says.

“Like hell it is. I dated a drummer while he was on tour. We used the sticks for... never mind.”

“It’s a new type,” she says and sticks it back into her pocket.

“Now, are you ready to practice body hopping?”

Chapter 28

Diva

I spin my knobs counter-clockwise and count until I start to relax. Then, I picture my spirit—a shiny, gorgeous, sexy as hell espresso machine—slowly floating upwards.

Part of me knows this is never going to work. I meditated with monks in Tibet and never stole someone's body while doing it. Plus, I'm not a body hopper. But I need to buy time until my raccoon gets here, so I play along.

I feel weightless and at peace as I imagine my spirit floating through the air towards McKay and entering her body. I close my eyes and become one with her. My nozzles settle into her arms, my knobs meld into her eyes, and my water reservoir drops into her stomach.

“What the fuck?” McKay shouts.

I feel my mouth moving with every word, but I don't have a mouth. *What the hell?*

“This has never happened before,” my mouth says. “No one ever leaves their object!”

I freeze. *What's going on?*

I blink—which I hadn't been able to do in a long time. Did the espresso machine just grow eyeballs like the time Neph's friend Julian tried to free me and only gave me random, useless body parts? It was quite horrifying.

But as I blink with actual working eyes, I find I'm staring at a shiny red espresso machine. A damn hot espresso machine, if I do say so myself. It's just an object now, like it was before my ghost became trapped in it.

"I'll find someone you can hop into instead," McKay says. "Just... let me take over."

My body starts moving of its own accord toward the kitchen door. I feel my legs taking step after step. My muscles work, and the tingle of blood in my limbs is pure ecstasy. Literally like taking ecstasy. Which reminds me of Molly, the receptionist from Del Ray. Which makes me think of Fletcher. I miss Fletcher.

"Why am I getting turned on?" McKay demands.

"None of your business," I tell her. Wow, I can talk! With an actual mouth!

But I can't control my limbs, and she's taking me—us, I guess—toward the other kidnappers.

Like hell she is! I tense all my muscles to force myself to come to a stop. "You're not alerting Trevor or the other kidnappers. I'm not letting them put me in the espresso machine and turn me off again!"

“They’re not going to do that,” McKay says. “I need my body back.”

“I need it, too.”

“Get out!” McKay screams. My hand launches up, of its own accord, and slaps me across the face.

“Hey!” I cry, my eyes growing wide. “I have a hand. And a face! Also, owww!”

“You don’t have those. I do!” McKay snaps. “And I want them back.”

I stare down at my hands, and strands of purple hair fall over my face. Purple hair like McKay’s.

I gasp and pinch myself.

“Owww,” McKay cries. “What the hell?”

“Just making sure this is real,” I tell her as it finally sinks in. I just hopped bodies, and I’m in McKay... but not in a strap-on way.

I wiggle my fingers and smile at the sensation. I’ve long since come to terms with being an espresso machine, but that was when I thought I’d be trapped in one forever. I didn’t know a body was possible. I forgot all the things I could no longer feel.

I do a little happy dance, but trip over my feet and land with a thud on my ass. “Ow! Ow!” I cry happily. It might be painful, but it’s a physical sensation, and I haven’t had one in over a year.

“You can’t be in here!” McKay shouts, her voice echoing in my head and pouring out of my mouth.

“Says who?” I demand.

“The contract. I’m a non-hoppable entity!”

“Apparently not.” I climb to our feet. How the tables have turned on the kidnappers now! “What are you going to do? Sue?” I snort, even though that’s exactly what I’d do.

“No. I’ll quit,” she snaps. “I’m not helping the other objects if you hoppers don’t stick to your end of the bargain. Trevor promised me no one would hop into me. It’s non-negotiable.”

“I don’t care what Trevor promised.”

“What?” McKay cries.

“I wasn’t part of whatever contract or agreement you made with him. I wasn’t even a body hopper until now.”

“Yes, you were, or you wouldn’t be able to hop,” McKay snaps. “Which means you’re bound by the contract. It specifically says all body hoppers trapped in objects.”

“I didn’t agree to anything,” I tell her. “You can’t sign a contract on behalf of somebody else unless that person gives you permission. I learned that when I got hired as a bailiff on a TV court show. That was an educational two weeks.”

“Okay, fine, forget the contract. I don’t want you in my body; you can’t do this without my consent. So you have to leave,” McKay cries.

“Well, I didn’t give consent to being kidnapped or unplugged,” I snap back. “And I’ll give you back your body back as soon as I get out of this place.” Assuming I can figure out how.

I’m not looking forward to being an espresso machine again, but I’m not an asshole body thief like Trevor. I’m just doing this to escape kidnappers and a bastard who wants me unplugged. This is self-defense.

“Wait a minute...” I pause. “Why weren’t Trevor’s bodies complaining? Are you telling me he got consent from all of them?”

“No, he can override—fuck! Don’t you dare—”

I focus on pushing her into a small room I imagine in the back of our psyche.

—*override me!* McKay switches from shouting out loud to shouting inside my head. *How did you even do this? No one in an object has hopped out before.*

“Hell if I know. Karma, maybe? A shaman once told me that if you mess with the bull, you get the horns.”

A shaman said that? That’s from The Breakfast Club.

“Fuck, I never joined a meal club, how would I know?” I say.

“And speaking of breakfast...”

I grab the dining room cart and pull it closer to the table.

What are you doing? McKay’s voice echoes inside my head.

“Taking the espresso machine with me—us—whatever!”

I grab the machine and grunt as I try to haul it off the table. My every muscle strains—and fuck it feels good to have my limbs burn like that. To feel limbs at all!

But it also means I can't lift the machine.

“Fuck. Don't you work out?”

Me? McKay cries in outrage. *I'm in great shape. I jog every day!*

“You shouldn't skip arm day,” I tell her as I pull the espresso machine across the table, inch by painstaking inch. When I reach the edge, I slowly tilt it off the side and onto the cart. Metal hits metal with a clash, and the cart rattles. “Shit. I hope no one heard that.”

I hope everyone heard it, McKay snaps.

I push the cart across the dining room, glad that it's well-made and virtually silent. “We're getting out of here.”

No! McKay protests. Suddenly my knees lock and refuse to move. *I'm staying here!*

“Let's go,” I grind out.

I'm not going anywhere with you.

I try to move my leg, but it stays put. “I'll take you someplace nice,” I promise. “Better than this building filled with kidnappers.”

Better here than anywhere near the Movin' On people, she says.

“I'm not with them.”

Your friends are.

“No, they’re not! Neph is a cafe owner from a small town. She’s my bestie, not part of some secret spirit-trapping organization. Here!”

Since we’re sharing a head and a body, I figure I can show McKay memories. I don’t want to, but I need her to trust me, at least a little bit. Enough to get her to cooperate and loosen her hold on the body so I can escape.

I remember one of the times when Neph and her guys borrowed a shopping cart so they could take me all around town. We talked and laughed and took a bunch of group photos that they hung behind the bar.

McKay is quiet for a moment, and I can hear the distant mutter of her thoughts like someone speaking in the next room.

We kidnapped you from your friend, she says softly.

“Finally, someone listens to me!” I say. “I just want to go back.”

But I want my body back.

“I know the feeling,” I say. “But I can’t escape while in an espresso machine.”

Yes, you can. Give my body back and I’ll take you back to your friend, she says. *You don’t have to take bodies without consent like Trevor.*

I feel a wave of rage just thinking about the asshole, followed by a wave of worry. Why the hell do I care that the guy’s

unconscious? I need to get out of here before he's up and about and hopping into another unsuspecting clown—or worse, a mime like that one who tricked me in Lyon.

I should give McKay her body back and let her take me home. It's the right thing to do. Sort of. Assuming I can trust her...

What if she's lying? What if, the minute I hop back into the espresso machine, she traps me in there for good? She said that Movin' On can do that to spirits against their will, and her sister works for them. She probably knows how to do it, too.

She also said no one escaped an object before. What if I can't do it again?

There's chittering in the kitchen, and I turn toward it. "What was that?"

Someone dangerous, McKay warns.

Someone dangerous to my kidnappers might be helpful to me—the enemy of my enemy is my friend, just like when I was trapped in that Saudi prince's palace and befriended his rival. Okay, seduced. But it all worked out in the end.

I hurry to the kitchen door—well, more stumble as much as hurry. These limbs feel strange. Either I've forgotten what it's like to control legs or McKay's feel too different from the ones I used to have. I was taller than her, and I did Pilates every day, so I was definitely in better shape.

I project my thoughts at McKay. *You really need to work out your core. I didn't use to either, until this one time I had to*

scale the outside of a fort and couldn't do it. Core strength is everything.

Forget about my core. You can't go in there!

I ignore her warning and push open the kitchen's swinging door.

Chapter 29

Asgard

“**Y**ou fucking shot me!” I shout at the purple-haired monster—though it sounds like chittering since I’m stuck in raccoon form. It was a lucky break that she only used a sedative and not poison.

She’s also a lot more attractive than I remember. I want to run my paws through her long hair and lick her lips. I wonder what she tastes like.

That dart must have given me fucking Stockholm Syndrome.

I take her in, hoodie and all. I’ve known plenty of agents who’d use a disguise to seem like less of a threat. If I hadn’t been so distracted with the need to rescue my mate, I’d have seen past her baggy hoodie and colored hair.

I look at her again now. She staggers across the kitchen toward me. Fuck, is she wasted? Maybe she did shots to celebrate taking me down and trapping me in this goddamn metal cage.

She’s got me locked up like a fucking animal.

“I’m going to make you pay for what you’ve done,” I shout—in raccoon form, so she doesn’t even hear the threat. I try to

shift, but whatever the fuck this cage is made of, it's solid and there's no room for me to take my human form. Which means I'm stuck as a raccoon until she lets me out.

“Don't worry, little guy, I'm going to get you out of there,” she says, as if she's reading my mind.

I gape at her. This has to be some sort of trap. Why would she shoot me only to let me go?

But she stares at the lock for several seconds, then goes to look through the kitchen drawers, her arms shaking and missing the drawers half the time.

Yep, she's drunk.

Even so, it's way more likely she's grabbing a knife to finish the job than to let me out, but she returns with a paperclip instead.

“I learned to pick locks when I joined a gang of jewel thieves. Had to leave them after they targeted my parents' mansion, though.”

That shit has to be made up.

But she certainly thinks she can pick locks, because she squats in front of my cage and inserts the unfolded paperclip into the lock.

“Don't do this!” she suddenly cries. “You can't stop me!”

What the actual fuck?

The lock clicks—okay, so she's good at lock-picking after all.

I don't wait to find out what she has planned for me. The moment she opens the cage door I leap out, shift in mid-air, and tackle her to the ground.

“What are you doing? That hurts,” she shrieks.

But it only hurts her. Lucky for me, the dart knocked me out for half the day—more than enough time for my wound to heal.

I raise my fist to punch her in the head and knock her out cold, but she stares up at me with wide, scared eyes, and a sudden pang in my gut stops me.

I don't want to hurt her, which solidifies my Stockholm Syndrome dart theory. I'm sure some witch came up with a potion to make me feel whatever bullshit emotions seem to draw me to the purple-haired bitch.

“Get off me!” she demands in a haughty tone like she expects me to do her bidding.

Well, that Stockholm Syndrome potion won't work on me. I pull my fist back.

Her hand darts up to grab mine, misses, and lands in my hair instead.

The moment she touches me, a jolt travels down my spine and to my cock, making it twitch. My skin tingles, and I shiver. *What the fuck?* I frown as I try to ignore the sensation.

I hesitate, but she doesn't. She grabs my fist—without missing this time—and her hand on mine sends an endless tingly warmth down my arm.

Fuck. I need to knock her out and get the hell out of here with my espresso machine.

“Why did you follow me here just to jump me?” she demands.

“I didn’t follow you,” I hiss.

“Yes, you did! You followed me from the clown car—not a literal clown car, but you know that—down to the waterfront. I saw you!”

“I wasn’t following you.” I was following my mate, the espresso machine, who shouted demands at her kidnapers as though she expected everyone to do whatever she told them—like this woman is doing now.

My mate drew me to her like a magnet to her metal side, the same way this woman is drawing me to her now.

“You’re a terrible liar,” she says.

“I’ve beaten lie detectors—”

“Me too!” she cries. “But no way you have. You lie like my friend Tiffany did when she got caught shoplifting from Tiffany’s. She claimed she owned the store because look, her name was above the door.”

She’s trying to distract me, and fuck, it’s working. I yank my fist free of her hand and pull it back to hit her. She flinches, and it’s as though she’s stabbed me in the chest.

I gape at her, and she meets my eyes with her wide ones, half scared and half angry.

“Mate,” I say without thinking. *What. The. Fuck.*

“Oh, you’re British now,” she says. “I can do a wonderful English accent from that week I was on Coronation Street—they never did air those episodes, though. Too bad, eh, gov’nor,” she adds in a terrible English accent.

A laugh escapes me, like she just reached down my throat and yanked it out. But I stop laughing when I remember what I just said to her.

Mate.

It’s undeniable that I feel the same pull toward this woman who poison-darted me as I did toward the espresso machine. But I didn’t feel anything like this for ol’ Lady Venom when I first saw her.

Something is definitely off here.

“What...” I take a deep breath, half afraid of the answer she might give. “What happened to the espresso machine?”

“The machine is over there.” She nods to the kitchen’s entrance. “I’m right here.”

I frown. “I’m not asking about you. What happened to her?”

“Who?”

“The espresso machine!”

“I’m right here!” she shouts.

“The fuck are you talking about?” I snap.

She frowns. “My spirit was in the espresso machine, but now I’m here. Yeah, I know. I didn’t think it was possible either, but here I am...”

“You... you mean...”

“Somehow, I body hopped. The actual body belongs to McKay. She’s still in here, but I’m driving this car. Person. Whatever.”

I gape at her, not sure what to think of her farfetched explanation.

“I’m Diva,” she adds. The name sounds familiar, but I can’t place it.

“Asgard,” I tell her, though I haven’t a clue why.

She smiles. “Nice name. I think it suits you.”

My heart does a summersault. Fuck.

She purses her lips, and I watch them move as she asks, “Hey, why were you at the top of that office building earlier?”

I can’t tell her the actual reason—that I was hired to assassinate the heir to the Del Ray fortune. Covert missions are covert for a reason.

Whatever the case, I can’t tell her the truth, so I lie. “I was there to rescue my mate, the espresso machine.”

“You’re still a terrible liar,” she says, and it makes my heart flutter. “But you did find me. *Finally!*”

“I...” I don’t know what to say. Thankfully, I don’t have to say anything, because a crash sounds from somewhere nearby. Fuck. How could I have forgotten about the danger I’m in here? This place is crawling with chair-smashing water taxi drivers, knife-throwing grannies, and poison-dart throwers.

“We have to get out of here,” Diva cries. “If Trevor finds me, he’s going to unplug me for good.”

I don’t know who the fuck Trevor is, but I figure he’s one of the assholes. Maybe Water Taxi Driver—though I bashed his head in, and he’ll be lucky if he ever wakes up from it.

“Please,” she whimpers beneath me—and not in a hot way.

My heart constricts. *Fuck.*

My gut says she’s telling the truth, and I always trust my gut. Usually. The one time I didn’t, I ended up caged, raccoon style. After she shot me with a dart. Or her body did. Whole thing sounds messed up, if you ask me.

But my gut has never led me astray before, and I need to trust it now.

I climb off her and offer her my hand. “Let’s get out of here.”

She takes it, and my skin goosebumps. As I pull her up, she stumbles a little and steadies herself on the counter. “This way.”

She staggers into the dining room, and I follow. She rushes to a cart holding my espresso machine—the one that, if she’s to be believed, used to house her.

My heart leaps into my throat. I read her wrong. She’s about to do something to hurt my real mate.

I leap toward her and grab her arm before she can hurt my espresso machine.

She gapes at me. “What are you doing? We need to take the espresso machine with us.” She yanks her arm free from my grasp and starts pushing the cart toward the door. “We can’t leave without it!”

That had been my plan originally, so I nod. I place my fingers on the machine’s side and feel... nothing. No spark like I should feel when touching my mate.

I move my hand to Diva’s arm instead, and my stomach flutters, my heart races, and my cock twitches.

She is my mate. Somehow, she moved from the machine to the body of this dart-shooting bastard.

“Hey, who’s there?” a man shouts.

I whirl around just as a tall, skinny man steps into the dining room from another room in the yacht club.

Chapter 30

Diva

“**S**hit. We have to go,” Asgard shouts. “Just leave the espresso machine and run.”

“No!” I cry and push the cart faster. “I need it! If I leave it behind, I won’t have anything to hop back into.”

“It’s Janet. I need backup,” the tall, skinny man shouts from across the room.

Did Janet hop bodies, or are there multiple Janets here like in The Good Place? Seriously, this body hopping thing is confusing.

“McKay’s helping the raccoon shifter escape,” Janet cries.

No, I’m not, McKay shouts in my head. *Damn it, Janet!*

“They’re taking the espresso machine!” she shouts.

I slam the cart into the door that leads outside and try to push it through. McKay’s muscles strain, but they’re no match for the heavy cart.

Fuck, you’re weak, I shout at her.

Then leave! she shouts back. *Hop into the raccoon.*

Then I won't have anyone to help me. Not going to happen, mmm 'kay? I push harder.

I don't know how she expects me to body hop under pressure. I wanted to try after Asgard tackled me, but it's not like I can reach a meditative state when my heart is racing and my adrenaline is through the roof.

"Move. I got this," Asgard snaps and practically shoves me aside. His skin still feels warm and comforting against mine—or I guess, McKay's.

He shoves the cart through the door and wheels it over the lawn and toward the docks at breakneck speed. I race after him.

"You're making a mistake, McKay," Janet shouts, but she doesn't give chase.

"Tell Trevor he's an asshole," I shout back.

My legs lock and I fall face first into the grass. "Fuck!"

Do you know how much trouble I'll be in? McKay cries. They'll lock me up for this, if they don't kill me first.

Why would they lock up a dead body? I ask her as I try to climb to my feet. McKay locks our knees. They're body borrowers. Won't they understand it's not your fault?

Only if they believe me! Nobody's ever hopped out of an object before.

I manage to bend one knee and get my foot on the ground, but the other stays very much under McKay's control. *Work with*

me here. If we don't get away now, they'll shoot first and ask questions later.

Shit, McKay says as she realizes I'm right. *Stop talking and run.*

Our knee unlocks, and I push her sneakered feet against the grass as fast as they will go.

Despite her weak core, her body can really move—until I trip over my own feet—or I guess her feet—and go flying face first into the grass.

Get up, McKay shouts.

I jump to my feet and run after Asgard as he pushes the cart onto the dock and toward the nearest yacht. It's nowhere near as fancy as what I'm used to, but it'll do.

I unhook the line securing the yacht to the dock before rushing up its gangway and into the cockpit.

I grab the controls. There's a chair in front of the wheel, but I've always felt more in control of a yacht while standing.

I pause to glance back toward the yacht club and spot Janet standing in the dining room doorway.

"You better let me drive," Asgard says.

"First of all, you don't *drive* a yacht. You *pilot* a yacht," I tell him. "And second, I can pilot one of these in my sleep."

"Not when you're drunk."

"I've done it while drunk, too. I don't mean, *it*, it. Though I've done that drunk. But I've also piloted my yacht when I was

tipsy. Not the day I died, either. I was drunk, then—but I was passed out when it happened, not piloting.

“Point is, I’m not drunk now. I’m uncoordinated. You try getting someone else’s body to do what you want.”

You don’t see any of the other body hoppers having any issues, McKay says. But they’ve never tried to control me. I have a strong mind.

I look back toward the yacht club and my stomach clenches. I can just make out the shadows of people inside the building rushing toward the door and spilling onto the lawn.

“I’m sure you can handle it, but maybe you should let me take this one,” Asgard says. “Not that I know how to pilot a yacht, but how hard can it be? Can’t be that different from driving a car or flying an airplane.”

I roll my eyes. “I’ve done all three of those things, and it is different.” Even though my hands feel too small and too shaky, I take the controls and power up the yacht. “Besides, I once sailed around the world in a yacht just like this... well, mostly around the world. Okay, like thirty percent around the world. But why would I leave Hawaii after I found a wonderful poke place?”

“I’m not going to go deep-sea fishing and make my own poke on a yacht. Though I do know how to catch fish from that time I dated a fisherman who supplied sushi restaurants in Japan. That was a miserable thirty-five minutes I’ll never get back. Learning to catch fish, not dating him. He was kind of hot.”

Asgard growls at me. “I don’t need to hear about your exes right now... or ever.”

“Jealous?” I say with a grin, but it falls as I watch a half dozen strangers run onto the dock. I wonder if Janet and Trevor are among them in different bodies.

“We need to get out of here, five minutes ago,” Asgard says.

I hesitate. Should I pilot a yacht when I can’t even pilot my body? Or should I let a guy who’s never done it before try it when we might all be about to die? I’m no longer in the espresso machine, so the choice is obvious.

“Step aside, Hot Stuff. I got this.” I can do this despite the oddly short fingers and shoulders that are sloped all wrong. I have muscle memory—even if these aren’t actually my muscles—so if I just don’t think about it, I’ll pilot the yacht like the expert I am.

I ease the wheel to the side to motor away from the dock, but my arm jerks in the opposite direction. *Shit!*

The yacht shudders as it hits the dock with a groan like my dad any time he picked up the phone and realized it was me. I guess these muscles don’t have any of my memories after all.

I can’t drive this thing, Asgard’s never piloted a boat before, and the body hoppers are closing in fast. We’re so fucked.

Chapter 31

Diva

I glance at Asgard. If he tries to take over at the helm, he'll probably crash the yacht. "I got this," I tell him as I turn the wheel more slowly this time and gently push the throttle. "It's just been a while since I piloted—or had arms."

"How did you end up in that body? And the espresso machine?" he asks as the yacht eases away from the dock.

"Long story," I tell him. I kind of don't feel like sharing with McKay listening. Plus, I'm not even sure he actually wants to know, or if he's just trying to keep me calm by keeping me talking. I'd rather just focus on the task at hand.

Behind me, shouts echo as the body hoppers race toward us. They sound like they're close now, but I can't risk turning to look in case it makes McKay's body do anything weird.

I keep my eyes forward and my focus on what I'm doing, and my damn biceps twitch. Again. Now we're fucking going toward another moored yacht.

I yank back on the throttle to slow us down. "Fuck!"

"Here," Asgard says.

“I know what I’m doing!” I snap.

“I know you do,” he says.

I blink in surprise as he reaches around me and places his large warm hands on top of mine.

“You just need to steady your hands,” he says gently as I lean back against his broad chest.

Stop getting turned on, McKay snaps.

I didn't mean to. Haven't you experienced involuntarily horniness and pussy clenching before? Although it's been a long time since I've felt it happen. I forgot how wet it gets.

Not when there was someone else in my body. Gross!

I'm sorry. I'm not doing it on purpose! I tell her.

I focus on the rise and fall of Asgard’s chest against my back. It calms me, and I relax against him. My hands stop shaking on the controls. Taking a deep breath, I ease the yacht into a starboard turn and point its bow toward the open lake.

“Good girl,” Asgard says in a deep rumble against my ear.

I tremble as my pussy clenches between my legs.

You're doing it again, McKay snaps.

Don't worry, I don't plan to do anything sexual with you here. That's just weird. Plus, you know, kidnappers and maybe murderers are chasing after us. So not really the right time.

Then stop using my vagina!

I'm trying!

Asgard squeezes my hands, and I try not to like it for McKay's sake—and mine since I don't want her here during intimate moments. My body—well, technically her body—doesn't cooperate.

That's it, McKay cries. Get away from him now or I'm taking over our arms and stopping this boat. I'd rather die than be a part of this.

Okay, okay! I gently nudge Asgard with my elbow, and he lets go of me. I miss his touch... his warmth... the way his hard muscles feel against my—

Diva! McKay shouts.

Sorry. Sorry.

I focus on picking up speed as distant shouts echo behind me. They're overpowered by the sound of the engine, so I can't make out the words.

Glancing back, I spot the lights of another yacht come to life as people rush along her deck. "They're following us! I don't want to go back there. They're going to lock me up or unplug me. I can't go through that again."

"I won't let that happen," Asgard says with calm confidence.

We don't have a plug, McKay reminds me.

I will if they put me back in the espresso machine—or some place worse, like a... toilet!

You can't unplug that.

You can clog it or something!

“What are you thinking about?” Asgard asks.

“Toilets!” I snap. “And clogging them.”

“Umm...” he says. “Okay? Do you need to go?”

“What? No! Actually, I honestly don’t know. I don’t remember what that feels like.” I focus on my asshole, hoping it will tell me something. It doesn’t. “McKay, do we need to go to the bathroom?”

“Who’s McKay?” Asgard says.

I remember how he jumped me when he thought I was the original owner of this body. It’s better if I don’t tell him that she’s still here.

“That’s what I call my asshole,” I lie. “Don’t you have a name for your asshole?”

Oh, fuck you, McKay says.

“Umm... maybe focus on piloting,” he says. “And, no, but I did name my cock—”

“Don’t make me think about your cock, or McKay will fuck us up.”

“Your asshole will fuck us up if I talk about my cock?” Asgard shakes his head and glances over his shoulder. “Speaking of being fucked up... You’ve never been in a chase, have you?”

“Actually...”

“Don’t answer that! Drive! They’re gaining on us.”

I realize he’s right, and my heart starts to race.

I focus my gaze on the Toronto skyline on the far side of the harbor and push the yacht's throttle to its fullest.

My stomach clenches like I'm about to puke—maybe I do need to go to the bathroom?

No, you're just scared, McKay says, helpfully.

With good reason. It's against all the safety laws and regulations to go this fast at night in a harbor. There could be other yachts to crash into... and I've already drowned once.

I slow the motor. If we crash, we'll sink just like... just like...

My chest feels tight as though it's filling with water. My breath turns short and gasping.

“What's wrong?” Asgard places a solid hand on my shoulder.

I can't get enough air to tell him, so I don't try to explain.

“We have to speed up, they're gaining on us!” he shouts.

I can't do it. I can't go faster when there's a risk we'll crash, sink, and die. I know how to swim—hell, I learned from three former Olympians—but that didn't save me or my sister, who had the same lessons and died on the same cruise as me.

Asgard puts his hand over mine and pushes hard on the throttle, and my stomach lurches as the yacht speeds up.

“No,” I gasp and yank the throttle back.

“We have to—”

His voice is cut off by something slamming into the back of the yacht. I stumble forward over the controls, and the wheel

dives into my chest. *Ow, boob pain!* I never thought I'd miss that.

I whirl and squint through the glare of the kidnappers' yacht to find it directly behind us with its bow nearly against our stern. It must have rammed us.

People rush to board our yacht just like those pirates did off the coast of Greece.

Fuck! What if our yacht's damaged? What if it sinks? What if they come over here and drown us or...

"I'll take care of them," Asgard says. He turns to me and meets my gaze, his face lit up by the kidnappers' bow lights. "Whatever happens, promise me you'll keep moving. Get out of here and go somewhere safe."

"What are you going to do?"

"Whatever it takes." He grins. "I trained all my life for this moment. To protect you. I just didn't know it until now."

Tears spring to my eyes.

"Promise me you'll get out of here."

"But—"

"Promise me!"

"Okay, okay. But what about you?"

"I can handle myself," Asgard says.

I'm not sure he can, given that I found him locked up in a cage. But before I can stop him, he bursts into a run straight out of the cockpit and to the helm. He punches one of the

kidnappers and throws him overboard faster than I can blink. The others haven't made it aboard our yacht yet, so he leaps onto theirs and lands in a roll.

Go, go, go! McKay shouts.

I take a step toward the cockpit door to go after him. I have to help him. I can't watch him get hurt or killed like that skunk who tried to rescue me. My heart feels like a ship's hull cracking just before it starts to sink.

Diva, McKay says gently, I know how much this hurts. I can feel it. But you don't want his sacrifice to be in vain. You promised you'd get out of here.

I swallow hard and turn back to the controls. It takes every last bit of willpower I have to force myself to push the throttle. The yacht speeds up, and I glance over my shoulder as a gang swarms someone on the kidnappers' deck. I can't see who it is from here, but I know it's Asgard.

I can still go back and... but what would I do? I can barely control my limbs, and I promised to stay safe.

How is it that since I died, I can't ever help the people around me? Instead, they always seem to end up taking care of me. I used to be an ass-kicking Diva, if I do say so myself, and now that I have a body to work with, I can't even tell if I need to poop.

I turn my back on the kidnappers' yacht—and the man who saved me—and slump into the chair.

You made the right choice, McKay says.

I don't reply as I motor toward the mainland.

Chapter 32

Diva

I abandon the yacht and push the cart with the espresso machine toward the hotel where Neph and I are staying. I have a vague idea of where I'm going, and I can always ask for directions if I get lost.

The downtown streets are packed and the city is brimming with nightlife. Brightly lit restaurants and bars line Richmond Street, buskers sing on street corners, and the streets are packed.

I've dreamt of coming to the city while I was stuck making espressos at Jewels Cafe, but now I wish I'd never come. The only good thing about the whole situation is that I'm in a body, which means I can eat for the first time in over a year—I'm just not hungry.

My stomach feels like it's twisted into knots. How can I even think about food when Asgard sacrificed himself to save me?

Watch out, McKay cries, and I realize I'm about to plow into a woman who suddenly stopped in front of me.

She's staring at the sidewalk, and I look past her. The pavement is littered with flowers and candles, and when I realize why, my heart stops cold. In the center of it all is a bloodied rat flattened by tire tracks. Crushed electronics that I think used to be a tiny phone are strapped to his belly, and a single red rose rests in his paws.

My heart feels like it's being squeezed by ice-cold hands.

That poor rat. I'd been so drawn to him in the subway. But maybe it's a different rat, I try to convince myself. The city probably has millions of rats. Or maybe it's the same one. If it is, I'm too late to save him. Had he been a shifter, like the raccoon and the skunk?

I drop my head and keep walking.

Everyone's dead, I tell McKay.

She sighs. *It's just a rat.*

I slouch. I don't have the energy to correct her.

And Asgard might be okay, she adds. Raccoons can swim.

"He's not a fucking raccoon!" I shout. "He's a man. A selfless man who risked his life to rescue me."

A few people glance at me, but they just speed up and keep walking. No one checks if I'm okay.

What did I expect? In the city, no one gives a fuck. This isn't some small supernatural town where everyone knows everyone's business.

I don't like small towns, but just thinking about one makes me miss Neph. I could really use my bestie after the night I've had.

Look, I know you didn't get a good first impression of everyone at the yacht club, but Janet and the others aren't bad people. They wouldn't hurt someone who's innocent. They're just trying to do the right thing.

Like your sister? I suggest.

McKay goes quiet, leaving me to my thoughts. Which isn't necessarily a good thing, since they drift to Asgard, the rat, and the skunk.

Every man I've been drawn to today is dead, except for Fletcher. Trevor's probably fine, too—just unconscious, not that I care. The guy's an asshole.

Diva... McKay says softly, how did you manage to hop out of the espresso machine? You're the first person who's managed to escape an object. I was starting to doubt it was even possible.

I don't know if she's trying to distract me or if she doesn't care that I'm upset. *I have no idea. I never body hopped before.*

You mean... never? Not even before you died?

I was just a normal human, I tell her.

I hear her thinking, but it's too quiet to make out the words, like a voice coming from a phone held to someone else's ear. Then she speaks directly to me. *Well, now that you're free... do you think you could hop into someone else? I'd like to get*

my body back so I can try to help the others who are trapped in objects. Assuming they even believe me.

I really think you should reconsider the whole working with kidnappers thing, I tell her, then pause.

I promised to give McKay her body back—and she's put up with all my falling and horniness already. But hopping bodies will probably mean more falling as I adjust, not to mention convincing a new person to let me stay in control. Plus, I'll be subjecting someone else to the same misery I've subjected McKay to.

I know how awful it is to be trapped and helpless and unable to move. I don't want to do it to anyone else—but if I don't, I'll break my promise to McKay, and she doesn't deserve that either.

I stare down at my hands. I wish I just had my own body, so I wouldn't be stuck in this mess of a situation. I let out a heavy sigh. *Okay.*

Okay what? McKay asks hopefully.

You can have your body back... if we can find someone who's willing to let me hop into them.

Now you're concerned about consent? she asks.

I told you, borrowing your body was self-defense. But do you think I could borrow a hundred bucks?

You think I have that much money on me? McKay says.

I shrug. *Doesn't everyone carry a bunch of hundreds for emergencies?*

I've got ten bucks and a few toonies. You can borrow those if you leave now.

Thanks, I say, when what I really want to say is, *that's it?! I'd rather not sound rude about her being currency-challenged when I already took her body.*

I walk over to a young homeless woman who's got a sign asking for money, and a German shepherd lying on the ground next to her.

"Hey, I'm Diva," I tell her.

"Kennie with an 'I-E.' And this is Rosco."

"Kennie, if I give you ten bucks, would you be able to come on a walk with me?"

She stares at me for several seconds. "Why would you want that?"

"I need to body hop into someone temporarily to get to my friend Neph."

"Body hop? Is that some weird kinky shit?"

"Kind of but not really?"

She shrugs. "Okay. Rosco and I wouldn't mind stretching our legs. But if shit gets weird, I'm leaving."

"It'll probably get weird," I tell her as I hand her the ten dollars from McKay's wallet, but it's not like I have a lot of body-hopping choices right now.

She puts it into her bra and gets to her feet. “Where to?”

Um... how do I give you your body back? I ask McKay. *I’ve... never done that before.*

Just do the same thing you did to hop into me.

I try to twist my knobs—except I don’t have any, so I end up lifting my hands like I’m pinching some invisible person’s nipples and twisting them.

“I’m not into that,” Kennie tells me.

I drop my hands. “Sorry. Let’s walk.” I push the cart while Kennie and Rosco fall into step next to me.

Maybe try counting your breaths, McKay says.

Oh, right. I can breathe.

And don’t you dare wipe my memory before you go. Promise me you won’t make me forget.

My jaw drops. *Wipe your memory? I can do that?*

Shit, I shouldn’t have said anything, McKay says.

That explains how Trevor and the others get away with what they do—and why his victims’ expressions were so blank after he hopped out of their bodies.

I won’t wipe your memory. I promise. I hope. I have no idea how to do it, and so no idea of how to avoid it.

I slow my breathing down the way I’d done in Tibet and start to relax. Then I picture my spirit, which still looks like an espresso machine, floating up out of McKay and into the homeless woman.

Here goes nothing.

Chapter 33

Diva

Rosco barks and tugs on the leash... jerking my arm and making me stumble a step. *Wait, what?*

“Finally,” McKay cries. The sound doesn’t come from my mouth.

I touch my face. My hair. My non-designer pants. “It worked. It actually worked!”

“What the hell?” Kennie cries. My lips move with her words.

“I’m out of here.” McKay lets go of the cart with the espresso machine and turns back the way we came. She takes a few steps, glances at me over her shoulder, and adds, “Good luck, Diva. Don’t ever hop into me again.”

“Thanks, McKay. I really mean it,” I tell her. “Without you, I wouldn’t be here. I’d still be trapped on that table for Trevor to unplug.”

She shakes her head and keeps walking.

“Fuck, this is kinky shit,” Kennie says, and I feel her—our—mouth move. “How is this even possible?”

I take a step toward the cart with the espresso machine and topple forward on top of it. *Shit, these boobs are huge.*

“Thanks!” Kennie says. “Hey, I can hear your thoughts.” *Can you hear mine?*

Yup.

Where are we going? she asks.

My hotel.

For the kinky shit?

No, I need to find my friend.

For kinky shit.

No! I focus on keeping my balance and grab the cart with the espresso machine in one hand. In the other, I hold onto Rosco’s leash.

As I walk toward the hotel, I glance over my shoulder to make sure McKay isn’t following me. She isn’t, but one of the other body hoppers might be. If they are, I wouldn’t be able to spot them right away.

I cross the street a few times and keep an eye on both sides to see if anyone is watching or following. Most people avert their gaze from a homeless woman with a cart and a dog—even when the cart holds a commercial espresso machine.

The coast is clear. Probably.

Why am I feeling paranoid? Kennie asks as our surroundings change from busy city streets to a quieter residential area.

Low-rise apartment buildings line both sides of the road, and street lights illuminate our way.

I tighten my grip on the cart. *I'm worried someone is following us.*

Are you in trouble? I feel her concern as she turns our head from side to side to look around.

Roscoe barks. I hope that's not a warning.

Kind of... I speed up. *Hey, why are you taking this body borrowing so well?*

She shrugs our shoulders. *I've been homeless since I ran away at seventeen, and I've seen things. Not body hopping things, but one time I saw a squirrel turn into a woman in a bikini and high heels. Of course, no one I've told believes me—and they're not going to believe this happened either, are they?*

Probably not, I tell her. *Hey, is the Holiday Inn near here?*

It's just up ahead. Turn right at Jarvis. It's before you reach Adelaide.

I almost miss it, but Kennie points out the green H hanging above the door. I open it—which takes a bit of coordination in a new body—and push the cart through the door.

You sure we should be here? Kennie asks.

Course I'm sure. I tug on Roscoe's leash so he can follow me in. *The key is to always act confident, even if you don't belong somewhere. Like the time I became a model by climbing onto the runaway and strutting my stuff. It helped that I was*

wearing my friend Lacey's designs. Sure, she sewed them herself and they were a bit... eehhhhh. But if you act like you belong, nobody notices the details.

Did that really happen? Kennie asks.

Of course it did. I glance around the hotel lobby.

The place looks sterile, with three white reception desks topped with clear barriers to keep customers and employees apart. It looks more like a hospital than a place you'd want to stay. Who designs hotels like this?

Neph would think the glowing blue light embedded in each desk looked cool though. I smile as I remember my friend and her enthusiasm for... well, most everything. She'll be so confused and so excited to see me in a new body.

A middle-aged woman in a blue hotel uniform that looks two sizes too big glances at us nervously from behind her desk. "Umm... ma'am? You can't be... you know, in here."

"Why? Because I look homeless?" I snap.

"Umm... yeah."

I pull my shoulders back. "I'll have you know that I have a room booked here. I don't know the suite number. My friend booked it. It's under Nephrite Murphy."

"Sorry, ma'am, but your, um, friend will have to show ID and let you in." She flinches as though she thinks I'm going to dive over the partition and hit her.

Damn, it must be hard to work nights at this hotel. The other two desks are empty, so I assume she's the only person working right now. It's no wonder she's stressed and nervous.

Then again, I've stayed in much fancier places that needed armed security for when the drug-fueled parties spilled into the halls and lobby.

Okay, fine, they were *my* drug-fueled parties.

I push the cart toward the desk and spot a name tag pinned to her shirt. "Erica, can you call up to my friend's room?"

"Did you say it was Nephrite Murphy?" she asks.

I nod. "That's her."

Erica searches for her on the computer, then picks up the phone to dial the room.

I slump against the cart with the espresso machine. Roscoe leans against my leg. In a few minutes, I'll finally see Neph again. I'll be able to hug her for the first time ever! And make sure she's okay after the kidnapping ordeal earlier.

I'll also find out if the skunk shifter is okay. Is he alive? The thought of him lying dead on the road makes my heart feel like someone dug their fingernails into it. Maybe she'll know where Fletcher is, too. Maybe he's even here, waiting for me?

My heart does a summersault at the thought of seeing him again.

"There's no answer," Erica says and hangs up the phone.

It's not like Neph to be out in the middle of the night. Maybe she went to the hospital with the skunk shifter and she's still there now? I frown. "Can you try again?" I ask even though I know if Neph was here, she would answer. She never lets a phone ring without picking up.

"Either she's not here or she doesn't wish to be disturbed. I'm sorry."

"Has she checked in?" I tighten my grip on the cart. What if something happened to her? What if—

"The system says she did earlier this evening. I can't provide any more info or let you into her room without her permission." Erica types something else into the computer. "And the room booking doesn't include our standard pet fee. It's an additional fifty dollars per pet, but it should cover the first five days of your stay."

"Neph can pay that when she gets back."

Erica nods. "That's fine then, but you'll have to wait here... or, you know, leave?"

I'm not waiting in this sterile hotel lobby, and I definitely don't plan on sitting on the street all night.

I'm going to hop into Erica so I can get upstairs. I let go of the cart with the espresso machine. *Thanks so much for your help, Kennie.*

No problem. If you feel like hopping into me again, my hourly rate is ten bucks. Kennie laughs, and Erica looks at us like

we're crazy. *I'm kidding. I'm kidding. Hop on by any time, free of charge. I'm usually on Richmond.*

I feel lighter as I start taking deep breaths. I imagine my spirit—still in espresso machine form—lifting out of Kennie and floating across the room before settling into Erica.

I blink, and I'm staring at a homeless woman with a dog standing in the middle of a hotel lobby next to my cart.

"It worked!" I cry.

"Whoa, this shit's messing with my head." Kennie reaches down to give Rosco a pet. "See you later, Diva."

"See ya." I try to wave as she leaves the hotel, but Erica pulls our hand back and slaps us across the face.

"Oh fuck, what did I smoke?" Erica's shout comes out of my mouth. Our mouth. This is still so confusing.

I resist the urge to compare drugs we've tried. I need to focus on Neph. "I'm sorry. I just need to borrow you until I find my friend."

I picture Neph, with her curly red hair and bright green eyes, in those off-brand sweaters she loves to wear because they're cozy.

"Oh... oh, fuck," Erica says. "She's your friend?"

"You could see that?" I look up as the hotel's front door opens and a man in a business suit walks in.

He takes one look at me and Erica talking to each other with the same mouth, and shakes his head. "Nope. Not today." He

turns on his heel and rushes out.

“Shit, I’m going to get fired,” Erica complains, though I don’t see why she’d want to work here in the first place.

“What were you saying about Nephrite?” I urge.

Erica twists her hands together. “The redhead. Umm... don’t be mad, but a cowboy and someone in an Elmo costume dragged her out of here an hour ago.”

I tense and force our hands back to our sides. The bodyhoppers came for Neph. How did they even know her name? Or that she was staying here? “Where did they take her?”

“I don’t know! I called the cops, but they never showed up. That’s pretty standard, actually. They almost never show, even when—”

I don’t have time for Erica’s stories right now. “Did they get into a car? A van? A bus? What?”

“A limo.” Erica twists our hands together again, which makes me feel more agitated.

“Shit. This is bad.” Would they take her back to the yacht club? Probably not now they know I know their location. But if they have the money to buy yacht clubs and drive limos, it wouldn’t be that hard to buy dozens of evil lairs around Toronto. Or even around the world. How am I going to find them now? And what are they going to do to her? Poor Neph!

“Where’s your phone?” I ask Erica.

My head snaps down and I look at the desk. A cellphone sits next to the keyboard. “Oh, thanks.”

“This is the worst drug trip ever. How did I even get high at work when I didn’t bring anything?” Erica wails.

I pick up her phone as her anguish mixes with my own. Who do I even call? Neph is missing—and I can’t even call her phone to see if the kidnappers answer, because I don’t know her number. Why would I when, up until this point, I’ve been stuck in an espresso machine?

Asgard is gone—and if he somehow beat up all the kidnappers and managed to escape, I still have no way of reaching him. I don’t even know his last name. Or if Asgard is his real name, or a nickname.

I never got the skunk’s name, either, and he’s probably dead, too. I think back to the rat memorial I passed on the way here, and my heart sinks down to my shoes.

The only other person who’s still alive is Fletcher—and I never got his number or address. Even if I had, would I want to bring him into this mess? He could get hurt like poor Asgard and the car-surfing skunk, and the rat that got run over.

I could look up the number for Jewels Cafe and call Neph’s mates, but they’re across the border. They could get here within a day, but if I learned anything from the time my other friend was kidnapped, the first few hours are key or you lose the trail. Plus, they’ll just worry and then show up and get themselves kidnapped, too. If anything happens to them, Neph will never forgive me.

The only person I can ask for help is Kennie. At least I know where to find her. But I barely know her. And I don't want to drag her into this when the body hoppers are now targeting my friends. She probably has enough problems as it is.

But I need to help Neph. I'm tired of doing nothing while the people I care about get hurt. And if I'm going to save her, I'll need help.

I use Erica's fingerprint to unlock the phone.

"What are you doing with my cell?" she demands.

"I'm downloading ChorePossum."

Thank you for reading AN ESPRESSO MACHINE'S GUIDE TO LOVE & MISCHIEF! We hope you loved Diva's story. The sequel, A BODY HOPPER'S GUIDE TO LOVE AND MISCHIEF, will be available for preorder soon... but you can start reading it now on Patreon:

- Mia Harlan (patreon.com/miaharlan)
- Eva Delaney (patreon.com/evadelaney)

Chapters are made available as they're written AND you'll receive an advanced ebook reader copy before it's released.

If you'd like to read a hilarious chapter that never made it into the book, grab it here (geni.us/Diva1Bonus).

Want to know how Diva met her barista bestie, Neph? You're going to love [MOONLIT NEPHRITE by Mia Harlan and Eva Delaney](#).

My ex said I was a failure. I proved him wrong by opening a magical cafe. When it might get shut down, can my four fated mates help save it?

When I finally open my dream business in a supernatural town, everything goes wrong. First, I get drunk and wake up in bed with my best friend. He's never wanted me, just like my ex.

Then, all the objects inside my cafe come to life. I have to chase shrieking tables and soothe panicked mugs when I should be making drinks. To top it off, if I can't help the spirits trapped inside the objects move on by morning, I can kiss my cafe goodbye.

I'm starting to panic when a spelled latte helps me find my fated mates. But when my best friend rejects me, how can I trust the others to stick around? Especially when I'm about to lose my cafe and prove that my ex was right all along.

If you like quirky characters, panty-melting fated mates, wonky magic, and possessed furniture, you'll love this laugh-out-loud paranormal romantic comedy with all the feels.

Read [MOONLIT NEPHRITE](#) today.

Looking for more quirky reverse harem romance? You're going to love [JUNIPER \(psstt... the guys shift into dildos\)](#) by Eva Delaney and [HER DONUT SHIFTERS](#) by [Mia Harlan](#).

Sign up for Eva Delaney's newsletter (evadelaney.com) and Mia Harlan's newsletter (miaharlan.com) to find out about new books!

Also By Eva Delaney

Star Pilot - Space Opera Reverse Harem

A Star Pilot's Fearless Rebel

A Star Pilot's Daring Rogue

A Star Pilot's Renegade Spy

Sapphire: Rom-com paranormal RH

Sapphire: The Ice Cream Vampire

Sapphire: Sexy and I Snow It

Sapphire: Two Scoops of Trouble

Juniper: Rom-com paranormal RH

Juniper: The Dildo Witch

Juniper: Dildoomed

Juniper: All's Well That Comes Well

Love Blooms

Deflated (with Mia Harlan)

Storm: Rom-com paranormal RH

Storm: Raptor Shifter Biker Chick

Solar Mates (with Jewels Arthur)

Uranus

Moonlit Falls (with Mia Harlan)

Moonlit Nephrite

Love and Mischief (with Mia Harlan)

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Jewels Cafe: Amber

Amber

Amber: Deja Brew

Amber Goes Yeti

Amber's Christmas Surprise

Spell Library: Violet

Violet

Deflated (with Eva Delaney)

Love Blooms (with multiple authors)

Silver Skates: Wynter

Wynter

Shifter Bay

Her Donut Shifters

Her Pastry Shifters (Patreon Exclusive)

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Paranormal Reverse Harem Romance Reader Challenge: A
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Mister Fit

With Eva Delaney

Deflated

Moonlit Nephrite

An Espresso Machine's Guide to Love & Mischief

With Hanleigh Bradley

Tall, Dark, and Haunted

Saturn

Venus

Neptune

About Eva Delaney

USA Today bestselling author Eva Delaney is 98% coffee. Her hobbies include writing, procrastinating writing, and feeling bad for not writing. The rest of the time, she makes up songs about her cat and dog and sings to them. They don't care for it.

Sign up for Eva's Patreon for exclusive content and early access to future books: patreon.com/evadelaney.

About Mia Harlan

Mia Harlan is a USA Today & International Bestselling Author who writes quirky reverse harem romance guaranteed to make you laugh.

A librarian by day and author by night, she lives in Canada with her husband (who's definitely NOT a vampire) and their Mini Mortal (who doesn't have fangs).

Sign up for Mia's Patreon for exclusive content and early access to future books: patreon.com/miaharlan

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