



Licensed for Trouble
Book 3, PJ Sugar series
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Chapter 1

PJ Sugar knew how to spot a criminal. Even when that criminal might be dressed as a two-hundred-pound raccoon, complete with bandit eyes and a ringed tail, toting a ten-pound pumpkin toward the apple dunking and hot cider station near the cherry red Kellogg Farms barn.

PJ simply possessed those kind of gumshoe instincts, the sort that could spot a murderer or a car thief or even a cheating husband at first glance. Maybe she'd been born with them. Maybe they were simply honed after years of toting around the nickname “NBT”—Nothing but Trouble.

Whatever the case, it didn't take more than one look to recognize Meredith “Bix” Bixby—despite the fifty or so pounds she'd put on since senior year of high school, or the fact that she'd cut her long blonde hair to within two inches of her head, dyed it black, and crowned it with a pair of knobby black ears.

Gotcha, you little bail-jumper.

However, nabbing said bail-jumper might be a different bushel of apples, thanks to Jeremy Kane's brilliant costume idea. Really, sometimes she wondered if her boss actually wanted her to succeed at her job. Especially when Jeremy pulled the foamed

construction of a six-foot hot dog once used to advertise Tony's Footlongs in Dinkytown, Minneapolis, out of his tiny office closet.

A hot dog. Yes, she had arms, and her face protruded through an oval opening in the front, but she could only manage a lurching wobble, and forget about seeing anything in her peripheral vision. She had to turn her entire . . . uh, bun . . . to follow Bix's movements as she plopped her pumpkin near the Kellogg Farms sign and moved toward the hot cider station.

And of course, Jeremy had vanished. At least he wouldn't be easy to miss, not with his foot-high nozzle hat and bright red foam tube marked "ketchup."

"C'mon, Auntie PJ." Davy gripped her hand with his two grubby ones and turned his full attention to yanking her through the coarse grass toward a hay maze. As if she could resist the charms of a four-foot policeman, complete with blue uniform, utility belt, and what looked like a shiny pair of working handcuffs.

Local detective Boone Buckam's influence, no doubt. His way of reminding PJ that she may have broken up with him, but she'd never quite be free of the imprint he'd made on her life. Like his name tattooed on her shoulder.

"Just a second, Davy." PJ shot another glance at the cider table now, where Bix stood next to a Tinker Bell dressed in green with wide glittery wings. Perfect. Bix had brought her daughter.

"Davy, why don't you go get Sergei—maybe he'll do the maze with you." She even shot a look toward Connie, Davy's mother, where she stood with her husband. Sergei seemed to be trying to explain to his parents, in broken English and begrudgingly

translated Russian, just why people might dunk their heads into a corrugated metal bucket full of chilly water in an attempt to snag an apple with their teeth.

Admittedly, it didn't make sense to PJ, either.

Along with things that didn't make sense—why would Meredith show up here, at a community event? Even dressed as a raccoon? Surely Bix knew that this crime, along with her three prior shoplifting misdemeanors and one ancient domestic assault against a former boyfriend, would net her a stint in the community jail. Right?

Probably. Which was why she'd failed to show up for her court date a week ago and had been playing hide-and-seek with PJ ever since. She'd missed her by seconds at her house, the country club, her favorite salon, and even at Fellows Academy, where her daughter attended class with Davy, PJ's nephew. In fact, PJ had started to believe that Meredith might be on to her and her assignment to bring the bail-jumper back into the system.

Hey, PJ wanted to tell her, she was better than the kneecap-breakers that Liberty Bondsmen usually sent out. Bix should be counting her blessings that Kane Investigations had landed her bounty-hunting contract.

Around them, little hobbits and superheroes and the occasional Hulk searched for the perfect pumpkin to go with the perfect Sunday afternoon, fragranced by the rich redolence of decaying loam, the crisp musk of hay. Laughter spilled into the afternoon, and near the front of the farm, a bluegrass band warmed up with a whine of fiddle.

Yes, PJ could understand the pull to attend the annual Kellogg Harvest Days event, even for a wanted criminal. And the raccoon costume might have stymied a PI and bail-recovery agent of lesser caliber.

Now it seemed that Davy might be in league with Bix as he yanked PJ's arm.

"Noooo, I want you, Auntie PJ. Come into the maze whif me."

Davy's little bottom lip quivered, and her heart gave a painful lurch. She missed waking up to him bouncing on her stomach and the flying leap he did into her open arms. Connie's words this morning at church, in passing—"PJ, I hope to see you at the festival this afternoon. . . . I need to talk to you"—had stirred all the ache she'd steeled herself against since her sister threw her out, one pair of jeans at a time into the purpling night. She didn't really blame her sister for the deep freeze out of her life over the past month. Her sleuthing skills had inadvertently threatened Davy's life—twice. But deep inside she was hoping Connie's casual invitation was about a second chance. She couldn't camp out on Jeremy's office sofa much longer.

And if she captured Bix, the bounty might be enough for a tidy rent deposit.

"Okay, little man. Hang on—let me find Jeremy." PJ slid out of Davy's grip and did a wobbly three-sixty. No sign of the deserter. And Bix had finished her cider and was edging toward the dessert table. Shoot.

"I'll meet you in there!" Davy had clearly given up on trying to manhandle her inside the maze. PJ turned just in time to spot the little law enforcer running around the first corner, his dark curly hair bouncing as his cop gear jingled.

"Davy!" One more scan for Jeremy, a pleading look in Connie's direction, a glimpse of Bix . . . "Wait for me!"

She took off after Davy, her legs straining against the foam in a sort of half-drunken lurch as she wobbled into the maze. "Davy!" She slowed to a speed walk, rounded a corner—

“Boo!” Davy jumped out at her, holding his toy .45. “Hands up!”

PJ put up her hands. “Don’t shoot, I’m an unarmed frankfurter!”

“Don’t believe her, partner.” The voice came from behind her—low and laughing—and accompanied the dangerous swagger of Boone Buckam, six-foot-two of lean trouble, with lethal blue eyes and a too-familiar I-caught-you-now expression on his face that made PJ tremble just a bit. More than once she’d wondered at her decision to cut him loose and declare herself a free agent.

Especially since it didn’t exactly seem like Jeremy might be snatching her up anytime soon. Six weeks since the kiss that had seemed more desperation than a romantic move, she’d started to wonder if she’d hallucinated what she’d considered interest on his part.

“Boone!” Davy bounded toward him, wrapping his arms around one of Boone’s legs. “I love the handcuffs.”

PJ met Boone’s smirk with a withering look. “I thought so. You haven’t learned how dangerous it is to arm a Sugar?”

“I’m hoping he redeems the family. Maybe he leans toward a different side of the law.”

“Ha. I’m on the right side of the law.” Speaking of—she tried to jump, get a glimpse of Bix over the top of the hay mounds, but she couldn’t quite get high enough.

“Oh sure. By cheating?” He patted Davy on the head. “I think she needs a lesson in what happens to lawbreakers, don’t you, Davy?”

As if on cue, Davy whipped out his handcuffs. “I have to take you in, Auntie PJ,” he said, with such a serious look on his pudgy face PJ couldn’t help but hold out her hands.

He snapped the cuffs on, put his hands on his hips as if to survey his handiwork, and took off.

Leaving her handcuffed in front of Boone like a criminal, while the real criminal downed apple fritters and pumpkin bread at the Girl Scout fundraiser booth.

“Davy, come back here!” She held up her hands to Boone. “Please?”

He gave her a lopsided smile. Thankfully, it didn’t hold the same power it once did. “I don’t know. I think it’s safer for mankind to keep you a little handicapped.”

“Oh, whatever.” She turned and waddled around the hay bales. “Davy!”

“I’ve been meaning to talk to you, PJ.” Boone edged up behind her.

“Get me out of these cuffs, Boone.” She whirled, held out her hands.

“Do I look like I have a key on me? And anyway . . .” He jutted out his chin, shook it a little, lowered his voice. “I can’t take sides against the family, you know.”

Oh, good grief. “Brando? Seriously?”

“I’m hurt.” He stepped back, as if taking a bow. “Don’t I look like the Godfather?”

“You’re wearing a tux. I thought you were a groom or something.”

His smile deflated. “No, I’m not a groom, PJ.”

Then he turned and strode away.

Not a groom. Oh, that’s right. He’d asked her to marry him. Twice.

Why did her mouth run out ahead to ambush her? Wow, she knew how to destroy a Sunday afternoon. “Davy! Get over here with that handcuff key!”

She ran through the maze, into dead zones and out again, finally emerging to the other side.

Davy crouched below a model cow, spraying dyed “milk” into a metal bucket.

“Look, Auntie PJ, I’m milking a cow.”

“I’m going to milk you, little man, if you don’t come over here and un-cuff me.”

She held out her hands.

“Davy, did you handcuff your aunt?” Sergei strode toward them, carrying two cups of steaming cider.

Davy glanced up at his six-foot, muscle-cut Russian stepfather and went white for a moment, long enough for PJ to remember that he and Sergei still treaded on new soil.

“It’s okay. We were just playing.” PJ crouched next to Davy. “Hand me the key, kiddo.”

Davy fished around in his pocket and gave her the key. PJ unlocked herself as Connie swished up in her elegant Maid Marion dress—a complement to Sergei’s dashing Robin Hood costume. Sergei handed Connie the other cider cup.

“PJ, do you have a second?” Connie tugged on her elbow. “I have to talk to you about something.”

Connie was grinning, the old warmth in her eyes. Maybe Connie had begun to forgive her. PJ shot a look toward the apple-dunking bin, the band, then spotted her near the Girl Scout booth, buying a cookie. That probably meant she would stick around for a moment.

“Sure, Connie.” PJ followed her sister, tucking the handcuffs into a handy, concealed front pocket between bun and dog.

Connie had changed over the past six weeks—maybe the way she left her brown hair down to blow in the slight wind, or the shine in her green eyes. PJ could attribute it to any of the things that suddenly felt acutely absent from her life. Newlyweds. Marriage. A life on track.

“Thanks for coming today. Davy has really missed you,” Connie said, blowing into her cider. “And I have too.”

PJ smiled at her. “I can’t say I miss the fried fish.”

Connie’s gaze tracked over to Sergei. “We’ve gotten the fish-eating down to once a week. And his parents’ visas have been extended another year.” She said the words without any malice in her eyes. Yes, perhaps things had smoothed out at the Sukarov household.

Without PJ’s troublemaking. A knot began to tighten in her stomach.

“Great costume, by the way.” Connie wore amusement at the corners of her mouth.

“Please. Jeremy worked as a street advertisement in Dinkytown. He inherited his costumes.”

“You two seeing each other now?” Connie had the good taste not to glance at Boone, now hauling a pumpkin from the patch.

“Besides work every day?”

“You know what I mean.”

“I don’t know. We haven’t exactly progressed past our one impulsive kiss. I’m not sure he even remembers it.”

“But you do.” Connie raised an eyebrow, eyes twinkling.

PJ didn’t answer her. But yes, she well remembered being inside his arms, the way he kissed her as if suddenly something sweet had unhinged inside him.

“Yes,” she finally said quietly.

“Where are you staying these days? Please tell me you’re not in your car.” Connie bore genuine concern in her eyes.

“Hey, the Crown Vic has enough room for the entire family.”

Connie didn’t smile.

“Jeremy’s office. On the sofa.”

Connie stared into her cup.

The sun had started to slip into the dusky October horizon, the heat of the day moving with it. A slip of crisp breath dried the sweat around PJ’s face. How she longed to remove her sauna dog.

Still, Connie didn’t move.

PJ had sort of expected something like, “Well, those days are over. Please move back in.” Or at least, “That has to be awkward.”

But nothing. Until . . .

“I’m pregnant, Peej.” Connie brought her gaze up, wearing a hesitant smile. “I’m pregnant.”

Oh. Oh. Well. “That’s great!” PJ’s voice sounded strange, though. Too high, too happy.

Connie didn't seem to notice. "Yes, I think so." She again glanced past PJ. "We think so."

We. As in Sergei and Davy and Boris and Vera, and probably also their mother, Elizabeth Sugar, strangely absent from today's activities.

"Congratulations." There. Now her voice sounded normal. She leaned forward and wrapped Connie in a one-armed hug. "That's wonderful."

Connie returned the hug, but when she stepped back, she still didn't meet PJ's eyes.

"Okay, what's the deal?"

Connie shrugged, looked out into the fields of pumpkins. "You can't move back in, Peej. We need the room for the baby, and besides it's time for you to set up your own home."

"Oh, I . . . I knew that, Connie." Except there went that strange voice again. Happy, happy PJ. "Of course you need the room."

Connie glanced at her, fast, as if testing PJ's words.

PJ took her hand. "Really. I need to find my own place anyway. I'll be fine."

Really. Fine. Just. Fine. "In fact, we need to celebrate the good news with some pumpkin cookies, don't you think?"

"Well, I am eating for two." Connie slid her hand over her stomach.

Right. Cookies, pronto.

A crowd had formed around the dunking-for-apples trough, and as PJ approached the cookie stand, a cheer went up from the ensemble. Boris broke through the crowd a

moment later, an apple clutched in his golden teeth, water dripping down his wide, grizzled face and onto his sopping shirt.

Vera applauded behind him, dressed as . . . well, a Russian babushka, in her curly lambs-wool jacket, a blue polyester housedress from the early seventies, and a pair of flat boots. She took the apple from her husband and handed him his leather jacket.

“Maladyets!” she said, taking a bite of apple.

And right behind them appeared Bix the Raccoon, laughing at Boris’s heroic performance, clutching her pumpkin with one hand, her six-year-old Tinker Bell with the other.

She locked eyes with PJ. For a moment, everything went silent as PJ read Bix’s face, those conniving eyes, those tight budded lips, and deciphered two things.

Bix knew PJ had been hunting her.

And after today, PJ wouldn’t have a prayer of capturing her.

“Meredith,” PJ said, and that’s all it took. Bix whirled, dropped the hand of her six-year-old, and took off as fast as her paws would carry her.

Which turned out to be considerably faster than PJ, who sort of half ran, half bounced after Bix. “Stop! Stop, Bix!”

But Bix wasn’t having any part of stop. She shoved past the gawkers in front of the Great Pumpkin cutouts, past the bluegrass band warming up in front of the hay maze, and through the split-rail fence out into the parking lot. Then she turned and hurled her pumpkin at PJ.

And PJ, encased in a giant foam pillow, couldn’t dodge it. It thumped her hard in the thighs and she went down like a bowling pin, spinning out on the dirt.

“What in the world?”

Jeremy. All eight feet of ketchup, looming over her and then peering after her prey.

“It’s Bix!” PJ said, pointing above her head. “Help me up.”

Jeremy tossed his cup of hot cider and held out both hands. “Who?”

“Meredith Bixby!”

Recognition registered on his face as PJ bounded to her feet. But she didn’t wait for him to catch up, just turned and watched as Bix skidded to a stop beside a shiny yellow Vespa scooter, threw a furry leg over, and inserted a key.

She wasn’t getting away—not on PJ’s watch.

PJ heard ripping as she threw herself at the raccoon in an all-out tackle. She took her out just as the bike lurched forward. They flew off together, rolling into the ditch with a bell-ringing landing that huffed the breath out of her.

Ow.

“Get off me!” Bix slammed an elbow into PJ’s face. It landed on the bun.

PJ wrapped her arms around Bix, trying to roll on top of her. “Meredith, you jumped bail—”

“Of course I did, PJ. I’m not going to jail!”

PJ finally got a hold of Bix’s wrist, both hands fighting for control. “You . . . should . . . have . . . thought . . .” She groped for the cuffs, curled her fingers around them just as Bix rolled out from under her.

Then in a move that both Boone and Jeremy should have been cheering, she whipped out Davy’s handcuffs and managed to snap one cuff on Bix’s wrist.

But instead of giving the snarl PJ expected, Bix looked up at PJ with an expression of horror, her black-rimmed eyes filling. Her voice dropped, low, desperate. “Please, PJ, you have to listen to me. I’m not the person they’re saying. I’m not a thief. It was an accident. I meant to pay for the wallet. I just slipped it into my pocket while I was looking at a pair of earrings. I swear it was an accident. My lawyer is trying to sort it out, but until he does, I can’t go to jail.”

PJ hovered above her, her hand groping for Bix’s other wrist. “What about the other three charges?”

“Years ago, when I was a mess. I’m not that person anymore. I swear it. Please.” A tear rolled into Bix’s ear. “My kid is watching, PJ.”

Her expression whisked PJ back a decade, to the humiliating moment when the Kellogg police hauled her away in her grass-stained prom dress, the smoke from the country club kitchen inferno blotting out the starry night. The false arrest had driven her out of Kellogg and put her on the run for nearly ten years, until Boone had come clean and cleared her of all suspicion.

“Bix,” PJ said, finding the woman’s eyes, pinning hers to them. “I don’t want a scene either. If I take off the cuffs, do you promise to come in quietly? You can even call your lawyer on the way, and he can meet you there. And then neither one of us will make the papers.” She gestured toward the crowd behind them.

“Really, PJ?” Bix wiped her eyes with the back of her free paw, smearing her makeup into her ear.

PJ nodded. “Promise?”

Bix nodded.

PJ rolled off her, and Bix offered a paw to help her to her feet. PJ handed Bix the key to the handcuff.

“Sorry. It’s just a misunderstanding,” she said to the crowd. She searched for Jeremy, but he seemed conspicuously absent.

Tinker Bell ran and embraced her mother, who crouched beside her and whispered in her ear. The little girl skipped away, her thin legs barely able to stretch out, thanks to the slim green skirt. She must have hiked it up past her knees to ride behind her mother on the small . . . one-person . . . Vespa. Wait—Bix couldn’t have ridden here with Tinker Bell. Which meant someone else was taking care of her daughter. Which meant she probably wasn’t going home. . . .

Oh no.

And then, as all her instincts fired off like little explosions in her head, Bix slapped a cuff around PJ’s left wrist. She had the other wrist caught and the cuff snapped on before PJ could turn.

“Bix! Don’t—”

“Stop following me, PJ, or you’re going to get hurt!” Bix snarled as she pushed her, hard, into the dirt.

PJ rolled onto her back, trapped, her eyes closed, listening as the Vespa roared to life and whizzed away with a high-pitched wheel!

And, from somewhere beyond her periphery, she heard a camera click. Oh, perfect.

“Problems, PJ?” Boone said, his voice over her. He grabbed her by both sides of her bun and pulled her to her feet. “What was that?”

She'd torn a hole through the costume at the knees, and her dirty legs poked through between bun and dog. "She jumped bail. Were you serious – you don't have a handcuff key?"

Boone's silence made her look up.

"What?"

"Jeremy has you skip-tracing now? A couple solved crimes and suddenly you're tracking down fugitives?" A quiet anger simmered in his expression.

"Listen, Boone, I know you're still worried about me, but you can stop now. I'm fine. I just need to get out of these cuffs."

"You think just because you don't want me in your life that I'm going to suddenly stop caring? That I'll stop waking up in the middle of the night in a cold sweat, afraid that someday you're going to get yourself hurt—really hurt?"

Oh. "I do want you in my life. Just not . . . as my boyfriend."

He took a long breath.

"Please, Boone, I miss your friendship." And these cuffs had begun to pinch.

He shook his head slowly, then turned away. "Boone!"

As if she might really be in some sort of B-movie, Jeremy swaggered up, a convenient entrance, wearing a black baseball cap backwards, and minus his ketchup costume. "You okay, babe? What's with the cuffs?"

Boone stopped. Rounded. One second too late, PJ recognized his expression.

"Boone, don't—"

"You're going to get her hurt," he said, advancing on Jeremy, who took a breath.

PJ winced at the cold, calm look in his eyes.

Boone's voice stayed low and lethal as he stopped just in front of Jeremy. "You don't deserve her, and worse, you're going to get her hurt."

"Boone, you're overreacting. I'm fine. I just . . . I shouldn't have believed Bix." Boone shook his head, his eyes hard in hers. "People don't change, PJ. You should know that by now. Just try and stay alive."

He strode away, his tails flapping as he loosened his tie and dumped it in a garbage barrel.

PJ watched him go, her throat burning. She turned to Jeremy, scraping up her voice, any voice. "And where were you, Mr. Ketchup? Did you not hear me? Meredith Bixby, bail-jumper, remember?" She indicted to her still cuffed hands. "A little help would have been appreciated."

But Jeremy's gaze had trailed after Boone. "I knew you could handle it. Besides, I wasn't going to do you any good trapped inside a tube of tomato paste." Finally, his eyes met hers. "Why'd you let her go?"

"Because she had a hair appointment. I didn't let her go! Clearly, because I'm wearing handcuffs. Do you happen to have a key?"

He gave her a small smile. "Somewhere inside that hot dog beats a heart of compassion. Don't worry, you'll get her next time." Jeremy ran a hand down her arm. "I'll track down a key. And then I need something to eat. Seeing you in that hot dog costume is making me hungry."