



Be A Detective, They Said. It'll Be Fun, They Said (An Accidental Detective Mystery #3)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Wanda Jefferson, vampire/werewolf hybrid and (very) reluctant temporary PTA president, reporting for duty!

Yes, yes, yes. I'm a PTA member. Don't be so shocked. I'd do anything for my two precious babies, Olivia and Sam, including whip up batches of cupcakes late into the night for their annual bake sale at the Paranormal School for the Gifted. And if I have to endure the most insufferable, controlling, bossy-pants PTA president in all of existence who goes by the name Neerie Lincoln so be it.

Except today, Neerie's a no-show, leaving me in charge of the event. Inconceivable! The domineering little fae would never willingly miss the school's biggest fundraising event. Who else will properly ensure sweet and savory treats never grace the same table?

Neerie's sister claims she's been missing for two days. When she begs me and my besties, Nina and Marty, to put our fledgling detective skills to work to find her, we're reluctant. I mean, there's no love lost for the PTA president. However, she's left behind a little girl who misses her mommy something fierce—and THAT we can't ignore.

Of course, Neerie has also left a recently disgruntled ex, a loser baby-daddy, and a long line of horribly mistreated people in her wake.

Read: the suspect list is sizeable. Any one of a dozen people have reason to want to un-alive the crazy fairy, up to and including the school janitor.

Oh...and have we mentioned Neerie's absolutely obsessed with conspiracy theories? And the human groups devoted to them?

Yep. The suspect pool just got a whole lot bigger.

Diving headlong into Neerie's crazy world of nutball conspiracies

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:47 am

Chapter One

“Hey! There’s my pretty-pretty princess!”

My daughter, Olivia, rushed across the shiny gymnasium floor of her school to her auntie Nina, throwing her arms around the vampire’s legs.

Nina squatted and scooped her up, planting kisses on her tiny cheeks.

“Look, Auntie Nina! I made cupcakes! Cupcakes! Cupcakes! Cuuupcaaakes!” my sweet girl bellowed at the top of her itty-bitty lungs, her chocolate curls dancing in the winter sun when she tipped her head back and yelped for all to hear.

No one was as excited about this school bake sale as my Olivia.

Nina gave her a playful poke in her tummy. “You did, Miss Ma’am, and now you’re breaking Auntie Nina’s eardrums.”

Olivia was my expressive child. Dramatic, theatrical, excited about everything—little, big, made no difference to my baby. Everything was to be celebrated. She was larger than life and nothing like myself or her father when we were children, but her exuberance, her zest for being alive, made my life a brighter existence.

Nina called Olivia her little jalapeno. Hot and spicy, like a real kick in the pants.

Olivia planted return kisses on her auntie’s cheeks, squeezing Nina’s neck until her

heart-shaped face turned pink from the effort. Then she bracketed my beautiful friend's face. "I love you so much! Thank you for coming to the bake sale. Mommy said you would, even if you can't eat cupcakes. But you would if you could, right?"

Nina smiled at Olivia, love in her eyes, giving one of the multicolored ribbons around her pigtails a tweak. "You bet I would. I'd eat 'em all up. Gobble, gobble, gobble!" she said, blowing raspberries against Olivia's neck, making her giggle hysterically.

I'm so grateful for my BFFs Nina and Marty. I'd been a bit panicked when they'd texted to see if I wanted to have breakfast with them earlier this morning, and maybe do a little shopping until I had to pick up my children from school.

When they'd heard the president of the PTA, Neerie Lincoln (aka my PTA nemesis), didn't show up for the most important bake sale of the year—the bake sale where we raised money to put on the winter carnival for next year—they'd dropped everything to come and help me.

Yes. I'm a PTA member. I'm sure it comes as no surprise to anyone, but I love being involved in my children's lives. However, I usually acted as secondhand man, I didn't run the show.

As if Neerie Lincoln would ever let anyone else take charge, anyway. She was, as some called her, a Karen.

I don't necessarily approve of using a perfectly good name to describe someone who makes regular visits to the principal's office to complain about the most innocuous of offences, but as Nina said, if the shoe fits...

And it fit Mrs. Lincoln like a glove. If anyone could set my teeth on edge, it was Neerie. She was so difficult, Nina often asked me if I wanted her to wrap Neerie's signature high pony around her neck and squeeze tight.

She made everything about how valuable she was to us.

Anyway, Neerie, at the height of the Paranormal School for the Gifted bake sale, was a no-show. No one appeared to be able to reach her today, and her daughter, Tamlin, couldn't provide any information as to her whereabouts. Her aunt Naida had dropped her off at school this morning when the doors opened and sped away without explanation, declaring she'd be back in a bit.

Of course, the onus to take over everything—from the organization of where each donated item went on the tables (don't get me started on how cranky Elsa Franks could be if her Bundt cakes didn't get center stage) to the handling of money—was left to me.

Me, who had zero clue where to start because Neerie used me as more of her gopher than anything else. She had zero interest in any of the fundraising ideas I'd presented. It was Neerie's way or the highway.

Thankfully, my BFFs sensed my panic in my return text and came to my rescue. We were between investigation and OOPS jobs, due to how quiet things had been as of late, though during that downtime we were still trying to learn more about being better investigators.

And right now, I was relieved we were on a mini-break, because never was I so glad to see two people with a little time on their hands in my life as I was Nina and Marty.

Well, maybe that's a stretch. We've been in far worse situations (see Nina coming close to death and my almost drowning) than an errant PTA president shirking her duties, but I was a bit frazzled until they arrived.

"Mom?" A small hand tugged at my skirt.

I looked down to find my son Sam, my oldest. His pale green face looking up at me with a seriousness that made him appear eighty instead of his actual eight.

Half zombie, half human, recently tested for the paranormal version of Mensa due to his high academic achievements, defines my precious boy. The only zombie here at the school—and one of very few zombies in the world with a fully functioning brain, due to his half-human nature—Sam had been the beginning of my journey into motherhood.

We adopted him when he was an infant and quickly became embroiled in a fight to keep him safe from some dark forces I almost can't speak of to this day.

I ran my fingers over the frown wrinkles on his forehead. My sweet boy, as opposed to his sister, took things very seriously. He was all logic and statistics—at eight, mind you.

We hear, from his biological mother's best friend, Sal, someone we consider part of our family, that Sam's mother, while funny and friendly, was also quite logical and very good with numbers. Sam's aunt Sal told him stories about her all the time, and we treasure our time with her. In all ways possible, we honor his biological mother Samantha's memory.

Her death had been a tragedy, but the sacrifice she'd made so her son would be safe lived in my heart every day.

I smiled at him, that warm feeling each time I saw him settling in my belly. "What's up, Sunshine?"

He rolled his eight-year-old eyes and whispered, "Don't call me that in front of everyone, Mom. It makes me sound like a baby."

I bent at the waist, still in disbelief that we were already at the stage where I embarrassed him. With a salute, I said, “Aye-Aye, Captain. What can I do ya for, matey?”

He giggled, reminding me there was still some little boy in there somewhere. “The cupcakes are with the scones. They shouldn’t be with the pastries because they’re sweet, not savory. Mrs. Lincoln would have a fit if she could see.”

Marty, who’d been busy arranging the cookies for me, threw her hand over her forehead in dramatic fashion. “Oh no! The horror! How will we ever keep the sweet from infecting the savory?” she teased on a giggle, winking at him.

Sam held up a hand, his face somber. “This is one of those lessons in lightening up, isn’t it, Aunt Marty?”

She wagged a finger at him with a playfully admonishing expression, her blue eyes dancing. “Oh no, mister, I don’t teach lessons. Nuh-uh. I bring sweet treats and play Nintendo. I’m the fun aunt, remember?”

Nina scoffed at that, scruffing Sam’s hair with her palm. “As if. Tell Auntie Marty who the fun aunt really is.”

Now Sam really laughed, a deep, hearty chuckle, his eyes crinkling behind his glasses. He doesn’t need glasses, by the by. My Sam just thinks they make him look more like a bioengineer than a silly eight-year-old, and above all else, he doesn’t want to look silly.

He shook his dark head at Nina, readjusting his school uniform jacket. “Nope. You’re not going to make me choose between you. That can lead to resentment and jealousy I want no part of. It’s messy business.”

I couldn't keep a straight face. I burst out in full-on laughter. Honestly, I don't know where he comes up with this stuff, but he loves to learn and loves to read.

We, of course, monitor his intake of all media, social and otherwise, but his most recent checkup probably won't be the last time I catch him reading a *Psychology Now* magazine at the doctor's office.

Nina and Marty gathered him up in a hug. "We'd never make you choose between us, buddy," Nina said. "Now show me where the offensive sweet is with the savory and I'll make the bad cupcakes go away."

Sam hugged them both hard. While my son was a somber, serious little fellow, he was also quite affectionate and he loved his aunties. "Thanks, Aunt Nina." He grabbed her hand and dragged her to where the offense was occurring.

I gave Marty an impulsive hug as the crowd in the gymnasium grew and people poured into the space. "Thank you for coming to help out. I don't know what I would have done if Nina hadn't taken the reins and quieted all those hysterical PTA members."

Marty laughed, hugging me back, the scent of her pear and cucumber perfume sweet in my nose. "She does have a way with her penchant for violence, doesn't she? It almost always works. I've never seen so many women fall in line so quickly. In fear, mind you, but fall they did."

I grinned. My Nina, she was a blessing and a curse, but she was our blessing. "She definitely got the job done, and I couldn't have done this if you hadn't taken over the organization of the tables and helped get the credit card scanner working. I'm pathetic when it comes to technology."

Marty flapped a hand at me, her long blonde hair gleaming in the winter sunlight

pouring into the gym. “No worries. Now where is Neerie, who’s supposed to be running the show? She’s fae, right?”

That Neerie was. A petite little pixie of a fairy with a gamine face, shiny sandy-blond hair and pointed ears. She always wore the most adorable clothes, whatever happened to be the height of fashion, and she was a total terror.

I nodded. “She is. Though that doesn’t explain why she didn’t show up for her duties as president of the PTA.”

Marty shrugged, rearranging a plate of donuts. I watched her struggle not to snatch one because she was watching her weight—which was ridiculous. Her weight was perfect. “Maybe she just didn’t feel like coming today. Fae can be persnickety, remember? Depends on her breed. If we learned anything, we learned that much from our journey with Prim.”

That was a fact. Primrose was one of our more recent clients from OOPS, now a dear member of our extended family. We’d learned exactly how persnickety some fae could be during that case, and while I wasn’t sure what breed of fae Neerie was, persnickety was a hyphen on her name.

Still, I wasn’t so sure, finnicky or not, she’d miss the chance to show us all who was the queen bee of the school for the paranormal and gifted. Neerie loved wielding her power and lording over our heads all the hard work and dedication she put into the PTA.

I don’t like to speak ill of the missing-in-action, but only death could keep Neerie from an event for the PTA.

“Neerie is nothing if not difficult, but this isn’t like her at all, Marty. She doesn’t give a hoot how much gossip surrounds her Gestapo-like tactics or how much the other

mothers resent her for playing high and mighty, her mission is to rule the school. She'd be here even if someone cropped her head off. She'd simply grow another one. Nothing would stop her from being here, especially because it's such an important event."

Marty looked at me, confused. "It's a bake sale, Wanda. Not a sale on directions to the fountain of youth."

I snickered at my friend as I looked around at the gym, now full to capacity with a variety of very large paranormals. "While that's true, as you can see from the crowd we've drawn, it's a big part of what helps pay for the winter carnival. Never underestimate the appetite of werewolves and ogres. They know how to pack it away and they're willing to pay a hefty price for it."

Marty crossed her arms over her shrug denim jacket. "Huh. Then maybe she had a late night out with a new man?"

I scoffed again. "I don't care if aliens invaded earth. And believe me, Neerie isn't only a control freak, she's a conspiracy theory nut, too, but even little green men wouldn't have kept her from this bake sale, Marty."

Neerie all but wore a tinfoil hat. Since her divorce from a wealthy gargoyle, she'd become a little unhinged. More so than usual. From the moon landing was fake to Prince Charles was a vampire because, apparently, he's related to Vlad the Impaler, she knew every last kooky theory going.

I'd heard from some who'd once been part of her inner circle that she'd fallen down the rabbit hole, joined groups with like minds, but I didn't necessarily listen to gossip and I tried never to participate.

Marty rubbed my arm in sympathy. "Let's worry about why she left the cat holding

the bag later and sell some baked goods, so we can give these kids a winter carnival they'll never forget."

So far, everything was going according to Neerie's plans. If I shut out her constant jabber about banning books and what was allegedly going on with the school board and her belief they worked for the Illuminati, I didn't ignore how she handled school events. I'd paid attention, and it was paying off.

As I looked out over the gym with its dozens of tables stocked full of baked goods, as people milled about, chatting, smiling, enjoying a sweet treat, I felt good about picking up Neerie's pieces.

Mrs. Goodfellow, Sam's social studies teacher, approached me, her expression hesitant. She looked as though something was troubling her.

And just when everything was going so smoothly.

As she passed under the basketball hoop, I smoothed my skirt and ran a hand over my updo. I don't know what it is about a teacher, maybe I still felt they held a position of authority, but I always wanted to make sure I was presentable.

A nun with a ruler and a surly expression can scar you for life.

But everyone loved Mrs. Goodfellow. Tizzy Goodfellow was an elf, an ancient by most standards, and about as adorable and as far from the opposite of the cranky nuns who'd taught me in school.

Sam adored her and her use of magic to teach the children about nature and various types of birds, with whom she communicated regularly, enchanting her students no end.

As she held out a hand to me, her lively eyes—eyes that usually danced—were clouded. “Mrs. Jefferson,” she said, her voice tinkling like a wind chime.

I smiled warmly. “Mrs. Goodfellow, it’s so good to see you. How are you?”

She gripped my hand in her aging one, her pointed ears wiggling frantically. I have to tell you, when I see the paranormal in their element, when humans are nowhere around, it still tickles me pink to see their behaviors unhidden from prying eyes—to see them where they can be their true selves.

It was a shock at first, mind you, when I’d been exposed to what a human would surely call frightening. Fangs, shifts, wings, scales...you name it, I’d seen it.

But since settling into my role as a halfsie, I appreciated when I was allowed to let my paranormal flag fly.

She patted my hand as though consoling me for something I was unaware of. “Oh, I’m fine, dear. Just fine. May we speak privately?”

“Of course. Let me get someone to help monitor and I’ll be right with you.”

She smiled and pointed to the hall outside the gym, flitting away, her petite frame almost dancing as she went.

I looked around for Solange Martin, another PTA member, and waved her down. “Could you man the battlefield? I have to have a quick word with Mrs. Goodfellow.”

Solange was one of the younger mothers on the PTA, a sweet, gentle cougar-shifter single mom, and positively terrified of Neerie. She’d only just joined the PTA and she tried so hard to fit in. A people-pleaser extraordinaire, she was taken advantage of more often than not and it infuriated me no end.

“Is everything okay?” she asked, her dewy skin radiant under the sun, now pouring into the middle of the gym from the windows above the bleachers with gusto.

I smiled gratefully, giving her arm a squeeze. “Everything’s fine, Solange. Fret not. I’ll just be a sec.”

I made my exit before she could ask any more questions. The poor thing was so insecure, always worried she’d done something wrong—no matter the situation.

Pushing open the door of the gym, I met Mrs. Goodfellow in the hallway by a row of lockers, where she waited with Neerie’s sister, Naida. The latter was pacing and wringing her hands, very unlike her. I’d only met her once or twice, but of the two sisters, she was the lesser of both evils.

“Mrs. Goodfellow, how can I help you?”

Her expression grew worried, her eyes almost fearful. “It’s Mrs. Lincoln. I told Naida maybe we should talk to you. I know you have a detective agency, and this feels like something you might be able to help with.”

I looked to Naida, so similar in looks to Neerie with her darting green eyes, small features and hands like tiny bird’s wings, always flitting in expressive gestures.

I frowned at the state she was in. Her rosy cheeks were tearstained, her eyes swollen, her gamine face pale. “What’s going on, Naida?”

Leaning into me, almost as though she were afraid to tell me out loud, she whispered, “Neerie is missing!”

I blinked at her, automatically sensing something was awry. Her scent was a riot of different emotions. Fear. Panic. Worry. “Missing? For how long?”

Naida gripped my hands in her trembling palms. “Almost two days now! I don’t know what to do, but Mrs. Goodfellow said you could help. I’ll pay whatever you want, just please help me find my sister!”

I fought a sigh. Help find my PTA nemesis? The woman who treated me like her servant and spit on every idea I had?

Ugh.

Be a detective, they said. It’ll be fun, they said.

See me have all the fun.

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Chapter Two

A gnew Yannis, the school's janitor, a mumbling but endearing older gorgon, pushed his janitorial cart with a wave of his gnarled hand as he sauntered by. His assistant-in-training, Cooper Gregory, a sweet young vampire, followed behind him, dutifully listening to his mentor as he explained which direction to mop the floor.

I gave them a wave and a smile, thanking them for being so diligent about cleaning up during the bake sale.

I'll never forget how terrified the parents at school were when Agnew was hired. Everyone was afraid he'd turn them to stone, but he was a gentle teddy bear who only wanted to be part of the community, and eventually, he'd become a favorite with the teachers and children.

As I watched him pass, I grabbed Naida's arm, covered in a sleeve of tattoos. I gave her a comforting squeeze. "Tell me why you think Neerie is missing."

Her look was one of surprise. "You're kidding, right? You know Neerie as well as I do, and she wouldn't miss being queen for a day if someone gave her a million bucks. She would never have missed this bake sale after spending six months organizing it."

Well, it was obvious Naida saw her sister for who she was. I was grateful I wouldn't have to tiptoe around Neerie's demanding personality. It would allow me to ask the appropriate questions.

When Mrs. Goodfellow pointed down the hall to let me know she was leaving us in

privacy, I gave her a nod. Then I asked, “When was the last time you saw her, Naida?”

She leaned up against the brightly painted lockers and took a deep breath, the multiple piercings in her nose, lip and eyebrows catching the light from the windows in the hall. “Two nights ago. She dropped Tamlin off with me, told me she’d be back in an hour, and never returned. I’ve called, I’ve texted, I’ve done everything but go see that loose screw, Melba the Mystic or whatever her name is, to see if maybe she could look into that hokey-as-hell crystal ball of hers and tell me where Neerie is. I’m that desperate. I’m telling you, something is very wrong, Wanda.”

Melba was a werewolf and another mother in the PTA, who claimed she had the gift of sight. Not one of us believed her, but she was always a hit at parties and school functions. She was truly a lovely woman, if not a bit whacky.

But who am I to judge? We’re not supposed to exist, either. Maybe she can see things the rest of us can’t.

Gnawing at the inside of my cheek, I tried to gather my thoughts and ask the right questions. “And she said nothing to you about being in any trouble? Was she afraid of someone? Something?”

Naida rolled her eyes. “Neerie’s afraid of everything . You know that. And I’m not even going to try to cover for her. I mean, she thinks the guy at the Shop & Save is an alien plant, put here by the government to infiltrate the paranormal world. She’s a little off her rocker, and you know that’s the truth. Everyone talks about it all the time. But she wouldn’t leave Tamlin this long regardless. Especially with me. Which is why I know in my gut something’s wrong.”

I, too, had wondered what was up with Neerie’s lack of communication the night before the bake sale, but I’d been so busy making cupcakes with Arch, Charlie, Carl

and my children, I chalked it up to the universe sending me the gift of a Neerie-free night.

Yet, I wondered what Naida meant when she said Neerie wouldn't leave Tamlin with her for long.

I cocked my head. "Are you saying she had to have been desperate to ask you, specifically, to watch Tamlin?"

Naida shrugged as if her sister's disapproval was a given. "Well, yeah. She disapproves of my lifestyle. She hates my job as a tattoo artist. She thinks I party too much and, because I haven't settled down, I must be some kind of floozy. But I love my Tamlin, and she's been going through a rough time of it since Neerie and Thad divorced. I'd never say no to watching her."

Thad. The gargoyle. As I understood it, he wasn't Tamlin's biological father, but you'd never know it by the way he showed up for her, every event, every recital, even though he and Neerie were no longer together.

"What about Thad? Have you called him? Asked if he's seen her?"

Naida nodded her head, her unconventional buzz cut colored pink and green. "He was the first person I called. He's in California now, closing some big deal. Said he hadn't seen her since the last time he picked up Tamlin, which was about a week ago."

"Do you know if there were any disagreements between them? I realize they're divorced, and that comes with plenty of disagreement, but anything recent? Troublesome?"

"No. Thad picks up Tamlin and gets out as fast as he can. I mean, I can't say for sure there were no arguments, but if I know Thad, he gets in and out with as little

conversation with Neerie as possible. He does his best to keep the peace because he really adores Tams, but Neerie doesn't make it easy."

I hated that I didn't doubt that, but...I didn't doubt that. Neerie was difficult if you were on good terms with her. Not-so-good terms? It was probably like engaging in hand-to-hand combat.

"What about her private life? Was she seeing anyone that you're aware of?"

Naida sucked her teeth, driving her hands into the pockets of her leather jacket. "She didn't have time to see anyone. Between the hours she spent online with her kooky conspiracy theory friends and her PTA stuff, there was little time to do much else. If she was seeing someone, I sure didn't know about it. But we're not really close, either, Wanda. We don't talk about stuff like that."

Just then, I saw Nina poke her head out the gym door and cock it in question. I held up a finger to signal I needed a minute. "I'm not sure how I can help you, Naida, if you haven't seen something suspicious or noticed anything odd. Maybe you should go to the police?"

Leaning back against the lockers, she gave me a look, her eyes clearly saying not a chance. "I think we both know how frowned upon it would be with the fae if I went to the human police. All they worry about is exposure. Hide at all costs, etcetera, etcetera. I can't do that."

Frowning, I asked, "What about your fae...council, is it? Won't they help?"

Naida scoffed, her lips going thin. "The council doesn't love Neerie. She's made a lot of enemies with her crazy ideas and nutty theories. She was even banned from the last meeting for claiming the head of the council was selling our pixie dust to the were-bears, because pixie dust is like a drug to bears. The running gag was that she'd

watched too much Cocaine Bear on repeat. They're a last resort, if at all."

I wasn't sure what to say. How desperate could she be if she wasn't at least willing to speak to her own?

Naida gripped my arm, her small hand clinging to me, multiple shiny rings bedecking her fingers. "Please, Wanda! I know I said I was desperate, and I really am, but I'm still trying to do this quietly, for Tamlin's sake as well as Neerie's. If the council finds out she disappeared on some nutty whim, they'll try to take Tamlin. And believe me, they already think my sister's cracked as it is."

I couldn't dispute that if they were calling her Cocaine Bear .

"Have you asked Tamlin about it? Carefully, of course, but maybe she saw something, heard something that could help us find Neerie?"

Her nod was sharp, and I smelled her concern—it was deep. "I poked a little, but she didn't seem to know anything." She ran a hand over her eyes. "I mean, how do I ask a kid if her mother ran off to look into some new conspiracy theory? Neerie calls herself an alternative thinker, but we all know she's bananas. I think that's what she did, Wanda. I think she's involved in something really batty and maybe she got in a little too deep. That's what scares me the most."

I'd have to talk to Marty and Nina before I did anything. We'd agreed we all had to approve before taking a case, and as bumbling as we were when it came to solving a mystery, I'd need all the help I could get.

I pulled my cell from my purse. "Here's my phone. I'll put my number in yours, you do the same on mine. I have to consult with my associates before I accept, but I do want to help, Naida. I'm just not sure how."

She grabbed my phone with haste as if she thought if she wasn't quick enough, I'd turn her away. "Thank you, Wanda. Thank you . I know Neerie is difficult, and I know a lot of people don't like her because she's challenging. I don't have blinders on, but I also know her well enough to know she wouldn't skip out from an event like this, or leave Tamlin for so long without getting in touch."

When she handed me the phone back, her fingers trembled, making me feel guilty for disliking Neerie. I grabbed her hand and gave it a squeeze. "I promise to get back to you as soon as I talk to my colleagues and the bake sale is done. If you think of anything or hear anything, please text me, okay?"

She bit her lip, her eyes darkening with obvious worry. "I will. Promise."

The door to the gym burst open then, and little Tamlin Lincoln flew into the hall. Petite and adorable, her hair in pigtails with silky rainbow ribbons, she ran to her aunt.

"Aunt Naida! You came back!" she squealed, wrapping her arms around Naida's jean-clad legs.

"I did!" she replied with cheer, though I knew it was hiding her fear. She hiked Tamlin up on her hip with a grin. "I told you I would. I just had to do a couple of errands. You didn't think I'd miss those chocolate chip cookies we made, did you?"

Tamlin, at just six, was a living doll, and her personality the exact opposite of her mother's. She was inquisitive, funny, and almost always joyful. Her tiny voice, akin to a Disney princess's, always made me smile.

Quite suddenly, she appeared to notice me, wriggling out of Naida's arms to give my legs a hug, too. "Hi, Mrs. Jefferson! You did a really great job today. I'm sorry Mommy wasn't here to help, but if she was, she'd say you did a good job, too!"

Oh, sweet summer child... But who could deny this girl's enthusiasm and love for her mother?

I gave her a hug back, gently tugging one of her pigtails as I smiled down at her twinkling eyes. "Why, thank you very much, Little Miss. Did you have some yummy treats?"

Her face clouded, then as she looked up at me with sad eyes. "I did, but I missed Mommy's muffins real bad. She makes yummy blueberry muffins." Letting go of my legs, her eyes grew watery. "I miss Mommy so much. Aunt Naida says she had some important adult stuff to do and that's why she couldn't be here, so I'm trying to be under...under..."

"Understanding," Naida said, blowing out a short breath, avoiding Tamlin's eyes, but she held out her hand to her and spoke with a smile in her tone. "C'mon, Squirt. Let's go see if we can find Mrs. Anson's cake pops. Remember she made those chocolate ones dipped in strawberry frosting last year. Bet I can eat mine faster'n you!"

As she pulled Tamlin back inside the gym, my heart chugged sluggishly in my chest. For those interested, as a halvesie, I still have organs, they just don't quite work the way they do when you're entirely human. Yet, somehow my heart managed to chime in when a child as sweet as Tamlin was involved.

And that was when I knew I had to convince Marty and Nina to take this case. This little girl loved her mother, and she'd already had enough upheaval with her parents' divorce.

Marty would be a pretty easy sell. Nina? She'd take some cajoling.

I mean, Neerie had at one time called her Dracula with better hair...

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Chapter Three

“Well, fuck, Wanda,” Nina groaned. “What am I supposed to say when that hag of a winged monster has one of the cutest kids ever? Can’t we just offer to adopt her and leave Neerie the Narcissist wherever she is? The kid’d be better off with us and she’d have tons of playmates. Charlie’d love her and Olivia already does. She’d forget all about the nutjob who gave birth to her by the time we were done with her.”

We were in the murder basement, me trying to convince Marty and Nina to help me find Neerie, and it wasn’t going as well as I’d hoped.

Both of my BFFs were hesitant, for obvious reasons. They thought Neerie was off on some conspiracy theory jaunt and neglecting Tamlin for her own selfish pleasures.

But I wasn’t so sure. Neerie took pride in Tamlin, and when I’d witnessed her with her daughter, she was always attentive.

Marty shifted in her office chair. “I’d almost agree with you on this one, vampire. Tamlin is precious, and she’s the sweetest thing, and I have to wonder if she hasn’t been a victim of her mother’s kookiness, which worries me. Plus, Olivia does love her, and that works in our favor. But I think people would ask questions about us adopting her and that could get uncomfortable. So no can do,” she teased.

I nodded, even though I didn’t think adopting Tamlin was such a horrible idea...

Marty looked at me, her beautiful blue eyes full of sympathy. “I vote yes, but want it noted in her file, Neerie is a dreadful person and I don’t like her. I don’t like how

she's treated your generosity. I don't like the way she orders the PTA moms around like she's the head b-i-t-c-h in charge, and I really don't like her muffins."

I chuckled. Last year, out of the goodness of his heart and his love for my children, Arch had made blueberry muffins, too. He'd wanted to contribute to the success of his grandchildren's cause. But if you listened to Neerie, she was the only one who made them correctly.

Oh, the fuss she'd made about where Arch had placed his muffins on the center table, without knowing that was where Neerie put her baked goods. I thought I'd never hear the end of it.

And Marty was right. Neerie's muffins weren't nearly as good as Arch's.

This year, in preparation for a tantrum from Neerie, Arch made banana nut and gave them to me to put on the tables to avoid, as he said, "saying something he'd regret and embarrassing his grands."

Looking at my BFFs, I gave them my puppy dog eyes. "Listen, you two, I have no love lost for Neerie. She's mean and pushy and abrasive, but her daughter is darling. I realize I'm asking a lot, considering she's been rude to both of you, but I can't help thinking about Tamlin's eyes today and how sad she was that her mother wasn't in attendance."

Nina made a face. "That was the product of brainwashing. Neerie's brainwashed that sweet kid into believing she's mother of the fucking year."

I rolled my eyes at my friend. "Neerie has her faults, but she's a good, conscientious mother, Nina. I think she keeps her cray in check when Tamlin's around, but that's beside the point. A little girl's mother is missing..."

Nina threw her hands up in the air in clear defeat. Not that I doubted for a moment Nina would cave. She'd die before she'd let a child suffer a scratch, let alone the loss of her mother.

“Fine, I’m in. But I’m only doin’ it for you and the kid. Neerie can kiss my skinny ass, because I think what’s really happened is she’s run off with one of her conspiracy theory junkies. I bet we find her holed up with her tin foil hat and empty pizza boxes in some hotel in Jersey.”

“She calls herself an alternative thinker, FYI,” I said, repeating what Naida had told me.

“What the fuck ever. I’ll help you find the alternative thinker .”

Naida had sent me a list of the conspiracy groups Neerie was involved with online, with a note tacked on that read: If you thought I was worried about nothing, read some of the posts on the groups she’s a part of. Please, please help me. I can pay. I swear. If you say no, I won’t ask again, but I’m begging you...

Seeing some of those posts definitely left cause for concern, but I couldn’t see all of the comments because they were private and they had a vetting process to join.

If Naida could find out what Neerie’s Facebook password was, that would surely change the game.

I hopped up and rushed to Nina’s desk to give her a hug, wrapping my arms around her neck, inhaling the scent of her strawberry shampoo. “Thank you, Dark Lord. I love you. You’re my favorite BFF.”

Nina scoffed as she gave me a stiff hug before pushing me away from her in typical don’t-go-soft-on-me fashion. “Bullshit. You say that to Marty, too. Now where do we

start? You want me to look into these Facebook groups she's on until Naida can find out if she can get her hands on nutjob's password?"

"How can we do that? You have to join those groups, and I'm pretty sure the way you troll the jerks online who women-bash on some of those reels you watch on Facebook, you won't be able to resist creating some chaos with a flame war. You'll get booted out before you can say 'inbred halfwit'," Marty said, quoting one of Nina's favorite pet names for the men who had the courage of a keyboard and an Internet connection.

Nina simply grinned. "Listen, those incels deserve to be shot down by my sarcasm. Somebody has to call them out for talkin' to women the way they do, knowing damn well they wouldn't do it in real life because they're pissy babies. The fuck I'm gonna let some keyboard cowboy think he can say dirty shit to a chick when she's just baking a cake without getting his ass handed to him. If I see it, I'm gonna say somethin', because I'm that bitch. It warms the cockles of my nonexistent heart to call 'em out."

I went back to the chair at my desk and shook my head. "You do know your slam dunks to their egos won't stop them, right? You're only fueling the fire."

Nina shrugged. "I don't give a ripe shit what it fuels, Wanda. I just like poking them for being freaks, and I like doing it in big bold letters with their names attached. They might not stop, but you can bet they cringe when I call them basement dwellers with teeny-peeny's, and that makes me smile and smile. I don't go back to see if they answer me. I don't care. I just like pissing in their Wheaties. But that's neither here nor fucking there. Tottington can help. I already asked him to contact the dude who helped us with the last case to see if he could hack into Neerie the Nag's social media accounts."

Clapping my hands together, I cheered. "Oh, that's brilliant! But wait...who do you

suppose it is he's contacting?"

Nina scrolled her phone, popping her lips. "I have a strict policy: Don't ask, don't tell. In other words, if it gets me what I need, I don't fucking need to know how it happened, and neither do you."

I made a gesture with my fingers, zipping my lips and throwing away the key. "Noted. Okay, so we say yes to Naida then? I'd like to offer her at least some hope."

Marty snickered, tying her glossy blonde hair up in a bun—that meant she was ready to get down to business. "I don't know if hope's the right word here, good buddy. This is our third case and we're not exactly winning awards for best in mystery solving. But I'm all the way in."

That was fair, but there was nowhere else to go but up, right? So we'd missed an important clue our last go round. We'd missed one in our first, too, but that didn't mean we couldn't improve. No one was perfect.

Right? Right?

I figure if I keep telling myself that, manifesting it, it can come true.

Nina held up her phone then, her smile beautiful as always but smug as the day is long. "Told ya Tater Tott could help. We're in. Are you ready for Neerie's password for Facebook? Make sure you don't have any liquids in your mouth."

I immediately set down my tea. "Ready."

"Bigfootisreal417&%."

Marty hadn't heeded Nina's warning. She spat her tea across the room when she

sputtered a laugh. “I can’t wait to see what groups she’s a part of. Should we don our tinfoil hats before we go poking around?”

After I finished laughing, I had to acknowledge something very important. “You know, we laugh, but did any of us think half of the things we’ve borne witness to were real? Mermaids, unicorns, trolls, sirens, zombies to name but a few. Maybe Bigfoot is real and he’s running around in the woods somewhere with Bigfoot wife and all his Bigfoot babies.”

With that sobering thought, we all set out to scour Neerie’s social media accounts, but before I did, I texted Naida to let her know we were going to try and investigate.

“I’ll take her Twitter account,” Marty offered. “Nina, you check her Facebook, and she has a YouTube channel, too. You take that, Wanda.”

As we got down to the business of digging into Neerie’s online life, the basement became quiet until Nina muttered, “Holy fucksticks...”

My head popped up, eyes grainy from all the sites Neerie had subscribed to on YouTube. It was almost frightening how many there were. Everything from the human government has imposters in high places to the moon landing was a hoax and all the madness in between.

I pinched my temples. I don’t know that I had a lifetime of hours to invest all the sites Neerie was involved in. “What?”

“She was supposed to meet this Facebook group two nights ago. It’s local, all humans. They’re tracking Bigfoot. Remember that crazy shit on the news the other night about some fucking ruckus upstate in the woods, where a bunch of morons with guns were out shooting at something and ended up nailing a guy and his side chick, who were meeting in secret to smash smellies?”

Marty blinked, looking around her desktop. “I do! Did you see the interview his wife gave about how she wished they’d shot his man parts and not just his foot?”

Nina jabbed a lean finger in the air with a laugh. “Yep! That was this group Neerie was in. They got some tip from some dingbat that he’d seen Bigfoot and they were ‘investigating.’ They’re called The Truth Is Out There, and this lunatic thought the guy they literally tripped over was Bigfoot because he said it was dark and the man was huge. When the guy jumped up—buck naked, no less—one of the idiots in the group got trigger happy and shot him. I mean, c’mon. Jesus be some common sense, already. Anyway, Neerie was supposed to meet them that night. She said she’d be there.” She took a screenshot of the comment and sent it to us.

My eyes went wide. “But it doesn’t say anything about whether she showed up?”

Nina shook her glossy dark head. “Nope. But there’s another meeting tonight. One without guns, according to the admin. In fact, it’s clearly stated that there’s gonna be a pat-down to be sure no one else gets capped.”

I knew where this was headed. “I know what you’re thinking, Nina, and I’m thinking you’re bananapants. How are we going to infiltrate this meeting? They’ll know we’re not part of their Facebook group.”

Nina smiled again, leaning back in her chair. “How quickly you forget the Vulcan mind-meld. They’re humans, Wanda. I can get in their fucking heads slicker than snot runs down your face on a cold winter day. Easy-peasy.”

“Lemon squeezy,” Marty said with a nod.

I blew out a breath. “Okay, let’s do it then.”

Marty clapped her hands, her bangle bracelets clacking together. “I love a good

undercover job! What should we wear?”

“Clothes,” Nina offered dryly. “It’s not a fashion show, Blondie. It’s a damn meeting of the cuckoos.”

Tottington appeared out of nowhere, his stealth-like movements always giving me pause. He held a slip of paper in his hand, his dark suit perfection, his royal-blue tie against a crisp white shirt immaculate. “Dark Lord, I have more information for you about Mrs. Lincoln.”

Nina held out a hand for him to take, giving it a squeeze. “I can always count on you, Tater, can’t I? Whazzz up?”

He dabbed at her fingers before pulling them away, folding his one arm behind his back. “My contact has hacked into Mrs. Lincoln’s email. As instructed, I skimmed all incoming and outgoing correspondence for the last three months. I shall delve deeper, but this one particular message is pause for thought.”

“I hope it’s from the people she follows on Twitter. Or X. Or whatever it’s called these days,” Marty cooed. “Her DMs are chock to the brim with nutassery from members of this group called Paul McCartney is Dead. They believe that Paul died in 1966 and was replaced with a lookalike because on the infamous cover of Abbey Road , he’s barefoot and all the other Beetles are wearing shoes. They claim his bare feet symbolize death...”

“Well, Here Comes the Sun just took a whole new turn for me,” Nina cackled.

But Tottington cleared his throat. “I’m afraid it’s not quite that outrageous, Mistress. It’s from someone named Will Tempe.”

“Okay, enough with the dramatic pause, Tater. Who’s Will Tempe?”

Tottington squinted at the slip of paper he held. “If I’m reading this correctly, he’s little Tamlin’s biological father, and he claims that if Mrs. Lincoln doesn’t allow him to visit with Tamlin, he’s going to make her life—and I quote—‘a living hell.’”

All our eyes went wide in surprise.

But was it simply an idle threat? Or had he really made Neerie’s life a living hell?

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:47 am

Chapter Four

“O MG, you look so cute!” Marty purred as she pinched my thigh. “I love these jeans on you! You’re giving earthy and grounded.”

“And you’re also giving wannabe lumberjack,” Nina teased.

With a vague smile, I thanked her and ignored Nina. I’m not really a denim gal. I far prefer skirts and silky tops that are a bit more conservative, but Nina had convinced me, if we were going to go digging into a bunch of kooks’ heads and explore the woods to see if maybe we could find a clue about whether Neerie was with them, I couldn’t go in looking bougie.

She often accuses me of being bougie, but I say my skirts and heels are what make me...well, me . I enjoy being a girl. I won’t deny that.

Maybe not in the way Marty does, with lots of jewelry and the most current fashion. I’m more about a sedate set of pearl earrings and short heels. But jeans truly aren’t my bag.

However, Nina was correct. I did need to fit in and move freely if we ended up searching for clues in the woods. So fit in, I did. I borrowed a pair of Marty’s jeans and some sneakers, but I turned Nina down when she offered me a T-shirt.

“I got a T-shirt that’ll make those jeans sing the fucking blues, Wanda. It’s even in your stupid color wheel. You sure you don’t want a piece a this?” She held up one of her favorites. It read: “Surely, Not Everyone was Kung-Fu Fighting.”

I held up a hand with a small smirk before gently pinching her cheek. “As generous as that is, I’m going to pass, Mistress of the Dark. I’ve got one of Marty’s sweaters. Thank you anyway.”

I’d no sooner wear that shirt than I’d sleep with the devil.

She made a face at me, throwing the shirt on her desk. “Okay, but don’t say I didn’t offer. Now, are you two ready to do this shit?”

I wasn’t sure I was ready, but I was going to give it my all because of Tamlin.

As we headed out of the castle and filed into Marty’s SUV, I fretted over Will and his email to Neerie. “How can we question Tamlin’s father? If we do, he’ll know Neerie is missing, and if he’s not responsible, he might use it against her and try to take Tamlin from Naida.”

Marty turned around in the passenger seat, her eyes glittering in the dark. “You’re right, but if we don’t talk to him, and he has Neerie, or knows where she could be, things could go sideways.”

Nina, our elected driver, gripped the wheel, her knuckles pale. “I can always mind-meld the motherfluffer then make him forget our conversation.”

Tucking my purse into my lap, I nodded. “True. I just hate that it taxes you so, Nina.”

But she brushed that notion off. “I’m fine. The more I do it, the easier it gets.”

“But you’re not supposed to do it,” Marty reminded, snuggling into her flannel jacket. “You could get into trouble with the clan.”

“Like some of the dicks I’ve used it on are gonna tattle and look like prissies? Not a

fucking chance. I think we're good. Besides, I'm not doing it to gain anything for me. I'm doing it for information to help someone."

Then I remembered something I'd thought of when we found out Thad wasn't Tamlin's biological father. "Do we even know if Will's a fairy like Neerie? Or something else? She's never spoken about him. Not once."

Marty tightened the bun on the top of her head, giving it a fluff. "Neerie doesn't talk about much but herself. She probably thinks this Will had nothing to do with making Tamlin."

I laughed, leaning back in my seat to watch the bare trees of February speed past my window. "First things first. Where are these conspiracy theorists meeting?"

"They rented a room at the VFW hall, the crazy shits, but it shouldn't be hard to get in. They're all humans, so if they give us trouble, we beat 'em up."

Marty poked Nina in her arm. "We're not beating anyone up, Nina. We're in and we're out. You do your mind thing and then we skip. If Neerie was in those woods, we need to have time to go sniffing around."

"You're a fucking fun stomper, Marty. Always with the don't do this, Nina. Don't do that, Dark Lord. You're sure singing a diff tune when you need somebody to save your ass."

Marty threw up a finger. "Excuse me, last time I checked, Mrs. Muscle, I saved you ."

I leaned forward between them before Nina could lob a comeback. They did this often. In turn, I diffused the situation often . Sometimes, it was exhausting, keeping them from ripping each other's throats open.

Mostly it amused me, because no matter how often they argued, their love and loyalty for one another was far deeper than any fight they had.

“Ladies, no time for bickering. Now, I’ve been wondering why Neerie was caught up with a bunch of human conspiracy theorists?”

“Probably ’cause as paranormals, we know Bigfoot could actually exist. But who knows why anyone gets caught up in this shit, human or not.”

I certainly couldn’t understand it. “But she could easily debunk some of the more outlandish tales they conjure up by showing them her wings and her pointy ears.”

Marty cocked her head. “Maybe she does it to feel superior—because she knows what they don’t know? Neerie loves being on top. Maybe it gives her a thrill to have the upper hand. Or maybe, just maybe, she’s lonely. I don’t know why she and Thad divorced, but it’s a transitional period for her. Some divorcees go hog wild with their newfound freedom to help them heal. Some hide away to heal.”

“And some go lookin’ for Bigfoot? I dunno, Marty. Hah! I’m bettin’, she got so involved in this crazypants shit it drove her husband to divorce court.”

Frowning, I wondered that, too. “I’m going to text Naida and ask. I’ve also asked her to come to our office tomorrow morning so we can probe further. I didn’t go terribly deep in the hallway at school. Little ears everywhere and such.”

Nina turned into a dirt parking lot with about four or five cars and a shoddy-looking building with a sign that read: VFW Post 999. Everyone Welcome. Bingo every Friday 6:00 p.m.

Rolling her head on her neck, Nina cracked her knuckles and popped open the car door. “Let’s do this.”

As we piled out, I wiped my clammy hands on my jeans and swallowed hard. I don't particularly enjoy this part of investigating. I'm not nearly as good at playing a part as Nina and Marty. They're much quicker on their feet than I am.

I already felt foolish in jeans I wouldn't ever wear and sneakers that felt foreign to my feet. My imposter syndrome was hard to hide.

As we approached the door, Marty stopped us. "Wait. Isn't there a secret password to get in or something? So they know we're really part of the group? They're not just going to let anyone in. Not after what happened the other night."

Nina made a snorting sound from the back of her throat. "You let me worry about that. You two stay behind me and let me do the work. I know what a couple of 'em who planned to attend tonight look like. I poked around on their pages. Just follow me and zip it."

Pulling open the rusty, peeling door, she strode into the VFW like someone owed her money. Leave it to my fearless friend to take the bull by the horns.

She lifted her chin in a nod to a couple of grizzled old men sitting at the gummy-looking bar, sipping frothy beers, their ballcaps pulled down low over their faces.

Pointing to a door that led to another part of the hall, she asked, "Gaggle of lunatics in the house?"

One of the men barked a gruff laugh. "You mean the zippity-doo-dahs, lookin' for Bigfoot?"

Nina grinned, turning her eyes on the men, her gaze mesmerizing them. "That'd be them."

Both men, unable to look away, their eyes glued to her face, nodded woodenly. “Yeah...in the back past the kitchen.”

Nina grinned harder, saluting them. “Thanks, gentlemen.” Waving her hand at us to follow, she made her way across the uneven wood floor toward a door, pushing through it.

There was small hallway passing the kitchen and then an open room, where six or seven people sat in a circle with a table of glossy donuts and coffee behind them.

Stopping to listen, she held up a finger to her lips and cocked her head.

They were discussing the events of a couple nights go, around the same time Neerie’d disappeared.

A man with but a wisp of hair on his shiny bald head, dressed in jeans and an oversized jacket, shook his finger, his lips thinning. “I told you, Earl. That Benson was no good. Look what the hell he did! Now we’re all in the shits with the law. I don’t need that kind of crap in my life. They think we’re crazier than bedbugs, out in the woods lookin’ for Bigfoot. My kid’s husband is a cop at the local precinct. They been razzin’ him all day about his nuttier-than-squirrel-shit father-in-law.”

A woman, her short hair choppy and gray, crossed her American-flag-Croc’d feet at the ankles. “Oh, put a sock in it! How was Earl supposed to know Benson was bloomin’ crazier than a sack full of cats, Jody? None of us knew. We met him on the Internet, dumbbell! I didn’t even know if any of you weirdos were real till I met ya. If I had a gun, I mighta brought one, too!”

Earl, a round, chubby man in overalls that had seen better days and a dusty brown cowboy hat curling around the edges, held up a hand. “I banned him from the group, Jody. He’s in the clink now anyway. How was I supposed to know he’d come with a

gun and go off like the Mad Hatter? That's not why we're here tonight. We're here to talk about a coupla leads I got since the news broke about our group."

Nina wasted no time once she heard those words. "Earl's the admin from the group."

She sauntered directly up to Earl and without hesitation, put her hand on his rounded shoulder. Several of the people in the group gasped, and yelped a variation of, "Hey! Who are you?" but when she held up a finger and looked each of them in the eye, they quieted.

Tipping his stubbly chin up with her fingers, she captivated Earl's gaze. "Earl, I need to ask you some questions and you're going to answer without giving me any flack. Got it?"

His mouth went slack, his jowls trembling as he drove his hands into his overalls. "Uh-huh."

"Do you know Neerie Lincoln?"

"Uh... Yeah."

"How do you know her, Earl?"

"She's in my Facebook group," he said robotically, quite suddenly gripping the sides of his metal folding chair.

"Did you see her the night you went hunting for Bigfoot in the woods?"

Earl blinked. "Nuh-uh."

Dang it all.

But Nina didn't give up quite yet. "Was she supposed to come to your meeting? Her comment on your post said she was gonna be there. I need to know everything you know about Neerie Lincoln. Spit it all out."

"I don't know a lot about her. She just joined the group a couple of months ago. She was supposed to meet us there, but I didn't see her. I think Benson did though."

Nina lifted Earl's chin higher, straddling his chair so she loomed over him. "Benson's the guy who shot that cheating fucker in the woods, right?"

Earl's nod was slow. "Yeah..."

Nina gripped his shoulder harder. "Did anybody else see her?"

He shrugged his sloping shoulders. "I don't think so. But I got a text from her. I just didn't see it until after all that stuff went down in the woods."

"Do you remember what it said? Do you have your phone on you?"

I'd been so engrossed watching Nina, I didn't see Marty disappear. She held up a donut under my nose, the smell irresistible.

"Donut? It's glazed. Your favorite," she said, taking a big bite of her chocolate one, chomping happily.

"Don't mind if I do," I whispered. "So Neerie was at the meeting in the woods."

"If you listen to Benson. But he did shoot someone he thought was Bigfoot. Can we consider him a reliable witness?"

As I chewed on my donut, I watched Earl take his phone from the pocket of his

overalls and scroll his messages until he held it up to show Nina.

As she read it, she grunted. “What did she mean by, ‘I have to go to the basement?’”

His face went confused, as though he hadn’t given it much thought. “I don’t know.”

Nina took a picture of the text and handed the phone back. “Did Neerie tell you anything personal about herself? Did she have a boyfriend or anyone who was pissed at her?”

Earl’s eyes glazed over. “I’m tellin’ ya, I didn’t know her real well. She was new to the group. She didn’t say much about anything but Bigfoot.”

I licked my fingers clean and wiped them with a napkin Marty provided. “I think we’ve hit a dead end. Unless someone else in the group has something to share.”

“Give it a minute, Wanda. Maybe someone else knows something.”

But as Nina moved from one person to the next, they all claimed they hadn’t seen Neerie that night, and she never said anything about any trouble she might be having outside the group.

“Now, you all sit here until we’re gone and you won’t remember a damn thing. When you see us leave the room, you can carry on with whatever you nuts were doing.”

“Nina!” we both hissed.

She ignored us and let go of Earl’s chin, giving him a pat on his arm. “Thanks for the help, buddy.”

As she made her way across the floor, no one stirred. We gave her a silent cheer and a

quick hug before she crossed the threshold, and we made our way back down the rickety hall to the main area, where only one customer still sat at the bar. The television blared a college basketball game, and it appeared both the old man and the bartender were engrossed in the action.

But not so engrossed that the former didn't say, "Bye, good-lookin'. Be glad I ain't yer age or I'd give ya a real run for your money."

Nina smiled at that before she glared at him, fixing her eyes to his. "We were never here, Paw-Paw."

We hit the exit with a giggle and headed for the SUV, the gravel under my feet crunching as we scurried to get into the car, the cold night air producing snowflakes.

But Nina wasn't giggling. She handed the keys to Marty. "You drive."

I grabbed her hand. "Hey, you okay?"

She nodded, climbing into the backseat, giving my hand a weak return squeeze. "Just some wild shit in their heads. I'm here to tell you, those people are loons, and it's gonna be a long time before I get that kind of batshit out of my brain," she said wearily. "I don't know how people live like that, afraid of every damn thing. It's not just Bigfoot they're worried about, either. It's electrical lines and 5G and phone tapping and... everything. All of 'em at once was a lot. It got dark fast."

Marty reached back and brushed Nina's hair from her face. "Hey. You up to going into the woods and sniffing around? Because we can call it here and now if need be."

She gripped Marty's wrist and shook her head. "Just give me a few and I'll be fine."

Not much spooked our girl. She was the epitome of strength and fearlessness, but her

face said she'd read things that had upset her.

I decided to ride in the back with her, pulling her to me and easing her head to my shoulder, for which she gave me no guff. Instead, Nina pressed her silky head to my shoulder and let me stroke her cool cheek to calm her fears.

Nina rarely reached out for any kind of physical comfort. That she allowed me to comfort her meant she was afraid.

And if Nina was afraid, we all should be.

Chapter Five

The woods where the group met, was thick with pine trees and plenty of worn paths to follow. The cold night and the half-moon gave the space, alive with foliage, an eerie glow.

“Are you sure you’re up to this, Nina? I really wish you’d wait in the car for us. You look wiped.”

“And I really wish you’d stop fucking yapping in my ear. I’m fine ,” she spat, stomping toward the place where the Facebook group had met last night. When Nina was frustrated, annoyed she couldn’t do something or someone challenged her mettle, she lashed out.

This was one of those times. To be perceived as weak, no matter the circumstances, is unacceptable to her.

“Sorry if I’m trying to be a good friend and look out for your feeble backside!” Marty spit back.

“Sorry if you’re being annoying AF.”

I pushed my way past a thorny bush and grabbed both of their arms. “Girls, knock it off! If Nina says she’s fine, then she’s fine. If Marty wants to be concerned about you, as am I, then she’s allowed. Now stop arguing and get walking. We need to look around the whole area. If that sharpshooter Benson said he saw Neerie that night, and it’s true, we’ll smell her. It hasn’t been that long, and we haven’t had any snow or

rain. Though, it looks like we're about to get some. Now get to sniffing before we lose her scent."

"Yes, Mom," Nina teased, the tension lifting, leaving behind only the cold air and the scent of a hundred humans.

We were about a half hour in, scouring a good square mile, including the area where the shooting incident had occurred, when I finally asked, "Anything, guys? I feel like I'm wandering around in circles. I smell her, but the scent goes nowhere."

Nina appeared out of the dark, her beautifully pale face ghostly in the velvety night. "Same. It's like one big damn circle of Neerie, but I'm tellin' you two, I sure can smell the blood from where the guy was shot."

"Same," Marty added, plucking leaves from her flannel jacket. "So what now? Where do we go from here? Neerie was here, but nobody remembers it except Benson, and Benson's in human jail. Smelling her scent doesn't do us any good if it leads nowhere."

Nina crossed her arms over her chest. "Doesn't mean we can't talk to this dude Benson. I can get inside a human jail. I've done it before."

I held up a hand. "Getting in people's heads is taking a toll on you, Nina. That can wait for the moment. Let's talk about this text Neerie sent to Earl about the basement. She said, 'I have to go to the basement.' What could that possibly mean?"

Marty ran some lip balm over her lips. "Maybe she has a basement? Do you know if she has one? I don't know why she'd show up here and then text Earl to tell him she had to go to the basement. She was definitely here, though. I smell her bossy pants everywhere. The strange thing is, like you both said, her scent goes in a big circle but there's nothing outside the circle to indicate she actually left the woods."

I pointed to the screenshot Nina had sent us of Neerie's text. "To me, this looks like she possibly began a text and was interrupted. Neerie's nothing if not articulate. She's particularly articulate when it comes to telling us all what to do. What I don't understand is why she sent it to Earl, who seemed to have no idea what it meant? Or maybe she sent it to other people, too? Naida said she hadn't heard from her in two days, so she didn't send it to her."

"Well, she probably wouldn't if it had to do with some conspiracy. Her sister thinks she's fucking deranged, too, Wanda. Maybe the text meant nothing at all. To me, it looks pretty innocuous, like maybe she was telling someone whatever they were looking for was in the basement."

But my gut said differently. I shook my head. "No. This means something. I can feel it. It's almost too innocuous. Maybe she didn't mean to send it to Earl at all? Why would she send someone she doesn't know a text about a basement if it's her basement she's talking about? We need to go to her house and see what we can see. If she has a basement, there could be something helpful there."

"Cool-cool. We'll go to her house tomorrow. Are we done here, though? Because I'm not seeing shit and I wanna say goodnight to Charlie and Carl before they go to bed. I need to see my kids. I need to see something wholesome and good."

I gave one last glance around, the barren trees swaying in the frigid air, the rustle of bushes and debris loud in the quiet forest, and nodded. My toes were frozen anyway. I was ready for story time with my babies, a hot cup of tea and maybe a nice warm bath, scented with lavender.

With a long sigh borne of my frustration, I nodded. "I guess so."

We began heading back toward the SUV, parked on the outskirts of the woods, when I tripped over a root, falling on the ground with a hard crack and landing in some

thorned bushes.

“Argh!” I cried out as the back of my head hit a rock, the thorns scraping along my skin.

“Wanda!” Marty called, dropping to the ground to reach for me.

“Here, allow me,” an incredibly deep, almost seductive voice said.

I felt an enormous, unfamiliar hand grip my wrist, and without thinking, I allowed it to help me up.

Yet, when I went to push the hand away, all I got was a handful of hair...

What in all that’s furry and smelly?

I’m not usually much of an alarmist, but listen, this wasn’t just any ol’ hand. I screamed, long and ear-piercing. “Take your hands off me!”

The hand immediately let go, freeing me to jump back and fall into Marty. Nina came up from behind and steadied us before whipping in front of us in protection mode.

But quite suddenly, she gagged, making this clicking sound in the back of her throat. “What the fuck is that smell?” she crowed, putting a hand to her mouth.

I smelled it, too. But the real question here was, what the eff was that hand?

Or maybe the question was, who owned that hand?

“Ladies, don’t be afraid. The smell is me.”

As my eyes zoomed in on what was in front of us, I had to tilt my head upward in order to see who was speaking. The half-moon shifted out of the clouds then, shining on the figure—and when it registered, I gasped.

“Yes, yes,” the deep, cultured voice said. “I’m Bigfoot. Blah, blah, bah. Surprise!” He threw up his hands—the size of basketballs, mind you—and shook them before letting out a deep rumble of a laugh. “Now can we get the shock and awe over with? It’s not as though you don’t know what it’s like to be a creature people think is a myth. I’m just like you, though not quite as common as a werewolf or a vampire. We’re fewer and farther between.”

I frowned, unsure why my first question wasn’t at all pertinent to the situation at hand, but I asked it anyway. “How do you know people think we’re a myth? How do you know we’re considered myths at all?”

He bent at the waist to look me in the eye. I think. I couldn’t tell, his eyes were shrouded by hair—so much hair. “Because I can smell you, just like you can smell me.” He pointed at each of us. “Vampire, werewolf, and...” He took a deep whiff of the cold night to smell me. “Forgive me, but I don’t know what you are. An amalgamation of two species. Amiright?”

I didn’t have the chance to answer before Nina—eyes wide and gleaming, fangs displayed—blurted out, “You... You fucking exist...”

He nodded his matted, furry head, standing up straight once more. “I do. I’m just like you...Nina, is it? I suppose some would call me paranormal. I’m not sure where a Bigfoot fits in the scope of species.”

We all took a step back in obvious fear—even Nina—but he held up his hand. “Please don’t cower. I won’t hurt you. I’ve never hurt anyone. Not one soul. Even those who shoot at me. It’s everyone else who wants to hurt me .”

Nina straightened her spine and puffed her chest out. “Ain’t nobody cowerin’, pal. Did you see me cower? Not on your fucking life.”

Marty latched onto her arm and pulled Nina to her side. “Nina!” she whispered. “No need to posture. Stop trying to prove something.” Marty looked up at him, her voice shaky. “She doesn’t mean it. Mr. Bigfoot. She’s just sensitive when she thinks her prowess has been challenged. I swear...”

“Piss off, Marty. I do so mean it. I don’t cower.” Crossing her arms over her chest, she jutted her chin outward to prove her point.

I’d roll my eyes but my heart, as I said, usually sluggish, was racing, slamming so hard in my chest I thought it might burst out like a scene out of *Alien*. Yet his scent—a mixture of cow manure and skunk—didn’t say enemy. It said sadness, loneliness.

How did I parse my fear and my concern without getting us killed? We were strong, stronger together, but were we strong enough to take on Bigfoot? Bigfoot. Did I even have to worry he’d hurt us?

As I examined that, I decided he wouldn’t.

“I understand,” he explained. “It’s natural to protect how you present yourself to the world. No one knows that better than I.”

I couldn’t believe I was about to consider this, but he really wasn’t much different than us. The only real difference being he wasn’t half human. So there was never any respite from his true origins. He was always big and hairy. We shifted. We had a cloak we could wear to appear like the rest of the world—to fit in, to blend.

Swallowing hard, I tilted my head, my manners never far. “I almost don’t know what

to say. This is as surprising as finding out werewolves and vampires, among other things, exist. So I'll simply introduce myself. I'm Wanda Jefferson, and this is Marty Flaherty and Nina Statleon. We're here on an investigation. But not one that involves hunting you down." I held out my hand, almost praying he wouldn't take it.

But take it, he did, and I was surprised to find his fur was soft, his palm warm when it engulfed my hand. "I'm Hank. Pleasure."

The silence between us grew, the three of us unsure how to approach the idea that Bigfoot was real or that he was an articulate being with feelings.

Suddenly, Hank spoke, his eyes barely visible from behind all his hair. "I'm assuming you were human once, and that's what you meant by your surprise at finding out the paranormal existed. Am I correct?"

Marty gave him a small, if not tremulous smile. "Yeah. We weren't born this way. We were accidentally turned. I guess there are still some things, even after all we've seen, that we didn't believe were real. Our bad."

His nod was solemn. "I know what you're thinking, Marty. This is crazy, but it's not so crazy. I mean, look at you. If people knew you existed, they'd think your existence was just as crazy. I'm just a rarer form of paranormal."

Nina nodded, though she continued to keep her distance and a sharp eye on him. "Wanda said just that earlier today. So, Hank, sorry we intruded. We were just out here lookin?—"

"For Neerie Lincoln's phone?" he asked, the charming rumble to his tone making me smile.

Marty gasped, putting a hand over her mouth to silence her shock. "How did you

know about Neerie?”

“She was here with those other people who were hunting me. I gotta give it to them. They were on the right track. That’s why I smell like this, by the way. I rolled around in some cow patties to hide my scent because the one named Benson, he didn’t just bring a gun. He brought a dog, too. I love dogs, but I feared he might smell me and then, well, you know what happens next. The Bigfoot enthusiasts are getting harder to stay hidden from. If they build another subdivision in these parts, I’m sunk.”

Nina, relaxing a bit, nodded her understanding. “I feel you, buddy. If one more human asks me if I’ve ever seen the sun, I’m gonna show them the damn sun.”

He chuckled, a satisfying gurgle of a laugh. “At least you have each other. I’m mostly alone. I’ve heard of others like me, but I’ve never seen them. Though, the animals here in the forest make it easier.”

Almost as if on cue, a deer appeared from the brush, slipping to Hank’s side to rub up against him. He cupped her head with his large paw, stroking her ears.

I hated the sadness in his deep tone, the longing, and I wondered how we could ease that. But before we could even consider it, I wanted to know what he knew about Neerie.

I tucked my hands into the pockets of my jacket, my fingers frigid, my nose drippy. “So, before we get to know one another, and we surely will, Hank, what can you tell us about Neerie?”

He spread his arms wide, making a gesture that said not much. “She was here with that group, but she came late. I’m not sure if they even attempted stealth. I could hear them a mile away, guffawing and stomping around. I have super-hearing, too, by the way.

“Anyway, she wasn’t here long, and I was so focused on those cowboys and the guy who was out here...” He cleared his throat. “Um, mating , I lost track of her. She just disappeared. But she dropped her phone. I have it, if you’d like. I was going to try to drop it off at a police station, if I could get close enough. Cameras are everywhere these days. It’s not like the days of old anymore.”

I thought of all the shots I’d seen over the years of the ever-elusive Bigfoot and wondered if any of them were of Hank.

“We’d definitely like Neerie’s phone, Hank. She disappeared, and she has a little girl who misses her terribly. We came here because of the group that was here the other night, thinking maybe we could find something, maybe track her scent. You have no idea how much her phone might help.”

Stooping, he dug around an area with shrubbery and rocks and pulled out a black square. “Here you go. I hope it helps.”

I took it from him, almost laughing at how it looked like the size of a chiclet in his hand. “I could kiss you, Hank!”

He backed away with a hearty laugh. “I wouldn’t do that, Wanda. I smell like a landfill. I promise I don’t always smell like this. I do bathe regularly.”

The deer who’d approached Hank sniffed the air and moved toward Nina. All animals loved her. We thought it so ironic that vampires had once fed off of small animals. They didn’t do that anymore, at least not the good ones, but no animal ever appeared to fear Nina. She had a gift when it came to all creatures great and small.

Reaching out a hand, she ran her fingers over its snout to caress it between the eyes. The deer leaned into Nina’s hip, its soft eyes gazing up at her in adoration.

“An animal lover, are you?” Hank asked, his deep voice going gentle.

She grinned down at the deer. “The biggest. They’re the only beings on Earth who don’t judge you.”

“Tell me about it,” Hank responded, the irony in his words clear.

I thought about what I was about to offer, knowing it sounded outlandish, but somehow also perfectly feasible. “Hank, Nina’s castle isn’t far from here. I don’t know if you’ve ever seen it in your travels. Would you ever consider popping in? Maybe joining us for lunch...or...I hate to be rude, but do you eat lunch? I’m unfamiliar with a Bigfoot’s dietary needs, but I’m sure we can accommodate, right, girls?”

He stood very still and for the first time, I saw one of his eyes gleaming in the dark night. “You’d have me sit at a table with you?”

Nina snickered. “Fuck yeah. I have tall ceilings. There’s no reason you can’t fit. The kids’d love ya.”

Now he stared at us for a long moment. “You’d allow me around the children? Won’t I frighten them?”

“Don’t be silly,” Marty chimed in. “They’re used to all manner of the paranormal. Mermaids, elves, trolls, you’re no different. You’re just bigger.”

“True dat. He’s even bigger than Teddy,” Nina agreed. “She’s a bear shifter, FYI, for reference.”

Hank held up a fuzzy paw, the wind blowing his fur around. “Wait, sorry to backtrack, but mermaids are real?” he squeaked.

I laughed so hard, I almost wet myself. “Yes, Hank. Mermaids are real and so is our invitation. We’d love it if you’d drop by. We always say, the more the merrier.”

“I...I...I don’t know what to say...” he murmured.

“Say yes and it’s a date, Gigantor,” Nina said with a smile. “Arch is gonna love you. Bet you could eat a side of beef.”

Hank scratched his head. “You know, I don’t know. My diet consists of mostly berries and mushrooms.”

I gave one of his fuzzy fingers a squeeze. “Well, I guess we’ll find out then. Anyway, Hank, you’ve been a huge help, but I’m freezing and it’s getting late. So we’d better go. We have a wayward fairy to find, but we’ll see you soon, okay? Promise. And if you remember anything else that might be helpful, we’ll stop back and check with you.”

“Your kindness is unmatched, Wanda,” he whispered softly. “Thank you. I look forward to seeing you all again and meeting your families.” He looked toward the edge of the woods. “May I escort you back to your car?”

Nina flapped a hand at him. “Nah. You stay hidden from those whackadoodles. I don’t want ya gettin’ caught.” She gave one last stroke of her hand to the deer’s head before she waved at Hank. “See ya soon.”

We all waved at him before we began the walk back to the car, each of us lost in our thoughts at what had just occurred.

When we get into the SUV, Nina shook her head. “We just fucking met Bigfoot and his name is Hank. I didn’t think anything could surprise me anymore, but here we are.”

I pulled my seat belt across my lap, still in awe. “And what a gentle giant. Who would have ever thought Bigfoot was such a huggable love?”

Marty’s laugh was soft. “The kids will freak out when they meet him. What a crazy, wonderful night.”

“Who wants to take a trip to Scotland?” Nina asked, rather out of the blue.

I settled back in my seat. “What’s in Scotland, vampire? You have a sudden urge for some sheep?”

“After tonight, probably the Loch Ness monster. Bet she’d make a cool pool toy, huh?”

I laughed so hard, I did a very unladylike thing and snorted.

Chapter Six

“Bigfoot?” my husband Heath said, his eyes wide as he sipped at his mug of blood. Heath’s a vampire. It’s a long story, but he became one again to save me. He’s truly my knight in shining armor. “He’s real? Get out.”

I smiled, relaxing against the soft cushions of Nina’s sofa, relishing the warmth of the fire on this freezing cold night. “He’s very real and his name is Hank.”

Heath whistled while he bounced Charlie on his knee, making her giggle with infectious squeals. We’d finished up another family dinner, and as we relaxed by the fire in Nina’s great room, I told Heath about our day.

“How absolutely incredible,” he muttered, the wonder in his deep voice evident. “And you invited him for dinner?”

I chuckled, patting his leg. “I did. Who are we if not inclusive? He seemed so lonely, and as crazy as this sounds, he speaks like a scholar. It was truly a revelation. He’s not a monster, just one of a kind and lonely for it.”

He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to my lips, one that to this day, all these years later, made my stomach do somersaults. “I miss your face, beautiful lady. It’s good to spend some time with you.”

Sighing, I nodded, pressing another kiss to his lips. “Same. I know it’s been busy as of late. Promise after we figure out what’s happened to Neerie, we’ll do date night.”

Charlie grabbed our jaws and made kissy noises, to which we responded by smooching her tiny cheeks, as one does, making her giggle hysterically.

“I understand,” Heath said, his chestnut hair falling over his forehead, making him look sexier than ever. “I know you love what you do, honey, and I would never ask you to stop. I’m just saying, I miss you, and it’s nice to have a minute with you.”

What Heath said was true. He’d never ask me not to pursue what fulfilled me, and helping people fulfills me—even when the person is Neerie. But we had periods of time where we didn’t see each other as often as I’d like because of OOPS and our detective agency, and I was going to make a point of doing better, for the health of our marriage and our family.

“How about this? I promise to carve out more time for us and the children. I love you, and I don’t ever want you to feel neglected or like I’d taken advantage of you.”

He smiled that smile that made my heart flop like a fish out of water. He cupped my face, running his thumb over my jaw. “I love you, too, honey. Don’t let me get in your head. You’re an amazing wife and an even more amazing mother. I wouldn’t change a thing about us.”

Oh, this man. There was no one I wanted to do immortality with more than I did him. “Thank you.”

He tucked me against him on the couch, his hard frame instantly relaxing mine. “So tell me about the phone Bigfoot...er, Hank found. Have you gotten anything from it?”

I shook my head, pulling Charlie into my lap and snuggling her chubby body to mine as she tucked her face into my neck. “We tried every passcode we could think of, but nothing. So Tottington is going to have his contact look at it. Until then, we have to

go through Neerie's house and see if it's her basement she meant in that text."

"She's a little left of center. I've run into her a couple of times when I was picking up the kids. She lost her mind when I parked in the incoming lane instead of the outgoing for pickup."

Neerie was certainly a stickler for the rules. "She's definitely difficult and I swear to you, if I find out she's run off with one of her conspiracy friends from Facebook and left her sister and her daughter to worry, I'll drain her myself."

Heath covered Charlie's ears and gave me an admonishing look. "Little ears, honey."

"Drain her! Drain her!" Charlie cried, her head popping up.

Oh dear. I winced.

Nina gave Heath's shoulder a shove from behind. "Hey, what are you teachin' my kid, big guy?"

He took Charlie from me and handed her over to Nina, then promptly threw me directly under the bus. "It wasn't me. It was her."

I narrowed my eyes at him and shook my finger. "Oh, you."

He chuckled, his eyes lighting up. "You know what she's like. I'm not up to a massacre tonight. It's been a long day with the kids and she can take me."

Nina laughed, swinging Charlie up into her arms. "Dang right I can."

"Speaking of the kids, they need baths and bed," I reminded him. I wasn't a stickler, necessarily, but I did like the children to stay on schedule. It made for happier

campers and a happier mommy.

Marty winked at me. “Auntie Marty took care of that. All bathed and ready for a bedtime story.”

I mouthed a thank you to my friend, who was as much an integral part of their lives as I was. Both she and Nina made parenting our children a collective effort. I don’t know what I’d do without them. And I say that even with Nina’s gruff exterior and unfiltered opinions. She’s nothing short of a blessing when it comes to our children.

She loves my babies almost as much as I do, and when I’m weary, when I feel as though I’m drowning, she’s the first hand to reach for me and yank me out of the water. Mostly because she’s quicker than Marty—you didn’t hear me say that—but also because there isn’t anything she wouldn’t do for me.

Olivia and Sam came barreling down the stairs, where they’d been playing in Charlie’s playroom. Seeing as it was Friday night, we were having a sleepover at Auntie Nina’s, something the children did often with Carl and Hollis. It would also allow me to spend more time with them while I did some snooping around Neerie’s social media.

They launched themselves at us, smelling of soap and toothpaste, tucking between us in what we called a family sandwich. Heath hugged them hard, burying his face in their necks and making them laugh out loud as he scraped his stubble over their skin.

“Daddy!” Olivia screamed with giggles, her small hands grabbing at Heath’s jaw. “It tickles!”

Sam, while incredibly logical and stoic most times, wasn’t above letting loose when it came to us. “Tickle fight!” he yelped, stuffing his glasses in his pajama pocket.

As they dissolved into giggles, rolling around the couch, I fought tears. There was a time when I didn't think I'd be able to have a family with Heath. To have been lucky enough to adopt Sam and have Olivia was a blessing I couldn't find a word for. Sometimes, it still caught me in the back of my throat.

I count myself incredibly lucky, every day, all day.

Olivia's cherubic face, red from roughing it up with her father and brother, her wispy hair a ball on the top of her head, raised a hand. "Uncle!" she screeched with more chuckles.

"I'll save you!" I cried, pulling her to my lap and snuggling her close.

She settled down on my chest, toying with the buttons on my shirt, her soft hair under my chin. "Mommy, Tamlin was crying today. I felt bad. I didn't know how to make it better."

My heart chugged. Olivia might be larger than life, but she also had a heart as big as the Texas sky. She hated when someone was hurt, and she loved animals almost more than all of us put together.

Like me, she's a halfsie. We don't know how that happened, we don't even know how I became pregnant, but I was glad she was able to experience food and all the things she'd miss if she were only vampire.

"Did she say why, Punkin'?"

Of course, I knew why, but I wanted to see what everyone was saying. We couldn't keep Neerie's disappearance a secret forever. Neerie was front and center at school almost every day. Her disappearance would come out sooner or later.

Olivia sniffed. “She said she missed her mommy real bad.”

“And what did you say?”

Olivia sighed, long and dramatic. “I said if my mommy went away, I’d miss her, too. Then I gave her a big hug.”

I squeezed her to me. “Aren’t you a sweet girl? That was a nice thing to do. Did she say anything else?”

“She said she wished her daddy still lived with them.” Squirming in my arms, she cupped my face with her hands. “Our daddy’s never going away and giving us a di...div...”

“Divorce?” I asked, as I gazed into her beautifully innocent eyes.

She nodded with an adorable pout. “Yeah. That’s the word. Daddy wouldn’t give us a divorce, would he?”

Heath leaned over and looked Olivia in the eyes. “ Never, ever. Pinky swear promise.” He pressed a tender kiss to her cheek and then one to my lips. “Never,” he whispered.

Oh, how I loved this man.

Nina stuck her face between Heath’s and Olivia’s, dropping a kiss on her button nose. “Okay, lovebird family, Carl’s waiting with James and the Giant Peach upstairs, and Hollis promised to braid your hair in a French braid if you skedaddle.”

Sam wrapped his arms around my neck and pressed a kiss to my cheek. “I love James and the Giant Peach ! And Darnell promised to make a sheet fort. C’mon, Olivia!”

I wiggled my fingers at them. “I’ll be up to say good night in a bit. Love you so much.”

“Love you, too!” he yelped before racing off to find Carl, pulling up his saggy pajama bottoms as he went.

Heath rose and pulled Olivia up off the couch, swinging her around on his back. “Your steed awaits, fair maiden! Onward ho!” He gave me a wink before he piggy backed her up the stairs while Olivia laughed uncontrollably.

Marty dropped down beside me, patting my leg as I closed my eyes and inhaled. “It’s been a long Bigfoot-filled day. Some tea, madam?”

I smiled in gratitude. “I’d love that.”

As if reading our minds, Tottington entered the room with a silver tray of steaming cups of tea. “Ladies, shall I serve this in the murder basement? I have some news on Mrs. Lincoln’s phone I’d like to share with you.”

My droopy eyes flew wide open. “Murder basement?” I asked Marty.

“Murder basement, it is,” she chirped, heading toward the stairs.

Nina held out her hand to me, yanking me upward. “Bigfoot took it outta ya, huh?”

With a laugh, I nodded. “I’m still in utter disbelief. C’mon, let’s go see what Tottington’s secret friend found.”

Marty was already at her desk, the TV on so we could all see the contents of Neerie’s phone.

As I poured some tea, Tottington used his newly purchased clicker to show us Neerie's text messages and apps.

Marty busied herself fussing with her murder board, adding the pictures of Neerie and Thad that Tottington had printed. "We still have to find this Will Tempe, Tamlin's biological father. If ever there was a suspect, it's him. I mean, I'm not sure how he planned to make her life a living hell, but taking her out is certainly a possibility. I wonder if Tamlin even knows he exists? Add that to the list of questions for Naida."

Nina popped her lips as she looked at the big-screen TV, planting her hands on her slender hips. "There's a damn app for tracking Hank? I'd say these people are bonkers, but now that I know he frickin' exists, I feel like I should apologize. I won't, because they have plenty of other crazy shit running around in their little heads that's just insane, but wow. We need to warn him to watch his ass, because this is eerily accurate."

When Tottington switched to Neerie's texts, we found the one she'd sent to Earl, but it didn't illuminate anything of value other than make us wonder what basement she was talking about.

Shrugging my shoulders at the daunting task of going through the hundreds of texts Neerie had on her phone, I fought a yawn. "I guess we start at the beginning."

We pored over each person she'd texted during the last two months. There were the usual demands she made of the PTA ladies and myself, text after text about the bake sale and other events we were planning for the future.

It was when we got to her texts with Thad that our mouths fell open.

One in particular from about a week ago, read: You're paranoid as usual, Neerie. If you keep this up, I'm going to have to see about bringing Tamlin to stay with me for

a while. This obsession isn't healthy.

“ What obsession isn't healthy? Chasing Bigfoot? Buying into the idea that Paul McCartney's dead?” I wondered out loud.

Tottington scrolled a bit further. “I think he meant this, Miss.”

It's not an obsession, you idiot! It's happening. I'm telling you, something's going on at the school. I saw what I saw, Thad, and you'll take Tamlin over my dead body!

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Chapter Seven

“N eerie thought something was going on at Tamlin’s school?” Naida asked in disbelief as she shifted in her chair. “I’m almost afraid to ask, but what?”

We were all in the murder basement on very little sleep, tired from a long night of going through Neerie’s texts. Some more outrageous than others, but the ones with Thad? Probably the scariest.

Amidst all their arguing—over everything from the payment for the landscaper, to putting the kibosh on him taking Tamlin to Aspen with his latest “tramp”—there were the texts about something going on at the school.

Unfortunately, she was as cryptic about whatever she thought was going on there as she was about the basement she mentioned in her text to Earl.

Naida had come over, and she brought Tamlin with her to play with Olivia and Sam for a bit, to take her mind off missing her mother. Now we were trying to squeeze even a drop of information from her.

Leaning over my desk, I asked, “Did Neerie ever mention anything about a basement to you?”

Naida wrinkled her nose. “A basement? Hers, maybe? Can you give me some context?”

Nina clicked on the TV, pointing to it with the remote. “She sent a text to one of her

Bigfoot-hunting buddies that read, 'I have to go to the basement'. We can't figure out if it means something important."

Naida gripped the arms of the chair, the multiple rings on her fingers clacking against the wood. "She has a basement for sure. I guess we can look there, but I can't think of another basement she might mean." As she looked around our space, she cocked her head. "Where was her phone and how did you get into it?"

"If we told ya, we'd have to kill ya," Nina joked, leaning back in her office chair and putting her feet up on the desk, but Naida blanched.

"Nina!" Marty admonished with a quick smile of reassurance. "She's joking, of course. Our sources are confidential for obvious reasons."

I gave Nina my "knock it off glare" before turning back to Naida. "What do you know about Tamlin's biological father, Will?"

Now she sat up straight and made a face—an angry one. "That dirty dick? I know all I need to know about him to know he shouldn't be anywhere near Tamlin. Neerie keeps her from him for a reason."

My ears perked up. "Did you know he emailed her and threatened to make her life a living hell if she didn't let him see Tamlin?"

Naida's eyes narrowed. "Right. Know what that means? It means, he probably has a new chick in his life who has kids. He likes to use Tamlin as a prop and play at being a good father. It's how he sucks 'em in. Then he does what he always does. He screws up the new woman's life and leaves her when something shinier comes along."

"That has to be hard on little Tamlin," I muttered.

“You bet it is. It’s why Neerie won’t let Tamlin see him. Because he only needs her when he wants to put on a big show. Then he skips out and disappears, leaving Tam confused and feeling abandoned. When she finally asked why Daddy Will hadn’t seen her in a long time, she assumed it was because she’d done something wrong. That was it for Neerie. She put the kibosh on future visits.”

“How long ago was that?”

Naida shrugged, yanking at the bottom of her short leather jacket. “At least three years ago. She’s long-since forgotten he exists, so for him to pop up now means something fishy’s going on.”

I asked something I’d been wondering for no particular reason. “Is he fae?”

Her snort was filled with disgust. “Yep. He’s fae. A disgrace to the fae, but he is.”

Marty looked as though she were measuring her words before she asked a direct question. “Was he ever abusive? Physically or even mentally? Would he hurt Neerie to get to Tamlin or because she said he couldn’t see her?”

Naida’s jaw tightened, her eyes fiery, the tips of her pointy ears red. “He never hit her, if that’s what you mean, but he was plenty mentally abusive. He was always drunk, and when Will drank, he was meaner than a racoon cornered in an attic. Neerie kicked him out when Tamlin was only two because of it. From that point on, he drifted in and out of their lives.”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I tapped my pen against the pad on my desk. “How about Thad? Her texts with him were pretty argumentative. He said she was obsessed, and he seemed pretty angry about whatever she was obsessing over.”

Naida sighed, and it was sad and long. “Like I said, Neerie was paranoid about

everything , so it could have been about anything. But Thad was a good guy. He was nothing like Will. He'd never hurt either her or Tamlin. In fact, I thought they were happy. I felt like their divorce happened so fast. Almost out of the blue."

"Didn't your sister talk to you about what happened with them? Isn't that what sisters do?" Nina pressed, her eyes hard.

Naida toyed with the rings on her fingers. "That's what most sisters do, I guess. We're not like most sisters. Neerie's not like me at all. I'm easier going, I guess. She's always wound up so tight. We don't have a lot in common and never have, but that doesn't mean I don't love her. I just love her from afar, and I'm there when she has a problem—like this one, where she dumps poor Tam and runs off."

Marty's eyes were suddenly very alert. "Has she done something like this before? Run away and left Tamlin with you?"

Naida's lips thinned. "Only once and it was when she and Thad broke up. She showed up, no explanation, said she needed a minute to breathe, asked if I'd look after Tam, and split. But she kept in touch the whole time, checking on Tamlin, making sure I wasn't feeding her garbage and so on. She wouldn't tell me why she was so upset or what happened between them. She came back like three days later as if nothing had happened. Thad moved out and she went on, business as usual."

Rolling her tongue along the inside of her cheek, Nina asked. "We're gonna need to talk to this dude Thad. You think he'll cooperate?"

"I'm positive he will. He loves Tam. He'd do anything for her. I haven't said anything to him yet because I don't want the fae council to get wind of Neerie's disappearance, but I know he'd help."

That was another problem. "We're getting to the point where we can't keep this a

secret, Naida. In order to conduct a proper investigation, we need to talk to the people she spent her time with, like the PTA mothers. You do realize, that's a hotbed for gossip, but it can't be avoided if you want to find your sister," I pointed out.

Naida ran a hand over her hair, the gesture one of exhaustion. "I know that. I do. I realize not many people like Neerie. I know you have to do your jobs. I guess I'm not sure if I'm prepared to hear how many suspects you might find because of how awful she can be, but I don't want Tamlin taken from her. She's a good mother, despite her bossy, judgmental nature. Yet, what choice do we have if I don't know whether she left herself or someone took her?" Her eyes began to fill with tears that, despite the sisters' differences, felt genuine.

I reached over my desk and grabbed her hand. "I wish there was another way, Naida, I do. Are you sure you can't think of anyone who might want to harm her? Anyone at all?"

Naida tightened her fingers around mine. "Believe me, I wish I could. I just don't have any answers. She's isolated herself for so long since her divorce from Thad, I can't think of anyone who'd go to this extreme."

Nina rose from her desk. "Did you bring the key to her house? We're gonna go over there and sift through what we can, see if we can find a clue. Then we'll set up a meeting with the PTA moms and see if they know anything."

Naida frowned. "You didn't find any texts between her and the PTA ladies?"

"Nuh-uh," Marty said with a shake of her head. "Well, not ones that involved conspiracies, anyway. It was all just PTA-related stuff."

Naida blew out a long breath. "She obviously doesn't want anyone to know she's been holed up in her house day and night, going down the rabbit hole of conspiracies.

I hoped maybe she might have shared her concern about the school with one of them, but I guess she's keeping her whacky on the inside."

"She never mentioned anything to me about the school or any conspiracy." Shaking my head and rubbing my eyes, I fought a yawn. "I think the next thing we need to do is construct a timeline of her whereabouts for the last few days before she went missing, at least. Do you know if she'd gone anywhere new, somewhere she normally wouldn't go?"

"Neerie hardly ever left the house for anything other than Tamlin related stuff. She has her groceries delivered, and the only other reason she goes anywhere is to take Tamlin to ballet and twirling, her fae instructions, and of course, whatever she's doing at the school."

My cheeks puffed out. "Okay, then. We'll work on figuring out where she'd been before going to the woods with the Bigfoot hunting club—because that was the last place anyone saw her. Maybe that'll help us find her. Also, I'll text the PTA moms and call an emergency meeting. I'm going to have to let the cat out of the bag, Naida."

"I get it. I mean, if she disappeared, and it's not her fault, surely the fae council will understand, right?" She put her face in her hands. "God, I don't know what's worse. Her being kidnapped, or that she might have run off on some bonkers whim."

The sympathy I felt for Naida burned in my gut. She was trying to hold everything together and care for Tamlin. "We'll go to Neerie's house and go over it with a fine-tooth comb. Are you all right with that?"

She rose, digging in her jeans to pull out some keys and hand them to me. "I'm fine with whatever will help find her. Do what you have to do. She has a security code. She always said you can never be too careful. I'll text it to you. She has security

cameras, too. Maybe that'll help? For now, I need to get Tamlin to her ballet class. I swear, this kid's day is filled up from start to finish."

I understood that well. We all did. It made me think about reconsidering how many activities my children were involved in and if it was pushing them too hard. "No one gets that better than we do." I rose and moved to give her a quick hug. "Remember, if you think of anything, anything that might help us locate Neerie, text me, please?"

We sent Naida on her way and headed over to Neerie's house. Set at the end of a quaint cul-de-sac, her small white-brick house with wood shutters and arched windows was lovely. It wasn't the mansion she lived in with Thad, but it was plenty for only Neerie and Tamlin.

Her car was still in the driveway.

Huh.

"Her car's still here. Why is that, if she was meeting the Facebook group?"

"Maybe she fucking flew? She is a fairy, Wanda. The meeting was at night. She could have easily stayed under cover."

I turned toward the walkway, covered in the recent snowfall and dotted with pathway lights, glistening under the sun that led to a warm, French oak wood door that matched her shutters.

Marty eyeballed it, tucking her hands in her skirt pockets. "Cute place, huh?"

I nodded. "Very cute, but I expected nothing less from Neerie. I mean, look at the front porch. I love that swing with the pillows on it."

Marty nodded and pointed at a little wrought-iron stand with a ceramic snowman. “She’s done like a little winter wonderland scene. Love it!”

Nina draped her arms around both of us. “Okay, Chip and Joanna. Could we skip the decorating digest and get a move on? We have a bunch of bitchy PTA moms to face in like two hours and it would be nice if we could find a damn clue.”

I squared my shoulders and gave Nina a curt nod. “You’re right. But we hit the basement first.”

As Nina punched in the security code and I unlocked the door, we pushed our way inside.

“I always wondered where the hell Strawberry Shortcake lived,” Nina joked.

“Said the woman who would live in a mausoleum with tapestries of people killing each other if not for us,” I reminded her.

“Ohhh,” Marty breathed as we stepped onto the hardwood flooring at the entryway. “How adorable!”

And it was adorable. Done in a cottage core vibe with French country accents, there were lots of gingham pillows and willowy curtains. An overstuffed couch in pale blue with a toile throw, aged vessels in all shapes and sizes displayed in the arched window overlooking her backyard and gardens.

“Would you just look at that armoire, Marty?” I squealed, pointing to the corner of the room where an antiqued French blue armoire sat, an enormous wicker basket of flowers on top, the stems draping gracefully down over the sides.

“To die for,” she whispered.

“Smells like a damn candle store in here,” Nina groused, her nostrils flaring.

“Lavender,” I commented. The scent was light but pleasing. “Okay, basement first.”

We strode through the kitchen, a pretty mixture of pale green and ivory cabinets with wood shelving and accents.

When we got to the basement door in an alcove off the kitchen, we all fell silent.

Nina toyed with not one, but four or five of the bolt locks. “What the fuck is she hiding down there? Frankenstein?” She threw her hands up. “If fucking Frankenstein is real, I’m out. Hear me? If this is some sort of kooky science lab with brains and eyeballs in mason jars, I. Am. Out.”

I laughed out loud. “If that’s true, I am, too. Now, can we pop these locks, please? I don’t know what she has down there, but I want to find out.”

Nina turned each of the locks and pulled the door open with a creak. We made our way carefully down the steep steps with me in the lead.

I stopped short, gripping the wood bannisters and gasping out loud.

Nina was the first to speak as she took in exactly why I gasped. “Holy fucking looney-toons. That’s just shy of crackers.”

I stepped into the basement...filled with whiteboards.

Covered in one conspiracy theory after another. Each lush with red string, pictures of locations, and photos of people involved in the conspiracies. Coordinates, theories tying each alleged conspiracy together.

It was madness.

Nina gave Marty a nudge. “I think you’ve got some pretty hefty competition, Murder Board Queen.”

Chapter Eight

Marty began taking pictures of the boards—of which there were six, each dedicated to a conspiracy. “Well, I understand why she kept the door to this insanity locked. I wouldn’t want anyone to see this, especially little Tamlin.”

“She’s in deep for fucking sure. You think this had to do with her divorce from Thad, or was it just that she’s a bossy pants gone over the edge?”

I blinked. “But none of them are about a basement or the school—which, by the way, doesn’t have a basement.”

I’d hoped maybe I could somehow tie a basement to the mention of our childrens’ school, but there isn’t one at the school. We only have a boiler room.

“The school?” Marty clarified.

Plucking at the picture of what looked like a fuzzy alien from Roswell with a postcard from Roswell, I nodded. “Yes. There’s no basement in the school. So the school and a basement aren’t tied into whatever Neerie was talking about in her texts to Earl and Thad. We have a boiler room, and that’s it. So she must have meant her own, but how does that tie into the school and are they even connected at all? Is it important to her disappearance?”

I’m not sure why that text about the basement was sticking in my craw, but it was stuck good.

Marty patted me on the arm. “I wouldn’t rule it out. So let’s get pictures of everything so we can examine them closer back at the castle and see if there’s a connection, and then we’ll go through the rest of the house.”

“Man,” Nina said on a grunt, tucking my arm under hers. “She really has gone off the deep end. If we find her, she’s gonna need help. You know that, right, Wanda? Like some serious mental health.”

I gnawed my lip. “But does she? I mean, Hank is real. What if all this other stuff she’s tracking is real, too?”

Marty swiped at a cobweb stuck to my trench coat. “But here’s the thing, Wanda. She’s lost in this. This isn’t a hobby. This is someone who’s fallen down the rabbit hole to the detriment of her well-being, sweetie. Even her sister said she hardly ever goes anywhere social. She has her groceries delivered. The only time she leaves the house is to take Tamlin to her classes and to handle the PTA meetings.”

I nodded, tears filling my eyes. “I wish I’d known. I would have offered my help, Marty—even as much as I disliked her.”

The guilt I felt for contributing to the gossip surrounding her came over me in a wave. I didn’t participate in what the other PTA mothers dished out loud, but I didn’t stop them either, and I certainly had thought about some of the very rumors swirling around Neerie.

Marty swiped at a tear racing along my cheek with her thumb. “How could you have known? She has a pretty abrasive exterior, honey. But what she’s really doing is filling the hole in her life since her divorce with this stuff, Wanda. She’s put up a wall, and just because Hank is real, doesn’t mean she should devote her entire life to proving it. She’s missing out on Tamlin’s childhood, because no one who puts this much effort into creating these boards has time for a whole lot else.”

Taking a deep breath, I looked around the dark, musty basement filled with whiteboards on easels. Totes of decorations for Halloween and Christmas, a couple of lawn chairs, a gas can, and not much else.

“You’re right. But if we find her, no matter how awful she can be, we’re getting her help for Tamlin’s sake, if nothing else.”

Nina pulled me to her side and gave me a squeeze before breaking the mood with her dislike of emotional displays. “Quit cryin’ like a panty waste, and let’s find her so we can help her. Hangin’ around and caterwaulin’ is gettin’ us nowhere. Now, let’s get the pics so we can search the upstairs of Holly Hobbie’s house.”

Nodding, I set about checking to make sure there was nothing more of interest hidden away in a tote or on one of the few shelves Neerie had before brushing my hands and heading up the steep steps to search the rest of the house.

We went room by room, checking to see if maybe she’d packed a bag to rendezvous with one of her conspiracy theory buddies, but nothing pointed to a hasty escape.

“Got her laptop!” Nina called from one of the bedrooms Neerie used as an office.

I plopped down on Neerie’s couch and closed my eyes, exhausted from lack of sleep. “Can you get into it?” I yelled back.

Nina hopped over the back of the couch and sat next to me. “Nah. We’re gonna need my Tater for that. But I bet it has the security cam app on it. I just can’t get to it until we get a password. You find anything else?”

“No. Nothing,” I said somberly. “We’re going in circles again, Nina. Only this time, the clock’s ticking. Neerie’s been gone for what, three days now? You know what they say about a missing person and finding them within the first forty-eight hours. If

she didn't run off, what happened?"

Nina patted my leg with a hard thump. "Stop watching all that true crime and buck up. It ain't over till the fat lady sings, or in Neerie's case, the insufferable lady. Never give up the ship. I won't if you won't."

With a smile, I patted her hand, my heart swelling with love for my favorite vampire. "You're my favorite BFF, Elvira."

"She only says that so you won't cry like a baby who lost her binky! I'm really her favorite!" Marty yelled from Tamlin's bedroom.

"Pipe down in there, Blondie, and let's get a move on. We have PTA moms to question!"

Marty poked her head out around the corner of the living room doorway and made a face. "I'm not looking forward to this meeting of the PTA minds. I don't know how you deal with them day in and day out, Wanda. I'm not sure I'm even up for thirty minutes."

I lifted an eyebrow. "If you thought this was going to be a thirty-minute meeting, you're sorely misinformed. Those women could talk for thirty minutes about paint drying, given the op. But I promise to keep it as short and sweet as I can. Let's get these pictures to Tottington, her laptop data, and the footage of her security cameras, too. Maybe we'll get lucky. Will you fly this over to Tottington for me, please?"

Nina stood up and yanked me with her. "I will, now let's get this shit moving. We have some bitches to question."

Yawning, I followed them out of Neerie's cute place with dread in the pit of my stomach. Once we let the cat out of the bag, there was no putting it back in.

* * *

One antacid, three aspirin, and three hours later, we were in the thick of the meeting with the PTA mothers after talking to a dozen teachers, but we weren't getting very far. Everyone had a story to tell about Neerie, but no one had any idea where she'd disappeared to, and no one had heard her talk about anything fishy going on at the school.

Clearly, Neerie knew how her conspiracies would be received and she'd kept her cards close to the vest about her "obsession".

The PTA moms had heard plenty about Neerie's thoughts on Bigfoot, imposters in government, hoax school shootings, crisis actors, and her fear of 5G, but nothing directly involving the school.

Well, unless you count the time she told Shoshana Reed she'd bet her left arm Principal Mathers had a position in the Illuminati.

And maybe she did? Bigfoot is real. We can't deny that, now can we?

I stood at the small podium, overlooking the twelve or so mothers who made up the PTA, and fought a scream. Tapping the mic, I interrupted the rapid chatter of their gossip. "Ladies! Please, could we settle down? There's a missing woman involved here, and that woman has a small child all of your children attend school with. The clock is ticking." I tapped my wrist and gave them all my best stern nun face.

As I watched all of them scramble to get their seats in the auditorium, their eyes on me, waiting to hear what I had to say, I still had to fight that scream I'd been bottling deep inside, and I didn't know how to begin.

It dawned on me that these women all looked quite similar. How had I never noticed

that before? It was as though one woman bled into the next. They had similar hairstyles, similar fashion sense (pleated-front slacks, pastel T-shirts, and oversized blazers in various shades of taupe; or yoga pants and tiny tees), hoop earrings, and the same winged black eyeliner with a matte red lip.

I looked down at my skirt and heels and wondered if I'd missed the memo.

Nina, not only one of my best friends in the whole world, but also capable of wrangling cats, came to stand beside me and cleared her throat.

“Listen up, Chatty Cathys, we have some serious shit going on. Now, line the hell up and be ready to tell us everything—correction— anything you think might help us find Neerie. And that she’s missing doesn’t turn into a chance for you all to gossip about it. What you hear in this room stays in this room. You will not jeopardize the safety of her kid. Understood? If I hear one of you spoke to anyone—your yoga instructor, your plumber, your damn lover—I will find you, and I’ll damn well make you wish your skin had been peeled off under the hot July sun. Feel me?” Then she flashed her fangs, making every last one of them cringe.

Marty jumped in them, wrenching the mic from Nina’s grip, clearing her throat and smoothing her long blonde hair over her shoulder. “What my associate means to say is, this is very serious and your discretion is advised .”

The auditorium went silent then. You could have heard a pin drop before everyone rose and formed a line.

I smiled gratefully at my friends as I stepped off the stage and began questioning the first PTA mom.

I noted Melba the Mystic was the first in line, and I fought a roll of my eyes. I swear, if she told me she’d seen Neerie in a vision, I was going to have a meltdown. Her

visions were a scream for party tricks, but not so much when someone's life was on the line.

Yet, I kept my composure and began to ask the same stupid and what felt like pointless questions I'd asked everyone.

Melba looked at me with hesitant deep brown eyes before she gripped my arm. "Wanda, I know you think I'm a kook, so what I'm about to tell you is something you can take with a grain of salt, but I feel in my gut it means something."

I stood very still, preparing myself to hear something outrageous, like Neerie was off in the Bermuda Triangle digging up downed planes. "I don't think you're a kook, Melba."

I didn't. Mostly. A little left of center? Yes. Full of bunk? Maybe. But she was harmless.

She wrinkled her nose and tugged at the length of her chic bob. "You do. Everyone does, but I'm secure enough in my abilities not to care. I have something to share with you, and you can take it or leave it."

As the other women milled about while Marty and Nina questioned the next two in line, their chatter less frantic now, I decided it couldn't hurt to hear what Melba had to say.

"Shoot," I said with a smile while, from the corner of my eye, I noted Nina was questioning Solange. I tried not to worry she'd browbeat the poor woman.

"First, let me say, I wish Neerie no ill will. I'd never want to see her hurt or...whatever, but I'm going to be very honest. I don't like her. Most of us don't. She's rude, pushy and so stinkin' bossy. But I love little Tamlin, and that's why I'm

telling you what I'm about to tell you. Because even if Neerie's a horror, her little girl is precious, and she deserves to know where her mother is."

Gazing at her, I decided honesty was the best route as well. "Then I'll be honest in return and tell you that I'm not fond of Neerie either. She makes being a part of the PTA difficult, but her sister is desperately worried about her, and for her sake, for Tamlin's, we agreed to help. So please, anything you can tell me will be appreciated."

"I saw Neerie. In the woods. I think it was the woods, anyway. I don't know why she was there, but she sent a text to someone named Earl. She didn't mean to send it to him. I don't know who she meant to send it to, but I remember her frustration that she sent it to the wrong person. I felt it. It read, and I'm repeating this verbatim, 'I have to go to the basement'."

Blink-blink.

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Chapter Nine

My mouth fell open. As in literally unhinged. As I stand here now, I take back every doubtful thought I've ever had about Melba and her "visions."

I had to reach out and grab a chair in the row where we stood to steady myself, while still remaining calm on the off chance Melba might have something to do with this.

But how could she? Why would she? So she could become PTA president? Melba did what she had to in order to remain part of the PTA, but that was the most she did. I had to doubt she'd play a game of cat and mouse with us—it took more effort than she was likely willing to give.

Or maybe I'd pegged Melba wrong all along?

Beads of sweat popped out on my brow.

Melba instantly picked up on my panic. I mean, she is after all, psychic, right? "Wanda, are you all right?"

I dismissed my moment of pause. "I'm fine, Melba. I'm just tired. Can you tell me if you saw...um, in your vision, where she went after the woods?"

Her smile was sardonic, her response dry as she crossed her arms over her chest. "You don't believe me, do you?"

"That's not true, Melba. I very much believe you. I was simply hoping you saw

something else that might help us find her.”

I half expected her to break out a turban and press her fingers to her temples so she could contact the other side.

Instead, she took a very somber stance. “I didn’t see anything else, but I do know she’s out there somewhere. She is. I feel it.”

The conviction in her tone, plus her verbatim repeat of that text to Earl, made me a believer. “I hope you’re right, Melba. Listen, if you see anything else—have another vision, or can tell me anything else about the vision you did have—please, please let me know, will you?”

Her lips thinned, as though she wasn’t convinced I believed her, but then she nodded, her cute bob bouncing. “Of course I will, Wanda. I know Neerie isn’t everyone’s favorite, but no one wants her taken from Tamlin. No one. I hope you find her.”

She took her leave, but I had to take a seat after that, the women around me becoming blurs as I accepted the fact that Melba did, indeed, have visions.

And Bigfoot was real.

Cheese and rice.

“Wanda?” Solange Martin put her hand on my arm. “Are you all right?”

I gave her hand a quick pat, followed by a smile. “I’m fine, Solange. Just a little tired. Did you talk to Nina?”

She nodded, sitting next to me, the curtain of her auburn hair falling over her face. “I did. Wow, she’s scary. No offense,” she said, her voice a little shaky.

I chuckled. “She can be, but I promise her intentions are good.”

“I didn’t like Neerie. She was mean to me,” Solange blurted out, then bit her lip.

Sighing, I nodded. Universe willing, we found Neerie and as soon as we did, we were sending her to rehab. As in, mean girl detox.

“She was mean to everyone, Solange. Neerie could be very difficult, but I think she was going through a really tough time in her life, one she didn’t really share with us. I don’t mean that as an excuse, simply a possible explanation.”

Solange twisted her slender fingers in a knot. “But she was really mean to me in particular.”

That alarmed me. I turned in my chair and tilted my head. “How so?”

Solange gulped. “Well, first it was just that she didn’t add me to the PTA mothers text chain. I thought it was a mistake at first, so I asked her to correct it and she said she would, but she never did. Then, Coral Morales told me that Neerie said not to add me under any circumstances.”

My eyes went wide. How could it be that I’d never noticed Solange wasn’t on the text chain? “Oh, Solange. Had I known, I would have added you, no matter what Neerie said!”

She leaned into me, her musky perfume wafting to my nose. “It’s okay, Wanda. I didn’t want to complain...but there’s more,” she whispered.

I was wide awake now. Sitting up, I cocked my ear. “Okay...”

Her sigh came out raspy and long. “Thad and I went to school together.”

My eyebrow lifted. So what? Or...no. No . Wait. Please don't let her tell me they were having an affair.

“And?”

Her embarrassment was clear. “And she accused me of trying to steal her husband.”

For the second time today, my mouth fell open. “I'm sorry? Why on Earth would she think that?”

Solange's breathing shuddered as she put her face in her hands. “We happened to see each other at parent-teacher night and reconnected. We'd dated in high school.”

Oh, sweet fancy Moses, that must have made Neerie insane. Before they divorced, she was incredibly jealous of anyone who even breathed in his direction.

“So because you dated in high school, she jumped to the conclusion that you were trying to steal her husband?”

Solange's eyes went wide. “Not then, no. Not here at the school. It happened after and it was awful . She made a big scene.” Her shoulders slumped. “We ran into each other and had coffee. It was no big deal, I swear. We just happened to be in the same place at the same time, is all. We decided to catch up. She stomped into the coffee shop like she'd been watching us or something and accused me of trying to rekindle an old flame. But what she didn't know was...”

I put my hand on her arm. “What didn't she know?”

“That I don't want her husband. I don't want any man. I'm gay.”

“Oh, Solange. I'm sorry she made a scene like that and embarrassed you.” What I

couldn't believe was that Neerie hadn't told all of the mothers here at the Paranormal and Gifted about it. Though, that might make her look bad if she was perceived as bested by someone else.

"It's fine. Thad was one of the first people I ever told in high school that I thought I was gay—when we broke up, I mean. That was why we broke up. He was so kind to me when I was so confused. But I spent a lot more years confused. I mean, I married a man, had a child, and still couldn't admit my true feelings. Finally, I came out of the closet. Mostly . I got divorced, but I wasn't fully ready to be out in the open, I guess. That's what Thad and I were talking about when Neerie found us."

My heart twisted in my chest. "And Thad kept your secret because you're still not ready to tell anyone?"

"Yes!" she moaned. "Right now, I'm just trying to navigate single motherhood, but I was so afraid Neerie would find out, and I don't even know why, but I made Thad swear not to tell her."

"Even if it meant she tortured you..." Gosh, I felt awful for Solange.

Her misery was clear. "Yes, and torture me, she did. She made snide comments all the time about me being his wannabe wife and all sorts of ugly things. Finally, I'd had enough. I don't know how, but I found my spine."

"And you confronted her about how she was treating you?"

Solange sniffled. "I did. We had a loud argument in her PTA office. A really loud argument. Even Agnew the janitor heard us."

Wait. Back up. Neerie had an office here at the school?

I held up a hand. “I don’t mean to interrupt, but Neerie has an office ?”

Solange rolled her eyes. “It’s not an official office, but Principal Mathers finally gave in to her complaints about having nowhere to work on school events that brought in a lot of money, so she gave her what basically amounts to a broom closet right near the boiler room.”

Note to self, take a peek at the broom closet. “I see. Anyway, please continue. You had an argument Agnew overheard?”

She nodded, her hair shiny under the auditorium lights. “We sure did, and I said some things... some really awful things.”

“Like?”

“I...I said I hoped...I hoped that she’d disappear off the face of the planet. And now...” Her face crumbled, eyes filled with guilt. “And now she has!” she wailed. “I manifested this, Wanda! I did this!” She began to cry in earnest, putting her face in her hands.

I pulled her into a hug, patting her back. “No. No, Solange. You didn’t. That’s impossible. Did you physically kidnap her?”

“Nooo!” she sobbed.

“Then you’re not responsible for her disappearance.”

“I was just so tired of her taking out whatever her problem is on me! I was an easy target, and she knew it. She knew I was afraid of her. She knew I wanted to be the best parent possible for my son Michael. Divorcing his father was hard on him. I’m just trying to be there for him—be involved. That’s why I joined the PTA, but I just

couldn't take it anymore! She was so awful !”

I hugged her harder. “I’m so sorry. I wish I’d known. I would have spoken to Neerie. I would have done something.” I dug in my purse for some tissues, handing them to her.

She wiped her eyes. “You’re always so kind to me—to everyone , even Neerie. I was just trying to lay low and not make trouble, and I didn’t want Neerie to tell everyone about...well, you know... Me. My private life.”

There was so much I didn’t know about what Neerie had been up to. “Did anything else happen that I should know about? Have you heard her talk about anyone giving her any trouble?”

Solange snickered. “Just me. Everyone does whatever Neerie says because they’re afraid of her.”

Marty approached, her eyes hesitant. “Hey, everything okay?”

I gave Solange one last hug and rose, smoothing my skirt. “Everything’s fine. You two done?”

Marty smiled, her blue eyes showing signs of wear. “We are. We definitely are.”

“Solange, will you be all right?”

She nodded, rising, too. “I will. Thanks for sharing my meltdown.”

I chuckled as I scooted out of the row of seats. “Please text me if anything comes up, or if you just need to talk, will you?”

She gave me a warm smile and a wave. “I will. Thanks, Wanda—for being so kind.”

As Solange took her leave, Marty hooked her arm through mine. “Everything okay with you?”

“Let’s go get Nina. I have so much to tell you and we have an office to investigate.”

* * *

“That Solange wasn’t fucking kidding, was she. It literally is a broom closet,” Nina said with a click of her tongue.

It sure was. The three of us could barely fit all at once. There was a folding table she used as her makeshift desk with a matching folding chair. A desktop computer that wasn’t even hooked up to the school Wi-Fi, a hook with a sweater on it. Her “desk” held some sticky notepads, a cup full of pencils and pens, and not much else.

Nina dropped into the folding chair, her long legs almost around her ears as she sat in front of the computer. “So Melba the Mystic wasn’t shittin’ around. She’s the real deal?”

I’d told them what both Melba and Solange had said as we made our way to Neerie’s office. They were as surprised as I was that Melba knew what Neerie had texted to Earl.

I leaned against the wood doorframe, nodding. “Yep. It appears so. How else would she know—verbatim, mind you—what that text said? She couldn’t have seen it on Neerie’s phone, because her phone was in the woods with...Hank,” I whispered. “And absolutely no way she knows Earl. The only way she could have seen that text was if she was there, and all the people in the woods are accounted for.”

“But remember,” Marty reminded, her finger in the air. “That Benny guy, the one who shot the cheater, said he saw Neerie, but no one else did. Maybe Melba was there and no one saw her, either?”

Pinching my temples, I nodded. I hadn’t even thought about that. “You could be right. For now, until we check her alibi, I vote the mystic isn’t such a kook but could definitely be a soft suspect. Good on you for not missing a possibly important clue.”

Nina clicked on the archaic mouse as she looked at the computer screen. “I vote soft suspect, too. I’ll check her alibi. Now, what about this Solange chick—who, by the way, is afraid of her own damn shadow? When I was questioning her, I thought she’d shit herself.”

Marty rolled her eyes. “Stop picking on that poor woman. She was terrified the entire time she talked to you, Nina.”

I held up a hand. “Both of you stop behaving like children and get to the task at hand, which is deciding if we can rule out Melba and Solange and find out if there’s anything in here that will help us.”

Nina stuck her tongue out at Marty before she tapped the computer screen. “Well, she has a thing for lists. She was really into the cleaning supplies in the supply closet and the pens, pencils, pads, coloring books for the kids and—get this—some chemistry books. She has a list of ’em on a Word doc, and beside each fucking item, she’s checked off the incoming stuff, noted how much there is, when an item was taken from inventory, and how much was actually gone when it was time to place an order.”

Marty rolled her eyes. “She had her nose in every part of this school, huh?”

“Are the PTA broads even in charge of stuff like this, Wanda? And was there some

big spill or some shit? Like a toxic waste spill? Because she's made note of a bunch of stuff that was gone. Mostly paper towels."

She swung the comp screen my way to show me list after list of both school and janitorial supplies. Toilet paper, hand towels, soap, floor cleaner, pencils, pens, and a bunch of other items, like erasers and such.

How odd.

"As far as I know, she's only in charge of things having to do with the PTA, like bake sales and family fun day...the winter carnival. I have no idea why she's keeping track of soap and toilet paper."

Marty wrinkled her nose, pulling her jacket tighter around her. "This feels weirdly compulsive, Wanda. Another conspiracy theory, maybe? Is someone stealing the school supplies and using them to make pipe bombs?"

My stomach turned. I gripped the doorframe to steady myself. I needed to get some lunch before I passed out. "Neerie's into so many conspiracies, who knows. Nina, take pictures of her Word docs, would you, please?"

My phone rang then, an incoming call from Nerrie's ex-husband. "Wanda Jefferson."

His deep voice resonated in my ear. "Mrs. Jefferson? Thad Lincoln calling. Naida tells me you wanted to speak with me?"

I clicked the speaker button on my phone. "You're on speaker, Mr. Lincoln. My associates, Marty Flaherty and Nina Statleon, are here with me, and yes, we did ask Naida to have you contact us. Are you aware of the situation?"

There was a small pause, and a raspy sigh followed. "She said Neerie is missing."

He sounded worried, despite their differences. We couldn't see him, so we couldn't gauge his body language and facial expressions, but his worry rang true.

"She is," I confirmed. "Do you have any idea where she might go? Anything that could be helpful in locating her?"

He cleared his throat. "I don't. Despite some of the things she's been up to lately, she would never leave Tamlin for this long without keeping in touch."

"Define what you mean when you say, what she's been up to, Mr. Lincoln," Marty requested.

"I'm sure you know what I mean. Neerie was into all sorts of conspiracy theories. She spent a great deal of time devoted to finding answers. Too much time, but it was always after Tamlin was in bed. I'm incredibly worried she got into something dangerous..."

I wanted to see if he'd fess up to her telling him something was going on at the school. "Any particular theories you can think of?"

"I can," he said smoothly. "One in particular about the school. She didn't say what she thought was going on, and that's probably because I dismissed it, something I deeply regret now. I called her paranoid and it upset her, and she hung up on me."

We all looked at each other with a nod. "She didn't say anything at all about what she meant by something happening at the school?" I confirmed.

He sighed and it was a sigh filled with frustration. "Listen, Mrs. Jefferson, Neerie had fallen down a deep hole I couldn't drag her from. It became a real problem for us. I'm not defending my action of calling her paranoid, but I wasn't sure what else to believe. When your wife...er, ex-wife tells you she thinks the power lines by our

house are sending messages to the Illuminati, you begin to worry.”

So this conspiracy thing had been going on during their marriage. “The Illuminati?”

“The Illuminati,” Thad confirmed. “Yes. The Illuminati. I tried to get her help. I even tried an intervention, but she refused to participate.”

“Did you look into what she said about the school stuff?” Nina asked.

“I didn’t, because I’m away on business and have been for three weeks. But I am worried about Tamlin. I realize biologically she’s not mine, but I raised her from her toddler days. I love her. Hindsight tells me I was like a bull in a China shop.”

His regret after those texts they’d shared was very clear. With a sigh, I didn’t know what else to ask. “Thank you for calling us back, Mr. Lincoln. We appreciate it. If there’s anything else you can help us with, or anything you remember, please call or text.”

“I absolutely...” His deep voice trailed off then.

“Mr. Lincoln? Are you still there?” Nothing but silence greeted me, my phone indicating we’d lost the call. I growled my frustration. “He’s gone.”

“That was a big nothing burger anyway,” Nina groused. “So he knew she was nuts. Who didn’t?”

Marty swatted Nina’s arm. “Stop calling her crazy. I’ll remind you one more time—Bigfoot.”

“Bullshit. She didn’t find him, we damn well did.”

“Ahhh,” Marty cooed. “But she believed .”

“Regardless of Bigfoot and the Illuminati at school, Thad didn’t really tell us anything we didn’t know, and I need a breather. I’m going to go find out if Agnew or Cooper knows about any of this. I don’t know how janitorial supplies fits into this, but it’s a thread we can’t ignore. Just like all those whiteboards in her basement. I’ll be right back.”

I turned and walked down the hall, hoping to find Agnew somewhere close by. I headed to the boiler room to see if he was in there.

I hoped Neerie hadn’t been hassling him the way she did everyone else. He was a lovely man who only wanted to do his job and go home to his cats each night. I wasn’t even sure if he was here on a weekend.

Though, he was known to go the extra mile and come in on a Saturday. After the bake sale Friday afternoon, he likely had plenty of cleanup on his hands. Cooper did the same, taking his lead from Agnew, even though it wasn’t necessary. Still, the school paid them overtime, and that made it worth it for Cooper, who was going to college.

I wandered down the hall, passing rows of classrooms with colorful pictures the children had drawn, posters of multiplication tables, the letters of the alphabet, the shiny floor beneath my feet and smiled.

My children loved this school. I loved this school. I loved the smell of crayons, the cafeteria pizza (they even had a blood dispenser for the vampiric children), the floor cleaner Angus used to mop.

I stopped at the boiler room door and rapped with my knuckles. “Mr. Yannis? Are you in there? Agnew? Cooper?” I listened at the door, but there was no sound behind

it.

Deciding to take the bull by the horns, I opened the door, poking my head inside.

As boiler rooms went, it was, well, a boiler room. Nothing fancy. Agnew's pail and mop were set neatly in a corner. He had a small table where he ate his lunch, even though the staff often asked he and Cooper to join them. A shelf with the supplies Agnew was currently using and Neerie was so concerned about and, oddly, a transistor radio. Mr. Yannis was an ancient. It didn't surprise me that he still listened to the radio.

When I stepped fully into the room, the door shut behind me, leaving me in the dark. As my eyes adjusted, I felt around and found the light switch, flipping it on.

There wasn't much to see, and if Agnew wasn't in here, I needed to get back to Nina and Marty so we could hash out what we had—and lunch. Sweet Caroline, I needed some lunch.

Texting Arch, I asked if he would be so kind as to make me my favorite, a BLT on brioche bread.

My stomach grumbling, I left the boiler room and headed to the supply pantry a short way down the hall to take a good hard look at the supplies.

Reaching out, I began to move the jugs of cleaner around—and that's the last thing I remember.

Everything went pitch black.

Chapter Ten

“H elp us! Please help us!”

My eyes popped open to the tune of a child calling for help. The voice raw and filled with fear. I fought to sit up, but when I did there was nothing to see. Nothing but the cold, hard floor beneath me, damp and sticky.

My sluggish heart began to throb in my chest, but I reminded myself to remain calm. It wasn't as though I hadn't been scooped up and dropped in Hell before, right? Long story, but well worth remembering I'd been in this position several times.

That led to my next question? Was I in Hell? And if so, why was I in Hell? How did demons get in the middle of this? Was Neerie right when she said the Illuminati ran the school? Was the Illuminati run by demons?

Worse, was I getting ahead of myself? Was I letting all this conspiracy stuff get in my head?

So first order of business, find out where I'd landed.

“Help us! Pleecease, help us!”

Horror crept up my spine. It was hard not to panic when a child was calling for help, but I fought the temptation to give in and scream myself.

Instead, I called out, “Where are you, honey? Who are you?”

“Help! Please hurry!”

Calm. Remain calm, Wanda Jefferson. Do not freak out. But to no avail. The small voice, heart-wrenching and terrified, shredded my insides.

“I’m coming! I’ll find you!” I called back, fighting to keep my fear from seeping into my reassuring words.

And then, like a vortex, I was sucked out of wherever I was, my back pressing against a slick, cool floor.

“Mrs. Jefferson!” I heard another voice call. An adult voice. A familiar adult voice. A hand stroked my cheek. A soft hand, one that smelled of raspberries and eucalyptus. “Mrs. Jefferson, are you all right?”

“Wanda!” That adult voice I knew. Marty. It was Marty. And then Nina.

“Wanda! What the hell is going on?”

My eyes popped open to find Mrs. Goodfellow, her sweet lined face staring down at me as she feathered a caress across my cheek, while Marty and Nina dropped to my side as I lay flat out on my back.

I struggled to get up, but Marty held me in place. “Wait, let me see if you’ve hit your head, honey. Please don’t move.” She ran her fingers along my scalp, checking for abrasions.

Nina held my head, putting it in her lap. She grazed my forehead with her knuckles. “What the hell, Wanda?”

When I opened my mouth to speak, rather than words coming out of my mouth, I

cried. I couldn't stop the tears that fell down my face.

What on earth was happening to me? I felt disjointed, empty, lost.

Mrs. Goodfellow wiped at my cheeks, pulling my other hand to her cheek. "Oh, Mrs. Jefferson, what's wrong? Tell me how I can help?"

But I couldn't speak for the voice of that child in my head, calling for help. "I..."

Nina pulled me to her and hauled me up to my feet. "Okay, Wanda. It's okay. Let's get you home."

"Wait!" I croaked, turning to Mrs. Goodfellow, one of the few teachers we hadn't talked with yet. "I'm sure you heard what's been going on with Mrs. Lincoln, haven't you?"

She placed a hand on my arm, her eyes warm. "I have, dear."

I clung to Nina and my sanity. "Did she ever say anything to you about something strange going on here at the school—or anywhere, for that matter?"

Mrs. Goodfellow looked me in the eye, her worry clear. "Mrs. Lincoln's...how can I say this politely? An odd duck, yes? She likes things her way, and her way alone."

"I'll say," Nina agreed.

"That said, she never shared anything with me about anything happening here at the school, or anywhere else. She was a good mother, Mrs. Jefferson. A very good one. I wish I had more to help you."

I fought bursting into sobs right then and there, but I couldn't manage words.

Marty thanked Mrs. Goodfellow and promised to take care of me before she wrapped my arm around her waist and helped Nina drag me through the halls of the empty school and to the SUV.

I tried to stand up and walk like a lady, but every breath I took, I heard that child's cry for help, and it felt like a knife to my gut.

I managed to keep it together until we got back to the murder basement, where I promptly fell apart when Arch brought me the sandwich I'd requested.

"Oh, Mistress Wanda! Isn't this what you requested?" His worried eyes and furrowed brow made me reach for his hand and hold tight, burying my face in his rounded belly.

I began to sob even as I nodded, taking gulps of air to thwart my tears. "It's... It's not youuu," I cried. "I love your BLTs."

He cradled my head and let me cry it out until I had nothing left but dry heaves.

Inhaling deeply, I leaned back in my chair and gathered myself. "I'm sorry," were my first coherent words. "I don't know why that hit me so hard."

Marty bent at the waist, her blue eyes wide with concern as she pressed a cold cloth to my forehead. "What did happen, honey? What has you so upset?"

"And why were you on the floor outside the boiler room, Wanda? Talk to us," Nina demanded, kneeling in front of me.

Inhaling deeply, I looked at them, their eyes filled with worry. "The last thing I remember, I was in the supply room. I was checking to see if Agnew had anything in there that might explain the inventory business. Next thing I know, I'm somewhere

dark as night and a child is calling for my help. They asked me to help us. Plural. A petrified voice, calling for anyone to help them.”

Simply remembering the sound of their fear almost sent me into another fit of tears, but I forced myself to get it together.

Nina cupped my jaw, her eyes warm and sympathetic. “Aw shit, Wanda. That’s fucked up. Do you remember anything else?”

I shook my head, my misery swelling up in my belly. “No. That was literally all that happened. What I want to know is, how did I get wherever that was, and how do I get back so I can help whoever was calling me? Whoever it was, they were terrified, Nina. I’ll never sleep again with that tiny voice in my head!”

“Okay, listen, slow down, honey,” Marty soothed, pushing my mussed hair out of my face. “You can’t know for sure if the voice was real. Maybe it was someone toying with you. It wouldn’t be the first time someone did that to us.”

I nodded. “You’re right. But what if there really was a child in need of help, Marty? I have to go back!” I tried to stand up so I could go back to the supply closet right that second to see for myself.

“Back to what, Mistress?” Arch, ever the voice of reason, asked. “If what I’m hearing is correct, you don’t know where you were when you heard the child. You cannot go back to a place with no directions. I beg of you, please eat. Take a moment to think about this. Make a plan. Don’t expend all your energy fretting. It’s imperative you stay strong if there is a child involved. Understood? Now, enjoy your sandwich. And put the pieces together as you do.”

He wrapped his arms around my shoulders and gave me a tight hug before retreating back upstairs.

Marty kissed the top of my head. “He’s right, honey. Eat. No interruptions. Then we discuss, okay?”

I nodded, thinking I couldn’t eat a thing. But I wolfed (pardon the pun) the sandwich down, along with the side of potato salad (my favorite) as if I were on death row and it was my last meal.

As I chewed, Marty and Nina began to look closer at the pictures of the whiteboards Neerie had in her kooky basement.

Nina was frowning when I wiped my mouth and cleared up my dishes, sending Arch a text of gratitude. “What’s up?”

Tucking her hands in the pockets of her hoodie, she sent me a skeptical glance. “You up to this, or do you need more time to digest?”

Rising, I headed to our own whiteboard to see whatever Nina appeared to be looking at. “I’m up to it. What did you find?”

“The picture of this alien. Look at it. There’s a timestamp on it. Yeah, it’s blurry. No, I can’t see the background. Yeah, it’s crazy to think, but Wings didn’t get this pic from some magazine or the Internet. It looks like she took it. The date is from two weeks ago, and according to what I sent to Tottington, his friend says the EXIF metadata claims it was taken from an iPhone.”

I frowned. “That was all Greek to me. I don’t understand, and I don’t know if I need to. Does that mean Neerie took the photo with her phone?”

Marty’s eyes went wide as she held up Neerie’s phone. “It does. You know, we can check the location where the pic was taken on her phone.” She began to fiddle with Neerie’s cell.

Of the three of us, I'm the least tech-inclined. Most of what you can do with a cell, other than send texts and take pictures, is beyond my scope.

Marty gasped, holding up the phone. "Look at the map. It says it was taken at the school!"

Oh, Universe, are you going to tell me aliens are real, too?

First it was Bigfoot.

Then it was Melba and her very real visions.

Now aliens?

Stahp!

Chapter Eleven

“So that’s a picture of a real alien? Is that where we’re going with this?”

“We don’t know if it’s a real alien, but look at fucking Hank. Either way, Wings took this picture and the whiteboard she attached it to has nothing else but a land survey of the site in Roswell, where alien debris was allegedly found. But if she was into the Roswell shit, why does she have a picture of an alleged alien from the school, and how the fuck was she connecting all this?”

I stared at the picture of the alien, its shiny globe-like eyes and distorted skull blurry, but still very much resembling an alien as we’ve come to know them in media and movies.

Marty raised both her hands. “Okay, let’s take inventory of what we have so far. It might not be much, but we need some clarity. The timeline for Neerie on the day she disappeared is this: She took Tamlin to school. According to the camera footage Tottington watched, she arrived back at home just before eight-thirty in the morning. She never left until it was time for her to pick up Tamlin at school at three in the afternoon. She came back home, sans Tamlin, about six, a little after the time Naida said she dropped her off at her house, left again and never came back home after that.”

Scratching my head, I nodded. “So she must have gone off to meet the FB group in the woods then. A dead end so far. Next, we have her text to Earl about the basement, but we have no idea what she meant or if she even meant to send it to Earl at all. Melba thinks the text was meant for someone else entirely.”

Nina rolled her tongue along the inside of her cheek. “Yep. And BTdubs, Melba was at a pottery class until eleven o’clock with her husband. They went home after the class and went to bed. But she claims Neerie is alive, wherever she is. I guess we have to lean toward that being fucking true, because she did see the text to Earl in said vision. There’s no other way she could have seen it.”

“Though, wait. We still have Neerie’s ex-husband Will to talk to. He did threaten her if she wouldn’t let him see Tamlin,” I added.

Tottington came down the stairs and cleared his throat. “However, Mr. Tempe has been in fairy prison for the last four days, madam, and remains there as we speak. Darnell did some poking about and sent me the information. He can thusly be ruled out.”

“So what else do we have?” I almost shouted, my panic beginning to take hold of my good sense. “Nothing. We have nothing . None of the mothers from the PTA had anything helpful to say, other than Neerie was, well, Neerie . Overbearing, rude and pushy. That doesn’t help us find her!”

I gripped the shoulder of the suit of armor that sat in the corner of the basement, almost digging my fingernails into it.

“Hold the phone! I mean, literally,” Marty squawked, holding up the cellphone. “Look what I found in the search history on Neerie’s phone!”

I closed my eyes and prayed it was something that would help us find her. “What is it?”

Marty licked her lips, her eyes bright with excitement. “Were you guys aware that not one, but three children have gone missing from schools for the gifted in the last four months?”

I froze in place.

“Paranormal kids?” Nina asked.

Marty chewed on the tip of her nail. “Uh-huh.”

Nina frowned, nodding slowly. “Yeah, I remember seeing something about it on the paranormal web. All kids attending paranormal schools, right?”

Sometimes, I wondered if it was such a good idea to keep our children isolated from the outside human world. I understood protecting them until they could protect themselves, especially my Sam. He is, after all, a pale green.

It’s not something we could hide or something humans wouldn’t question, or even something he wouldn’t be tortured endlessly about. We’d purposely put him in this school for that reason—with others like him.

While lots of paranormal parents chose to let their children attend human schools, and I respected that, it was a big burden to keep your true nature hidden. One we ultimately decided was an extra helping on their plates they didn’t need.

It was hard to keep the schools hidden—it took a lot of work on our part to make it happen. If outsiders asked where the children attended school, we simply told them they were home-schooled. To further keep prying eyes at bay, we had all registered as home-schooling parents.

Marty shook her head as she squinted at the phone. “Yep. All paranormal kids, attending schools for the gifted. Tina Madry in California, a werewolf. Chester Godfrey in Virginia, a vampire, and Lori Caulfield in South Carolina, a witch. All around nine or ten, the first one taken four months ago. No suspects, no leads.”

A witch, a vampire and a werewolf... “The locations are so random. So what do they all have in common?” I wondered.

“They’re all paranormal and gifted?” Marty replied. Then she frowned. “But wait! They’re all in the top one percent of children in their schools with way above-average IQs. They’re super-geniuses, according to what this one person said on the California school’s page.”

“So someone’s snatchin’ kids who are smart—to what fucking end?”

Fear trickled down my spine. “My immediate thought is the government. They took children with high IQs, and they’re all a different species...”

Was one of the missing the child who’d called out to me for help? The voice had said help us . I clenched my fingers into fists. “What if...what if one of those children was calling me for help? The voice I heard said help us!” I squeaked, my cheeks flushing hot.

Marty gripped my shoulder. “Okay, let’s slow down, Wanda. First, we need to figure out if this has anything to do with Neerie’s disappearance. It’s a bit of a leap to suggest she was looking into this simply because of her search history. Maybe she was just reading articles on the paranormal web. She could have been looking for a million things that have nothing to do with her. We don’t even know if what happened to you has anything to do with this yet. We don’t know if there’s a connection. There are no children missing at Sammy and Olivia’s school—only one adult.”

“And we don’t know where the fuck you went, or if you went anywhere at all. If you’ll damn well recall, the last time someone fucked with our heads, they made me think I was in some dark hole when I was really in an apartment. So what if that was all some illusion?”

“Okay, if that was an illusion, why does someone want me to think a child needs help? To distract me from finding Neerie?”

Both Marty and Nina remained silent for a moment until Marty said, “Good point. That doesn’t make sense.”

“Okay, so let’s go with the theory some shit’s going on at the school and Neerie was looking into it. I don’t know how the fuck it has anything to do with an alien or some cleaning supplies, but if that’s the case, does that mean the kids who disappeared are somewhere in the school, and that’s how you heard them?”

My pulse began to pound in my head. “I think she found something out that she shouldn’t have and got caught. I think someone kidnapped her. I think, while Neerie is a little left of center when it comes to conspiracies, and some of them are completely bananapants, she’s not entirely full of bunk.”

Nina scoffed with a grin. “It’s shit , Wanda. C’mon, you can say it. Neerie isn’t entirely full of shit .”

I laughed out loud, some of the tension leaving my body. “Shit. How’s that? Neerie isn’t entirely full of shit .”

Nina wiped a pretend tear from her eye. “I’m so proud of my girl. But don’t do that again. It sounds awful coming from your high-falutin’ ass. Leave the potty language to me.”

I laughed again, giving her a hug. “I love you. Thanks for always being there for me.”

Hugging me back, she winked at Marty. “See? Told ya I was her favorite, Ass - Sniffer.”

“Oh, knock it off, vampire. Get in here, Marty,” I said with more laughter, holding out an arm.

“Group hug!” Marty chirped, pushing her way between us.

For the first time, I felt a bit of hope spring up in my chest. Maybe, just maybe, we could figure this out.

* * *

Two hours later, I wasn’t so sure. We’d made calls to the parents of the missing children, hoping they’d return them if they recognized us from our OOPS escapades.

Until then, we went back over what we had. “So now we know Melba the Mystic has an alibi. I checked the pottery teacher. She said Melba is a really nice lady, but her pottery blows chunks.”

Marty lobbed a stress ball at Nina’s head. “She did not.”

Nina caught the flying object without even looking up. “She didn’t have to. Look at this damn bowl she made.” Nina turned her desktop computer to show us a lopsided bowl. “But it’s proof she was there. Solid alibi.”

I winced at the bowl and fought a comment. I’ve never tried pottery. Maybe it’s really difficult. What do I know?

“Next up, Solange. Between the hours of five and eight, she was at karate class with her son. Confirmed by the dojo. They had dinner at Susie’s Bistro, also confirmed by Susie herself—who’s lovely, by the way, and offered us a free egg sandwich. Anyway, then from eight until about midnight, she was binge-watching a Korean drama with her mother, who lives with her, and the neighbor who lives across the

street, who watches with them. Solange gave me her number to call. Her name is Lucy Barrows.”

I felt a small sense of relief that neither of the women appeared to be involved. “I didn’t really think either of them had anything to do with it, but thanks for checking. I texted Principal Mathers and she directed me to the secretary, Janine Sampson, who handles all the ordering of supplies. She just sent me a text, so hang on. Let me read it.”

As I read, I paced. It helped me think.

Nina came and paced beside me. “What’d she say?”

I stopped short. “Janine confirmed she orders all of the supplies, office and cleaning, and Neerie asked her about them last week.” Holy kittens.

I texted back to ask what Neerie wanted to know about the supplies.

Marty came to look at the return text.

“Neerie wanted to know if Janine had to order extra supplies for Mr. Yannis, the janitor, and for the classrooms. She suspected someone was stealing from the supply closet. She accused him of as much, and said she was going to Principal Mathers with her suspicions.”

I scratched my head. “Why the heckle would Agnew steal paper towels in bulk?”

“Maybe it was the kid, Cooper. He’s in college, right? Maybe he needed ’em to clean up bulk puke.”

I rolled my eyes at Nina. “He’s a vampire, Nina. He doesn’t drink.”

“Forget the why, Wanda, look at the timeline. The timestamp on the alien photo is from two weeks ago. Neerie noses around, finds something out about the missing supplies, and talks to Janine Sampson a week later. Right after that, she goes missing. Are they connected? And if they are, how the fuck do cleaning supplies, an alien, and whatever the fuck happened to you , connect to missing kids and a missing Neerie? Did an alien kidnap her? And why? For that matter, are aliens even real? And still, I maintain there are no missing kids at Sam and Olivia’s school.”

“Yet,” I said. “There are no missing children yet . And Bigfoot’s real. Why wouldn’t aliens be, too?”

“Do you think Agnew or Cooper have something to do with the missing kids?” Marty asked. “I mean, who else would be stealing cleaning supplies? And if they are, why are they stealing supplies?”

I bit the inside of my lip. “I don’t know. Neerie didn’t make that connection. We’re making that connection because we have nothing else. They could be two completely unrelated things. I think we need to talk to Agnew and Cooper and see what they have to say. Maybe Neerie asked them about the missing supplies?”

“Hang on, incoming call from one of the parents on FaceTime,” Nina said.

We rushed to Nina’s computer, smoothing our hair as we pulled our office chairs to her desk. The call was from Chester Godfrey’s parents, Dinah and Gilbert Godfrey, in Virginia.

“Mr. and Mrs. Godfrey, thank you so much for taking our call. I’m Wanda Jefferson, this is Nina Statleon and Marty Flaherty. We’re investigating a missing parent at our school. We know this is an incredibly difficult call for you, but we’re hoping you can answer some questions for us?”

As I looked at Dinah's weary face, her pale skin and the tremble of her lip, my heart clenched in my chest so tight, I wanted to keel over.

Dinah pressed her closed fist to her mouth. "We know about you from your group—OOPS, is it? Have you found something about our...our Chester?"

When her voice cracked, mine almost did, too, but I decided keeping it together was the only way I could find out if these children had anything to do with Neerie's disappearance, and if one of them had been the child who'd called out for help.

I swallowed hard. "As of right now, we're still investigating, so I have nothing definitive for you. We're simply asking questions about Chester's disappearance and hoping you can fill in some of the details."

Gilbert, at least a head taller than his wife, bookish-looking with similar pale skin, horn-rimmed glasses and a button-up vest, cleared his throat. If he were near, I know I'd smell his anguish.

Vampires can't cry, which I know from Nina can be incredibly frustrating, and Gilbert looked on the verge of an emotional breakdown he couldn't set free.

Gripping Dinah's hand, he nodded. "Please, ask us whatever you need to, if it will help your investigation. We don't want any more parents to suffer what we have."

Marty looked at the pad with the questions we'd written. "What are the circumstances surrounding Chester's disappearance? Where was he when he went missing?"

Dinah's eyes grew sad and dark. "He was at school. According to his teacher, he'd asked to go to the boys' room. Chester is very bright, and because he's so bright, he can become overwhelmed by too much stimulation. As you know, he doesn't need to use the facilities, but he often asked to be excused from class to find some

space—some alone time. Almost a half an hour went by, but he never returned to class.”

I inhaled as quietly as I could. It was a parent’s worst fear. “Are there no cameras in the school? I know Chester wouldn’t show up on them due to his vampiric nature, but was there anyone suspicious nearby when he went missing?”

“No one,” Gilbert said, his tone almost angry. “It’s what has us most puzzled. There was no one in the halls during the time he left the classroom. No one any...anywhere. It was as though he disappeared into thin air.”

“So maybe another vampire?” Nina wondered. “They could easily avoid detection because you can’t see us on camera.”

Dinah shook her dark head. “We thought the same, but there was no scent at all. I thought my nose might fall off from sniffing that school from top to bottom. Nothing. Just...” Her voice hitched. “Nothing.”

“Do you know if he ever talked about anyone approaching him? Anyone who made him feel uncomfortable? Did any of his classmates ever have an encounter with someone they didn’t know, who made them feel uncomfortable?”

Gilbert’s nose flared. “Never. Not once. We talked to all of his friends, his classmates, everyone who knew him. None of his teachers had anything unusual to report. It’s almost as if...as if he never existed.” His voice broke then, almost breaking all of us, too.

“And no suspects? No one at all?” Nina asked in disbelief.

Dinah’s face became a mask of pain. “The council investigated, talked to everyone—and I do mean everyone, from teachers to crossing guards. We talked to

everyone, too, and there wasn't a trace of foul play. There was just nothing .”

I can't say why this particular piece of whatever we were calling it had stuck to me like glue, but the school supply thing wouldn't release me from its grip.

I fought the urge to scream, instead clenching my fists in my lap. “I know this might sound strange, Mr. Godfrey, but please indulge me. Was there ever any talk of missing school supplies at Chester's school? Cleaning supplies? Pencils, iPads...anything at all?”

Dinah blinked, pressing her fingers to her mouth. “Coloring books!” she shouted, making me jump. “I know it sounds crazy to remember something so unimportant at a time like that, but in the midst of the search for Chester, I heard the school librarian mention the coloring books Chester favored of some anime animals had gone missing—a bunch of them, in fact.”

You see? There's a connection. I know there is.

Hot-diggity.

Chapter Twelve

We'd spent half the night talking to the parents of the missing children, all with the same frustrating story, all tired and overwhelmed with unbearable sorrow—and none of them aware Neerie even existed. Each child had disappeared without a trace, no scent of a perpetrator, no suspicious people, and no leads.

But aside from their children being geniuses, they had only one other thing in common—missing school supplies. In the case of Tina in California, it was some iPads and crayons. Lori in South Carolina, bottles of bleach, drawing paper and reusable straws.

And according to the school secretaries from each school, they hadn't paid a great deal of attention to the missing items until after the children were gone.

Marty put her hand on my back. "Wanda, you're exhausted. You've been up since five this morning. Maybe a quick catnap is in order before we go to the school to talk with Agnew and Cooper?"

We'd asked Cooper and Agnew to take a moment to meet us at the school, even though it was a Sunday.

I scrubbed my weary eyes, letting my head rest in the cradle of my arms. "No more than you. I'll be fine. I can't close my eyes without hearing that child calling for help anyway." Yawning, I asked, "Did you talk to Naida about the missing supplies?"

"I did, and as per usual, Neerie never said anything about school supplies gone

missing, or aliens, for that matter. I think Neerie kept things close to her vest because Naida was always calling her crazy.”

“Crazy like a fox,” I muttered. “I don’t think she was all that crazy, Marty. I think the missing children, the school supplies, this alien, and Neerie’s disappearance are all connected. I feel it.”

Nina rolled up behind me in her office chair and put her chin on my shoulder. “Then let’s figure out how the fuck this is all connected. I say we go talk to Agnew and Cooper and see if they’ve seen any aliens as of late.”

“I say yes, but let’s grab something to-go for breakfast first, okay? Maybe stop at Susie’s for a steak-and-egg sandwich? Agnew and Cooper won’t be there until eight, right? And you need to fuel up for energy,” Marty suggested with a smile.

Despite the fact that we’d been up late into the night, she looked fresh as a daisy dressed in bellbottom jeans and a belted sweater, her hair in a messy bun with big gold hoop earrings.

I, on the other hand, was a rumpled mess. Under any other circumstance, I would insist on a freshly ironed top, but I was too tired to care.

Still, my stomach grumbled at the suggestion. “That sounds delightfully yummy. Let’s do it.”

On the ride over, I requested quiet so I could gather my thoughts and clear my brain’s cobwebs.

If someone at those schools was snatching children and the missing school supplies were connected, how were they connected? Was the kidnapper supplying kids with crayons and bleach? Why was someone kidnapping children, anyway? Genius

children, no less.

Supplies. Supplies. Supplies. That word was driving me out of my mind.

“I have to go back to the supply closet,” I said out loud, before I could catch myself.

“Um, no,” Nina said, that authoritarian tone in her voice. “We don’t know why the fuck you disappeared after you went into the supply closet.”

“Well, if the supply closet is the key, we can’t let anyone else go in there.”

“Wanda, we talked about this last night. What if you get back to wherever you went and can’t get back here?”

I looked out the window as we pulled into a parking space in town, the slushy snow growling beneath the tires of the SUV. “It’s not like the door to Narnia, Marty.”

She turned in the passenger seat, her eyes angry. “You know what? You don’t know that! Bigfoot is real, Wanda! Aliens might be real! Who’s to say there isn’t a door to Narnia? Did you just fall off the turnip truck? Are you just now joining us in the year of our Lord 2025? We’ve been to Hell, Wanda. Hell! ” she bellowed in my face. “What in all of what makes you think the supply closet couldn’t lead to Narnia? Or wherever? You absolutely are not going in there again!”

Nina gripped Mary’s shoulder. “Marty, easy does it, Blondie. I won’t let her go back there alone, okay? We’re all tired. We’re all stressed because this involves kids, but yelling at each other isn’t going to do shit. Everybody take a beat and everyone who can breathe, take a breath.”

I blinked. “Was that Nina being the voice of reason?” I craned my neck to look out the window, cocking my ear. “Is that the sound of hooves? Could it be the Four

Horsemen of the Apocalypse here to end our misery at long last?”

Marty began to giggle. “You joke, but they’re probably real, too.”

“Shut the fuck up, Wanda. Somebody has to keep you two hysterical hens from pecking each other to death. I talked to Principal Mathers this morning. I put on my best manners and told her no one was to go into that supply closet until we could figure out what the hell’s going on. I even suggested she cancel school tomorrow as a just in case. She didn’t love that idea, but ask me if I give a ripe shit. So no one’s going in the closet for now, okay? We go in together or we don’t go in at all.”

Marty’s lips mirrored mine. Thinning and angry.

“Oh, knock it off, you two, and make nice. Neither one of you would survive a trip to the damn discount outlet without the other. Quit freaking out and go get something to eat. That always soothes your savage beasts.”

When we both stubbornly remained silent and seated, she growled, her eyes narrowing at us both. “Get the fuck out of this damn car and go get the food I can’t even eat. I’ll wait here to savor the fucking smells of a bacon, egg and cheese I’ll never be able to have again. Now git!”

The ice broken, we laughed, leaving the SUV and heading into Susie’s Bistro, a cute café with a big picture window, the name of the eatery in pink and gold lettering painted on the glass.

I loved the crisp white tablecloths and the flameless candles on the tables. The small stem vases with fresh flowers in the middle of winter.

Marty leaned into me as we waited in line to place our orders. “You know, has it occurred to you that aside from the dark paranormal web, no one’s said boo at your

school about these missing children? You'd think they'd want everyone on high alert at every paranormal school."

I made a face of disgust. "You know what they're like in our world. Everything's a big secret. They probably didn't want every paranormal parent on the planet to lose their minds and go on a killing spree. You know there are some ancients who strike first, ask questions later. But I can tell you this—I'm disgusted. I don't know if hearing about these poor children sooner would have helped, but it would have been nice to have options. We might have been a day earlier in following this lead on Neerie."

Susie herself greeted us at the counter. When she leaned over the marble surface, her smile became a look of concern. "I don't mean to eavesdrop, but I heard you mention Mrs. Lincoln. I mean, Neerie. She's a regular here, every morning, Monday through Sunday. She orders a half-caf Americano and a blueberry parfait. But I haven't seen her in a few days. Is she all right?"

Here's where things got sticky. We couldn't tell her Neerie was missing. Who knows if she'd go to the human police out of concern. We didn't need that on top of everything else.

I put a hand to her forearm. "She's a friend of mine—another home-school mom. I was just mentioning a lesson plan I'd like to borrow from her."

I didn't necessarily lie, but I didn't exactly tell the truth.

Susie appeared relieved, the short fringe of her bangs bouncing against her forehead as she nodded. "Oh, phew. After her last visit a few days ago—Wednesday, I think it was—I was worried she was in some kind of trouble."

Marty's head tilted. Tucking her purse under her arm, she asked with innocence in

her tone, “What makes you say that?”

Susie exhaled, leaning her elbows on the counter, her playful blue eyes, normally cheerful, clouding. “She was on the phone with someone, and she was very angry. I only heard a little bit of the call. I didn’t listen on purpose, but it was hard not to hear her. She was pretty loud when she said—and I know this is going to sound crazy—something about a vampire, a werewolf, and a witch. Sounds like a book or something, doesn’t it?”

She was talking about the missing children. My hands went clammy, my mouth dry, but I managed to unstick my tongue from the roof of my mouth. “Did she say anything else?”

Susie cocked her head, cupping her chin in her hand. “Yeah. She did. She said, ‘I’m telling you, it’s in the basement.’ Then she said something about kids, and the last thing she said was, ‘I took its picture. It’s real and it’s in the basement. I saw its eyes.’”

We looked at one another, our eyes wide. The alien? Did she mean the alien ? She took the picture of the alien, it’s real, and it’s in the basement?

Marty gripped my arm, but she managed to stay quite calm. “How interesting, Susie. Anything else?”

The woman snarfed. “Isn’t that enough? I mean, seriously, vampires and werewolves aren’t real.” Then she flapped her hands. “Anyway, what can I get you lovely ladies?”

As we placed our orders, my head buzzed and my gut clenched. We needed to find out who Neerie had talked to that day.

The morning she disappeared.

* * *

I shoveled my egg and cheese on a bagel into my face as we raced to the school.

“Tottington says there were no outgoing calls on her phone that day. So who the fuck did she talk to before she lost her phone in the woods?”

“I have no idea, vampire. Maybe she deleted the call? Maybe whoever took her deleted it?”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about Neerie’s phone. It seems like she lost it when she was snatched, but if that’s what happened...why wouldn’t they take her phone, too? I mean, it’s evidence, right?”

“There could be a million reasons why, Marty,” I said around my last bite of bagel. “Maybe they didn’t know she had it with her? Maybe she didn’t realize she’d dropped it? Maybe whoever this is doesn’t give a whit about her phone because no one can seem to figure out who’s taking these kids to begin with? We’re paranormal, for Pete’s sake, and no one smelled anything. No traces, no leads, remember?”

Nina swerved into the parking lot of the school as a fresh batch of snow began to fall. “So we think there’s an alien snatching kids and school supplies, Neerie found out and was going to fuck everything up, so it took her, too? And it’s in a basement that doesn’t exist?”

I’d texted Principal Mathers and asked if there was a basement we didn’t know about, but she claimed there was no basement at Paranormal and Gifted.

“That’s the only piece of this I don’t get. What basement was she talking about?”

And then like a ton of bricks, a thought hit me. “The school is only about twenty years old, right? Before they established the school and glamoured it so humans couldn’t see it then renovated it, it was a series of factories. They got in there and connected the buildings for a more cohesive structure. What if...”

“What if there was a basement in one of the factories?” Marty shouted.

Nina pressed a button on the dashboard and called Tottington. “Tater?”

“Yes, Dark Lord, how may I serve you today?” he said, his words cultured and riddled with sarcasm.

She grinned as she slammed on the brakes. “Do me a skinny, find out if Sammy and Olivia’s school had a basement at one time. It used to be a factory?—”

“A series of apparel manufacturing factories!” I yelled.

“You think you can find blueprints for it, Tater?”

His answer crackled through the car. “I shall search high and low. Have we a breakthrough?”

“I’ll let you know as soon as I know, buddy. Gotta run.” Nina made a smooching sound and hung up.

We all jumped out of the car, racing toward the front doors of the school, where Agnew and Cooper waited for us in the lobby.

I rushed to Agnew, my stomach in a knot. “Mr. Yannis, Cooper, thank you so much for coming in on a Sunday.”

Agnew raised a dismissive hand. “Not a problem, Mrs. Jefferson. How can I help?” he asked, his eyes crinkling at the corners as he smiled, running his thumbs under his overall straps.

“I’m going to be as direct as I can because we’re in a bit of a pickle. Did Mrs. Lincoln ever accuse you of stealing school supplies?”

Before he could open his mouth to answer, Cooper spoke, his eyes angry, his words tight. “You bet she did! I don’t know if she’s your friend, but she’s not a very nice person. Why would Mr. Yannis steal paper towels from the school?”

Mr. Yannis slapped Cooper on his thin back with a chuckle. “Down there, boy. It’s okay. We worked it out. She did think I was stealing paper towels, and some other stuff, too. A chemistry book and ammonia or something, but I don’t have the key to the supply closet, and I don’t have it for a reason—because I’m always losin’ it. Might be gettin’ time for me to retire.”

But it was unlocked when I’d checked it...

Marty crossed her arms over her chest. “Who has the key?”

He clicked his tongue, running a hand over his face. “Mrs. Sampson. She opens it so I can get what I need, and then she locks it back up again. I kept losin’ it, so I asked her to keep it in her desk.”

Mrs. Sampson? She wasn’t an alien. She was a ghoul. “Did Mrs. Sampson ever tell you where the missing supplies went?”

Cooper stood up straight. “She didn’t know, either, but she told Mrs. Lincoln that Mr. Yannis couldn’t be stealing stuff because she had the only key. Then she asked Mrs. Lincoln if she was accusing her of stealing the stuff.”

Nina grunted. “What did Mrs. Lincoln say?”

“She got mad,” Agnew said. “Real mad. Said she was only asking because it might be important evidence. We didn’t know what the heck that meant, but she stormed off and that was that.”

Leaning against the concrete block wall, my adrenaline kicked into high gear. I was exhausted moments ago, but now, I was wide awake.

Evidence . She was looking for evidence. “When did that happen, Mr. Yannis?”

He shrugged, scrubbing a hand over the top of his head. “’Bout a week or so ago, I guess.”

Marty put a hand on Agnew’s arm. “Did she ever talk to you about anything strange going on here at the school?”

He squinted his eyes, scratching his jaw. “Strange? Nope. She was just upset about the school supplies. I don’t even know why she cared about the supplies, truth be told.”

Nina clapped Cooper on the back. “How about you, Cooper? Ever see or hear anything weird with Mrs. Lincoln?”

The young man shook his head. “Not weird, I guess, but she was always complaining and reporting people for stuff, if that counts.”

“Mr. Yannis, you’ve been under the employ of the school for a while. Have you ever heard of there being a basement in the school?” I asked.

He made a confused face. “A basement? No, ma’am. Never heard that.”

Dang it all.

Tucking my purse over my shoulder, I smiled at him, squeezing his forearm. “Thank you, Mr. Yannis, Cooper. Thank you for taking your time out on a Sunday to come talk to us. If you can think of anything else, please contact me, will you?”

“Sure, Mrs. Jefferson.” The old janitor began to walk away, but then he stopped. “Hey, is everything all right with you ladies? Anything I can help with?”

I smiled at him. “No, Mr. Yannis. But thank you. Go enjoy your Sunday.”

Both he and Cooper made their way out of the school, pushing open the double doors and heading into the cold morning.

We all looked at each other in total silence.

“She was looking for evidence,” Marty murmured.

Nina’s phone chirped then. Tottington’s familiar ringtone, “My Guy,” squawking in her back pocket. Dragging her cell from her hoodie, she read the text. “Holy shit!” She used her fingers to enlarge a pic he’d sent. “Welp, the factory did have a basement. That must be what Wings meant. The basement is here. The only trouble is, they damn well covered it up. It’s right beneath our feet.”

Gasping, Marty looked at the picture. “Holy cats,” she mumbled. “That has to be it! But how does that pertain to the missing children and, for that matter, missing supplies? You can’t get to the basement from up here. It’s under thousands of pounds of concrete.”

I looked at them. “There’s only one way to find out. Supply closet?”

Nina's finger shot up in the air. "Hold on one fucking second, Wanda. I don't want to beat a dead horse, but you don't know what you did in that supply closet that landed you where you ended up. What if you or any of us can't get back here because the same thing happens to us?"

I felt my fear and my anger shoot straight toward the sky. "What if there's a child who needs us and we're busy fiddling around with what-ifs?"

Marty stomped her foot, the heel of her boot slapping the floor, leaving an echo in my ears. "Wanda, we need to understand what happened to you and make sure it's safe to go find this child you say you heard. I'm with Nina on this. We're no good to anyone if we end up missing, too!"

"So who do we call to investigate this, ladies? Ghostbusters? The Supply Closet Police?" I began to walk away from them, on fire with the need to go back to the supply closet.

That had to be the key here.

"Aw, c'mon, Wanda!" Nina called after me. "Don't be like that. We're just lookin' out. You'd do the same."

Whirling around, even though I knew she was right, I shook a finger at them. "I almost don't know you two right now! Since when have we ever been afraid to walk into a dangerous situation? Since when? I know these children are somehow connected to Neerie's disappearance. I know I heard a child cry out for help. I'm not going to avoid going to the big bad supply closet just because it's scary!" I yelled.

Marty trailed after me. I heard the restraint in her voice as she tried to keep her tone even and calming. "It has nothing to do with it being scary, Wanda. It has to do with maybe ending up somewhere we can't get back from—which helps no one. We need

a plan. A better one than just rushing into the abyss of the unknown.”

I said something then, something borne out of fear and exhaustion and acute frustration. Something I regret deeply.

“As I live and breathe, I never thought I’d see the day when you both think we should wait to save a child! You’re both monsters!”

Nina was in front of me in a flash, her fangs elongated, her eyes afire. “Goddammit, Wanda, I’d punch you in your perfect face right now if I didn’t know you just said that because you’re tired and bitchy! You know me as well as anybody, and you fucking know there’s no way I’d ever let a kid suffer on purpose—and neither would Marty! What a shitty thing to say to us.”

But in the moment, I was so angry at what I perceived as their lack of bravery, I walked around Nina and made my way down the hall, head held high.

“Wanda!” Marty shouted, her voice bouncing off the lockers. All restraint gone. “Do not go to that supply closet or I’ll take you out myself!”

I stopped at the end of the hall and pivoted, my eyes narrowed so they’d know there was no doubt I was angry. “I’m going to use the ladies’ room, if you don’t mind. I mean, the kids can wait, right?”

“I’m gonna kill her, Marty!” Nina bellowed as I entered the girls’ bathroom, letting the door cut off Nina’s threats.

I gripped the sink’s edge, my head throbbing, my thoughts a swirling mess.

I shouldn’t have said that to Nina. I know how much she loves children, how she’d lay her own life down for one. I was cruel in my frustration and I won’t excuse it. I

owed her an apology.

I flipped on the tap to splash some cool water on my face and adjust my attitude when a text came in that made me smile. It was from Principal Mathers. Sam's test results had come in from the board of the council members here at the school, and as I read them, it was no surprise to me to learn he was in the top one percent of all paranormals tested.

He'd be so pleased, and I could really use the good news right now. I couldn't wait to get home and tell him. There'd be no living with him, but I wanted him to stay excited about learning and if giving him more challenging work was the key, I say unlock that door.

Washing my hands, letting the cool water cascade over my heated skin, I was taking some deep, cleansing breaths when my phone rang.

I smiled again because it was my husband, who always made me smile. I rushed to dry off and clicked the answer button.

"Hi, honey! How's your day going?"

Wanda! Listen closely to me," my handsome husband all but demanded, pausing then, which felt odd, as though he was trying to gather the nerve to tell me something...

At first, I thought it sounded like the time he called me when we were on an OOPS case and Olivia had used a sharpie to make her eyebrows look like Auntie Marty's.

But this pause felt bigger.

My vision narrowed to the green tiled wall above the hand towel dispenser.

Something was wrong. Something was horribly wrong. I knew Heath well enough to know as much by his tone. Also, he almost never called me Wanda unless he was proving a point or annoyed with me.

My mouth went dry. “What’s wrong, Heath?”

“Sammy’s missing!”

Remember when I said my heart chugs rather than speeds up when I’m upset or afraid? Not this time. This time, it raced like it was entering the Kentucky Derby.

“What?” I almost screamed.

But he didn’t have time to answer—because in that instant, I was no longer in the girls’ bathroom.

I was once again in the place Nina told me I couldn’t go because I might not ever come back—and it had nothing to do with the supply closet.

Shows you how much she knows.

Chapter Thirteen

Why does every place that's bad and scary have to be so ding-dang dark? It could be light and scary, too, right? Why does the big showdown always happen in the dark? Why not a lovely cottage by the sea?

My eyes popped open at that thought as I tried to adjust my sight to the darkness. My nostrils flared at the smell of the damp dankness of, well...of a basement.

Convinced that's where I was—in the school's basement, though how or why, I didn't know—I felt around the floor, my hands encountering patches of wetness. Feeling behind me, I found a wall. Shimmying upward, I stood, once more cursing my heels.

Straightening my spine, I inched along the wall, stopping every few seconds to listen—to absolutely nothing. There was no child calling me today.

As I crept, I forced myself to remain calm, trying to remember what happened before I ended up here—and then I froze.

Heath had called me. Sam! Someone had taken my sweet, gentle boy.

But why? Why would someone kidnap Sam?

And then, maybe because I was tired or maybe because I hadn't processed the information properly before I was swept here, I remembered.

Sam is a genius...

And when I found who had, I'd kill them. I'd pull a Nina and rip their intestines out through their belly buttons.

But first, I had to get out of here.

All right, Wanda, pull it together and get to thinking. How did you get to the basement in the first place? What was happening in the basement?

Tucking my purse over my shoulder, I pressed my brain to put the pieces together.

Obviously, this had something to do with Neerie, and maybe even the missing children. Three children were missing, and now my Sam.

I fought sobbing out loud at the idea my boy was out there somewhere, afraid. I refused to let that get in my head. Stay the course, Wanda. Think. Put this together.

The facts: Neerie is missing. Neerie talked about a basement in her text to Earl. She thought something was going on here at the school. She had a possibly genuine picture of an alien, taken here at the school.

School. School. School. Everything led to the school.

She'd searched online for the stories of the three children who were missing, along with some school supplies—each of them taken from a school for the gifted. Neerie found out what happened to the children and she was investigating.

Neerie also thinks the school is run by the Illuminati, Wanda.

Again, I remind you, Bigfoot is real.

Fair point. Score one for you.

The three children taken were a werewolf, a vampire and a witch—all geniuses.

One of the things the parents mentioned was the school supplies taken were things that interested the children. Like the anime coloring books Chester liked and the drawing paper.

And my Sam is a zombie ...and recently dubbed a genius . And one of the things missing from Sam's school were chemistry books...

I stopped inching along the wall and fought not to gasp, in case anyone was around. Fought to keep from punching my fist through the wall.

My child was here. I knew it.

But hold the phone and think. All three children were of a different species, Sam being the fourth. What did that mean in terms of the kidnappings?

Different species of geniuses...

Was this some kind of superfecta of genius paranormals?

My brain raced to figure out how to fit together aliens and kidnapped paranormal geniuses. What was I missing?

And how did I get here, anyway? It was obviously due to someone who was paranormal? Could an alien transport people from place to place?

I dug around in my bag for my phone but came up empty. I must have dropped it when I was brought here. As if the Internet was going to tell me what abilities aliens

had, anyway. It was all speculation. I mean, the Internet thinks vampires can't enter a house without being invited.

Tell that to Nina...

How could I possibly drum up a suspect who might be an alien? I hadn't seen any aliens as of late. Have you? Could aliens cloak themselves? Disguise themselves? Would we have been able to smell them, had we encountered any?

Was an alien responsible for this?

Stop. Stop speculating and get the heck out of here, Wanda Schwartz-Jefferson. Sam is missing. Nothing else matters. Find Sam.

I kept crawling along the wall, using my hands as an anchor to keep me grounded.

And then I heard it—a child's cry.

"Help me! Please hurry! Help me! Help us!"

Us? Help us . The missing children were here. I knew it.

"Where are you?" I called out, my mouth dry, my legs shaking. "Keep calling for me! I'm coming!"

"She's coming! I can hear her! She's coming!"

This couldn't be an illusion, could it? I didn't recognize the voice, couldn't parse whether it was a female or male voice, but I kept going, moving closer, inching agonizingly slowly along the wall.

Why couldn't I see anything? I was a werewolf, for pizza's sake! No manner of squinting helped my eyes to adjust. There was nothing but pitch black greeting them.

"Are you still there? My name is Wanda, who are you?"

"Help! Help! Help! It's coming!"

It? "What was it ? What's your name?"

I began to rush along the wall, my fingers digging into what felt like concrete, aching from trying to keep myself from panicking by clawing my way toward the voices.

That was when I smacked into something hard, cracking the side of my forehead, preventing me from moving forward.

If only I could see! That's when I remembered, I had a lighter in my purse. Nina calls it my Mary Poppins purse because I have everything but the kitchen sink inside.

I dug around and found it, yanking it out as though I'd just found the location of Noah's Ark. I keep one in my purse for various reasons—one being quite foolish.

I'd once seen a movie where a car crashed and the woman was stuck in her seat belt while a fire raged in the backseat. She managed to burn the seat belt and escape the car.

I don't remember the movie, nor do I even believe you could actually burn your way out of a seat belt, but some things stick with you, you know? So I always kept a lighter in my purse.

Okay?

I used my thumb, rolling it over the starter until it lit up like a Christmas tree.

Yahoo! Success!

I held it up, trying to figure out where I was and where to go next, when a tiny figure appeared out of nowhere.

Holding up the lighter, noting the wide space in front of me and all around, I cocked my head. I'd know those pointy ears anywhere.

"Mrs. Goodfellow?"

She smiled, sweet and warm. "Yes, dear. Of course, it's me." She held out her hand. "Come with me, and I'll show you the way out of here. It's so dark and dusty, eh?"

Aw, no...

C'mon! It was Mrs. Goodfellow snatching children? What a cruel twist of fate. I don't know why I asked something so silly, but ask I did. "What are you doing down here?"

She grinned, but there was something so cruel, almost evil about it, I hesitated taking her hand. "I'm here to help you, of course."

I continued to refuse her hand. "Help me what?"

I sniffed a change in her emotion. She was growing impatient, and I could smell it. Also, the lighter was getting hot and burning my finger.

"I don't need your help. I need you to explain yourself. What's going on?"

Her eyes narrowed the tiniest bit, but then she adjusted her gaze. “Come with me, and I’ll tell you everything, dear.”

As she spoke, I kept moving forward, and Mrs. Goodfellow kept moving back, giving me a much bigger picture of the landscape I was up against.

That’s when I saw them—far off in the distance of what I believed was the basement of the school.

Children. Four in a row. All on hospital beds in this cold, dank place. Nothing but concrete as far as the eye could see.

Then there was Neerie, tied to a chair...

And Mrs. Goodfellow, also tied to a chair.

I didn’t know exactly what was going on. I didn’t understand how Mrs. Goodfellow could be standing in front of me and at the same time tied to a chair. Obviously, it had to do with shapeshifting, but who was doing it, I had no clue.

And all I knew was, I had to get to those children.

Because one of those children was my son Sam.

Chapter Fourteen

I fought the urge to knock this fake Mrs. Goodfellow over and run to my baby—to all the children—but I needed to know what I was dealing with first. I had to know what kind of being I was up against in order to know how to fight it and bury it deep within the ground.

It had my child. It had to die.

Licking my dry lips, tamping down my absolute terror, I asked, “What are you. Who are you?”

Mrs. Goodfellow, or whoever this was melted before me, shedding her skin like a snake until her true form appeared.

So here’s the deal: I’m going to officially concur—aliens exist. And they can shapeshift.

Tall, lanky, gangly of leg and arm, bulbous eyeballs, enormous triangular head, green skin like that of some mint chocolate chip ice cream.

Yep. This was an alien, and Neerie had been right, and if we got out of this alive I was going to apologize to her for thinking her quite mad.

It chuckled then, a weird, almost electronic sound. “I know what you’re thinking, Mrs. Jefferson. As your friend Nina would say, holy shitballs, aliens are real. Am I right?”

I gulped. Nina would say that.

“What do you want? Why did you kidnap these children?” I demanded, as if I was some sort of authority figure it would bow down to. But Nina and Marty were always telling me I gave good stern nun. I was hoping it would work in my favor.

“You’ve been a busy little bee, haven’t you, Mrs. Jefferson? I’m surprised you didn’t figure it out. But it’s my understanding, you’re just getting your footing in the field of investigation,” it chirped, with a little too much glee for my taste.

Refusing to back down, I kept moving forward, pushing it back, getting closer to my son, who lay with eyes closed, pale green face curled into a pillow on a bed and hooked up to what looked like an IV.

What was this...this thing doing to my son? To all of these children?

Here’s the dilemma I’m currently having. How strong is this thing? Can I take it? Will I only end up making things worse if I rush it?

Talk. Do what you do best, Wanda, talk. Make nice.

I held up a hand, squaring my shoulders. “Can we pause here for a moment? Can you explain to me what’s happening? Why you’re doing this?”

It cocked its big head, its eyes assessing me from behind those orbs of black. “Of course. I’m not a heathen, Mrs. Jefferson. I am, after all, the more intelligent lifeform—or at least that’s what all you humans claim, isn’t it?”

“I’m not human...” I don’t know why I made that a big deal, but it was true.

It held up a long, skinny green finger. “Correct! You’re half werewolf, half vampire,

even if those numbers make no sense. You're actually a quarter vampire, a quarter werewolf and half human."

By golly, it was right. I don't know why we'd never noticed that egregious error. "You're right. That aside, why are you doing this? Why do you have these children? Why do you have my son?" I fought the growl in my voice when I mentioned Sam, even though I wanted to rip its throat out.

"Well, it's a simple explanation. These children, your son included, have a very important thing in their blood called seriguin. All paranormals have it. It's a waste product of their magic. It excretes when they urinate. Rather the way humans excrete things through their blood and their kidneys."

I looked up at this enormous being and decided ET had been a whole lot of bunk. "So you're draining them of their magic?" I should have paid better attention in science class. Curses!

"Sort of. I've been draining their blood. Not enough to kill them, of course—not yet, anyway—and collecting it before it can be excreted. I've been removing it, waiting for their bodies to make more, so I can repeat the cycle until I have enough."

"Enough to do what?" I squeaked, unable to keep the hysteria from my voice. "Why do you need their blood?"

Its head bobbed on its wide shoulders. "To make a group of superior beings, of course, Mrs. Jefferson. So I can take the blood back to where I'm from and use it to create super-assassins who aren't only double the strength and powers of my species, but smart as whips. Then we're going to come back here and wipe out Earth. Duh."

Was I hearing this right?

“Yes, you’re hearing that correctly, Mrs. Jefferson. We want to kill all humans and take over planet Earth,” he said so calmly, I almost stopped breathing.

And it read minds. Perfect .

It nodded. “It comes in handy, for certain. I’m male, by the way. My name isn’t something you can pronounce, but you can call me Groot. You know that tree in the movie Guardians of the Galaxy ? It cracked me up. You guys really know how to make a good story. Though, I didn’t love ET . He was a bit of a wimp.”

My head swirled as I tried to keep one eye on Sam and the children and one on this—this being. “So, um...Groot. You kidnapped all those children by pretending to be school staff, didn’t you?”

He shrugged almost coyly. “Yeah. Yeah, I did. That part was easy-peasy, as you Earth people say. I morphed into them, hid my scent, coaxed the children to me, transported them here where I’d decided to set up my lab, for obvious reasons. But I did put back the people I used. Good as new. Honest. I can morph into almost anyone or anything. Wanna see?”

“No!” I shouted, then bit my lip. “No, thank you. I want you to finish your story, seeing as you’re such a fan of them. So, Neerie caught you, didn’t she? She took your picture, and she figured out you were the one behind the stolen school supplies?”

“Yeaah,” Groot drawled, crossing his gangly arms over his thin chest. “She did. She’s not as crazy as everyone thinks, you know. I agree, she’s insufferably bossy, but she caught me one night while I was shedding Mrs. Goodfellow’s skin to take a breather. I almost caught her. Little did I know, she could fly. How did I miss the fact that a fairy can fly, for Mars’ sake? It’s the one thing we haven’t been able to perfect—aside from our ships, that is.”

“So you caught up with her when she met with her Facebook group and snatched her from the woods?”

He shot a finger up in the air. “Bingo!” he cried cheerfully. “But that one gentleman had a dog with him on their hunt for Bigfoot—as if he really exists—and he could smell me. Darnedest thing. Anyway, I grabbed her and brought her back here. I’m sure all the PTA moms would thank me if they could. She is rather dreadful.”

I burst out laughing. To think an alien doubted the existence of Bigfoot. Hah!

Groot cocked his head. “What’s so funny, Mrs. Jefferson?”

Shaking my head, I held up a hand. I think I was growing slaphappy from my lack of sleep and all these outlandish events. “Nothing. Nothing at all. Let’s get back to the problem at hand. I have more questions.”

“Of course. I’m happy to answer. Do go on.” He rolled his oddly shaped hand to indicate I should continue.

“You do realize you forgot her phone, right? She must have dropped it when you snatched her. We saw your picture.”

He shrugged his shoulders again. “So? Big deal. As if anyone was going to believe her alien theories any more than they did her conspiracy theory about poor Paul McCartney. To taint that man’s life with such a heinous rumor is unthinkable. I cherish my Abbey Road album. Besides, even you and your cohorts thought it was nuts.”

A fair statement if I ever heard one. If I made it out of this, my apology tour was going to be a long one.

“Why did you steal all those school supplies? The coloring books? The chemistry books, which I’m assuming are for my son, Sam?”

Groot tsked. “I needed to keep things tidy, of course, cleaning items were essential. Also, I wanted the children to have things they enjoyed when they were awake. What do you think I am, Mrs. Jefferson? Some kind of unfeeling animal?”

I was running out of questions. I had to do something. Anything. But what? This thing could snatch people up out of thin air.

“May I see my son? The children?”

Groot sighed. “I’m not sure if that’s a good idea. You have a soft heart, Mrs. Jefferson. Seeing them hooked up to all the machinery will only upset you.”

I looked over his enormous shoulder at the children, lying helpless in the beds, and strengthened my resolve. “Please,” I begged. “You’re going to kill us all anyway. What will it hurt to let me see my son?”

His sigh was one of impatience. “Oh, fine. My colleagues would laugh at me for being such a bleeding heart, but I’m almost done here. Sam finished the superfecta for me. Each of the children offer a facet of magic due to their species. All different, but combined, powerful. Little Sam gives me the last quality of magic I’ll need before taking what I’ve gathered and leaving this hellscape.” He motioned with his arm. “Go on, then. He won’t be awake, but you can do whatever you Earth people do when your time here is done.”

I let out a small sigh of relief, inching past him to run to Sam.

Do not cry, Wanda. Do not. While you gather up your child, figure out how to get everyone out of here. No tears.

But it wasn't easy, when my baby came into full view. He was hooked up to a machine cycling his blood, draining him of the magic he excretes. Helpless to do anything.

With a quick glimpse around, I took note of all the machines whizzing and whirring, quietly buzzing. The harsh lighting overhead, the scent of fear and desperation emanating from the children, even though they were asleep.

There was a standing fan, to keep the area cool and dry, I suspected; it was terribly damp down here. It blew softly next to the stack of coloring books and bottles of bleach and cans of oxygen.

I gathered my baby up in my arms and held on for dear life, rocking him, my eyes filling with tears. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw petite Neerie tied to her chair, unconscious, just as helpless as Mrs. Goodfellow, her pointy ears sagging downward. I battled my helplessness.

How would I get all of us out of here?

"It's okay, Sammy. Mommy's here," I whispered, gazing at the other children. Tina Madry, Chester Godfrey, Lori Caulfield, all in the same state as my son, and it infuriated me so, my limbs shook.

As I clung to him, as I rocked him, buried my face in his shoulder, something hit me out of the blue.

Movies and my lighter.

I know that sounds like a ridiculous combination, but the movie *Alien* sprang to mind.

Sure, it was probably a completely inopportune time to recall this, but didn't Sigourney Weaver kill an alien with fire? Didn't she throw herself into a furnace or something? The ending of the movie is fuzzy. I think I fell asleep. Sci-fi isn't my cuppa, but Heath loves it, and could it hurt to try?

But a lighter wasn't going to cut it. I needed a flamethrower.

I kept speaking to Sam, thinking about my husband and Olivia, while my fingers reached into my Mary Poppins purse and felt around for a can of hair spray.

Marty and I? We were old school. We still loved our Aqua Net and we always had some handy. In our purses, our bathrooms, even in a kitchen drawer—because a girl always wants to be at her best.

I can't tell you the relief I experienced when my hand touched that can of hair spray. Laying Sam back down as gently as I could, I pressed a kiss to his brow and whispered, "Wish Mommy luck, sweet boy. I love you more than the entire world times infinity."

Sam stirred then. Gripping my arm, he whispered back, "I love you...too, Mommy," before he drifted back into an unconscious state.

And my heart shattered. My stomach rolled and rumbled. Tears stung my eyes.

I wasn't going to let this thing take this boy away from me. Not without a helluva fight.

Gritting my teeth, I searched for strength while I kicked off my shoes—because heels and a fight to the death aren't always compatible. "So, what's next, Groot? How are you going to end it all?" I asked, as he stooped to check the dial on a machine, the likes of which I'd never seen.

“Well, I didn’t plan on so many deaths before I left Earth, but I have a sedative that will end all your troubles. Rather a humane euthanasia, if you will. Promise you won’t feel a thing.”

My trembling hands clung to the hair spray and lighter as I crept toward him with silent steps, my nylons catching the concrete as I went. I only needed him to turn around. “You know, I just want to mention, you’re the nicest bad guy I’ve ever encountered, and believe me when I say I’ve encountered many.”

He didn’t turn around though. Instead, he busied himself reading a printout. “That’s so kind of you to say. I’m not here to terrorize you, Mrs. Jefferson. Not at all. I simply want what I need to end all of mankind. It’s not a big deal,” he said—and finally turned around.

In that second, I hit the actuator of my can of Aqua Net and lit that lighter for all I was worth.

Except, my lighter didn’t light. The dull clicking sound of the wheel that sparks the flame was a dud.

Gulp.

Groot came at me, fast and furious. “Oh, Mrs. Jefferson, how could you? I was just beginning to like you. What a pity.”

He gathered me up so fast, my eyeballs jiggled in my head, giving me a good shake. His hands, though lean with slender fingers, were like vise grips, their cool clamminess digging into my flesh. “And after I let you say goodbye to your son. I’m so disappointed.”

Imagine my disappointment that my Bic didn’t flick. I struggled against his grip, my

feet dangling off the floor, my breathing a hard-won fight. He glared at me, his blacker-than-black eyeballs pinning me to the wall he held me against.

I was about to shift to were form when I sensed movement over Groot's shoulder.

“Wanda!” I heard Nina bellow.

Dear God, I loved my BFF.

Nina's voice caught Groot off guard and gave me the chance to take a second shot.

Lifting my arm—an arm that felt as if it were made of lead—I hit the actuator again, flicking the Bic in front of the stream of hair spray until it raged in flame.

Right in his big ugly face.

Groot dropped me hard, letting me crash to the ground, and my ankle twisted as my foot cracked against the basement floor.

“Wanda! Look out!” Marty screamed, the scuffle of her boots clacking wildly as she raced toward us.

Groot wasn't an easy kill. With his face on fire, even as he began to melt into green slime, he came at me again, hauling me upward and slamming me back to the ground. The hair spray and lighter flew to the floor, swishing away from me.

I scrambled to get away, but he grabbed my ankles and dragged me back toward him, scraping the flesh of my cheek against the concrete floor.

That was when I realized it was going to take a whole lot more than a Bic lighter and some hair spray to end this. “Forget me! Get the children! Get Sam!” I yelled to Nina

and Marty, as Groot hauled me up against him, my head only reaching his waist, the feel of his eerily cool, slick skin against mine making me gag.

But Nina didn't work that way. It was always all or nothing with her. I heard her call to Marty, "Catch!" Right before she hollered, "Hey, you piece of shit! Over here!"

I heard Marty grunt, then screech, "Wanda, duck!"

I fought to get away from this thing that had the strength of a thousand men, scratching and clawing as pieces of my clothing began to catch fire from the embers until I broke free and lunged for the far wall of the basement.

Groot screamed, a long, wailing sound that nearly blew my eardrums out as I scrambled to do as Nina instructed, tucking my head to my chest and curling into a ball when I felt hot flames lick at my heels.

When I poked my head up, I saw Marty pop the lid on a tank. Then the can of oxygen arced across the room, Marty launching it at the alien like an NFL quarterback.

It exploded in red-hot flames when it hit his burning head, and Groot collapsed on the floor.

The flames engulfed his body while he screamed in agony, twisting and writhing until he was nothing but a melted green blob, wisps of green smoke swirling above him.

I fell back on my elbows, my throat sore from being manhandled, my ankle throbbing after taking the hit to the floor, and sucked air into my lungs. The acrid stench of burning alien clung to my nose, making me gag.

Why hadn't I thought of the oxygen tanks? A question for the ages.

Marty flew to my side, pulling me to her, the comforting smell of her perfume wafting to my nose. “Oh, Wanda, we were so worried! Are you okay?”

I struggled to sit all the way up. “How did you find me?”

She chuckled, hugging me to her, swatting at the embers from the fire. “Remember that door to Narnia?”

I coughed, my lungs tight. “Please don’t tell me that’s real, too. Aliens, Bigfoot, what’s next? Elvis at the outlet mall, singing for his supper?”

“Well, it’s not real, but the concept is similar. I guess this...alien, is it? Made a secret passage in the supply closet. So when you were looking at the supplies, you must have moved a jug of ammonia. That’s what opened the door down here. To the basement of the school.”

“You mean, you guys went to the supply closet and risked never getting back to the school for me? My flabbers are all gasted.”

“Shut the fuck up, Wanda, and c’mere, you sassy bitch. Leave it to you to find the biggest motherfucker to ever walk planet Earth. You scared the shit out of us,” she complained, as she pulled me into her embrace, tamping out patches of my clothes with her bare hands. “I hate when you do that.”

I hugged her back. “I’m sorry about what I said to you. I didn’t mean it, I swear. I was just frustrated and worried. I love you. I love you both.”

She tightened her hug while Marty threw her arms around us. “I know that, dipshit. Forget it ever happened.”

Over her shoulder, I spied Sam and the other children. “Sam! We have to unhook him

from that machine now !”

I unfurled my aching body from Nina’s clutches and hobbled to my son, gathering him in my arms to hold him close while Nina and Marty removed the needle in his arm, then went to tend to the other children.

Neerie began to stir, her eyes slowly prying themselves open. “Wanda?” she whispered weakly. “How did you get here?”

I wasn’t sure whether to laugh or cry. “I don’t know exactly, but let me be the first to tell you, I’m sorry for not believing in your conspiracy theories and thinking you weren’t all there.”

“Alternative thinker,” she whispered hoarsely, fighting to keep her eyes open. “I prefer alternative thinker.”

Throwing my head back, I laughed as Nina untied her. “Oh, Neerie, if you only knew how not so alternative you are.” I hiked Sam against my chest and held out my hand to her. “Now, let’s get you back to Tamlin.”

Marty ran her hand over Sam’s head with a gentle smile, and Nina dropped a kiss on his cheek.

“My big boy, Sammie. Auntie Nina loves you so much,” she whispered hoarsely in his ear. “I’ll make sure you forget all of this. Promise.”

“Wait here,” Marty instructed. “We know the way out. Let us take Neerie and Mrs. Goodfellow. We’ll come back for you.”

Marty and Nina took the children first, still completely out of it, and whisked them out of the basement, returning to help a very weak Neerie and Mrs. Goodfellow.

When they came to get me, Nina asked, “You want me to carry him?”

I shook my head and hugged Sam closer, burying my nose in his hair. “I’m never letting this boy go—not ever again.”

While we walked toward this secret passage, Marty mused out loud, “Hey, Wanda? Do you remember when Nina made fun of us for having Aqua Net in our purses?”

I chuckled, wincing at the small stab of pain in my ribs. “Why, yes, Marty. I do. Didn’t she call us vain girly-girls?”

Nina knocked shoulders with me. “Fine. Gen X to the rescue, but holy shit, Batman, the big news? Aliens are real. You kicked an alien’s ass.”

“ We kicked an alien’s ass,” I reminded her, my legs already tired and my ankle aching from the walk down the long hallway.

“A fucking alien!” Nina repeated, wonder and awe in her voice. “How’d you know fire would kill him?”

“Are you ready for this? Alien . I saw it in the movie Alien . Part three, I think. I didn’t know if it would work, but I guess I got lucky.”

“Huh,” Nina said on a chuckle. “Sigourney Weaver and a can of Aqua Net saved the day. Who fucking knew?”

Marty stopped walking for a moment. “You know, if Bigfoot is real, and aliens are real, does that mean Santa Claus is real, too? Because I have some pressing questions about a Barbie Dream House and a Crissy doll I never received for Christmas, thank you very much.”

I tapped her arm, grinning. “Do you mean the Crissy doll that grew hair? Ooooh, I wanted one of those, too!”

Marty nodded with a fond smile. “Uh-huh. Remember, you pulled her hair out of the top of her head?”

“I do!” I squealed.

Nina grunted at us. “Barbie? How unsurprising and predictable.”

“Oh, shut up, Nina,” Marty chirped. “Not everyone wanted GI Joe with the kung fu grip.”

“Hah! Shows what the fuck you know. It was Stretch Armstrong for me. You could stretch that motherfluffer almost five damn feet.”

We both stopped and stared at her for a moment, aghast, before Marty innocently asked, “But here’s the most important question of all—could you braid Stretch’s hair?”

And much laughter was heard.

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Source Creation Date: July 21, 2025, 10:47 am

One month later...

Hank sat ever so patiently as Olivia and Charlie braided his long hair, laughing and smiling while their small fingers worked through his thick mane.

“You’re a good sport, dude,” Nina said, slapping him on the back.

Hank’s eyes twinkled—now that we could see them, that is. His warm personality and gentle nature had won us all over.

Yes. We’d done as promised. We invited Hank to have dinner with us and meet the children, and he was everything we’d hoped for.

He’d shown up at Nina’s castle, handpicked flowers in hand, smelling like he’d been dipped in sunshine and rose petals. His chocolate brown hair was fluffy and full, shining beneath the murder basements lights like he’d come directly from a Pantene commercial shoot.

He barely fit through the doorway, but we’d managed to squeeze him in, and now he was playing with the children, proving he was indeed a good sport, judging by the number of multicolored ribbons he had in his hair.

Hank turned out to be a true delight, a conversationalist extraordinaire and incredibly smart.

Arch had prepared a meal to feed a kingdom in preparation for Hank’s visit. Prime rib roast and roasted pork with sauerkraut, honey ham, au gratin potatoes, noodle

casserole, peas and carrots...and Hank had eaten all of it quite gratefully. He claimed he'd never eaten much else but the berries and herbs he found in the woods.

Arch couldn't bear to hear of the culinary delights Hank had been denied, so he promised to whip up a few batches of food he could take with him until the next time he came for dinner.

Now, as we digested the fabulous meal and gathered in small groups, I smiled, watching my Sam and his father, along with Uncle Keegan, Darnell, Carl and Uncle Greg, play a game of chess.

My heart constricted, a sharp tug at all that could have been lost, but we'd somehow managed to save.

"What'cha thinkin' about?" Nina asked me as I sipped my tea in the murder basement's waiting room.

I patted the place beside me on the settee she hated so much. "I was thinking how grateful I am to have everyone here together, and to add a new member to the family. And that Bigfoot is real and playing dress-up with our girls."

Nina laughed, wrapping her arm around my shoulders, settling next to me. "He damn well is." She paused a moment, watching the men and Sam play, then she asked, "Have you heard how Wings is doing? Mrs. Goodfellow?"

Mrs. Goodfellow, being the cheerful sprite she was, had bounced right back, vowing to continue to move forward.

Neerie agreed to seek help for her obsession with conspiracies, even though she'd been right about aliens. Apparently, it had been one of the causes of her divorce from Thad, and now that she was talking to a licensed therapist, she realized it was one thing to chase a theory, entirely another to immerse yourself in them and work your

whole life around investigating them.

She'd given up her position in the PTA, offering it to me, but when I thought about how I wanted to spend my time, it was with my family and friends. Not organizing bake sales. So I'd turned her down. Neerie, in turn, passed it on to, of all people, Solange—who she'd profusely apologized to for her poor behavior.

She'd also thanked me, thanked us , for finding her, for returning her safely to her family, and for figuring out what she meant by "it's in the basement."

When we asked her who she'd been talking to on the phone at Susie's, she said it was another paranormal conspiracy theory buddy—someone she thought she could trust with what she believed was happening at the school.

But this friend called her crazy when she brought up aliens, so she deleted him from her phone. Which explains why there were no outgoing or incoming calls for Tottington to track.

Neerie also hadn't meant to text Earl, just as Melba said. Neerie meant to text Thad, but she never got to finish the text to explain there had once been a basement at the school, before she was kidnapped by the alien.

"She's doing pretty good. She and Thad are going to try to work things out, and that makes me so happy for little Tamlin."

"Me, too, Alien-ator. Me, too."

I giggled. They'd been teasing me about using what I'd seen in Alien to get away from Groot, and it was all in fun, but sometimes when I closed my eyes at night, I still saw him, looming over me, his bulbous eyes watching me...and it left me afraid. I'd tuck myself into Heath, and he'd hold me close to keep my terror at bay, but it still left me worried that I hadn't done enough.

Groot said he'd come to gather paranormal strength to make a race of super-soldiers, so he could take over Earth. Were there more like him?

Were they here now? Would they come back and try again?

I'd been so terrified, I never asked the questions I should have, maybe sought some information about where he came from, if anyone else was involved in this coup, several months in the making, but I certainly had called for a meeting with the council to make them aware of what I'd learned, and of course, my deep fear they'd come back and try again.

Marty plopped down on Nina's lap and gave me a hard hug before brushing my hair from my face. "I know that faraway look, Wanda. I know what you're thinking about. Stop. You can't predict the future. You can't play what-if here. Council and clan members alike are aware now. That's all we can do. Besides, I have some good news that might cheer you up."

I dabbed a thumb under my eye to keep from allowing my tears to escape. "What's that?"

"I spoke to the parents of the children Groot kidnapped, and they don't remember a thing. They're all feeling fine and getting right back on the horse as if they never fell off. The day will come when their parents will share what happened, under the supervision of trained counselors, on the off-chance memories resurface, but for now they're healthy and happy. You did that, ma'am. You ."

I rolled my eyes when I looked into hers. "I didn't do that. He kidnapped me and transported me to the basement. I happened upon the children, Neerie, and Mrs. Goodfellow."

"And then you tanked an alien, Wanda. You saved those kids. Don't downplay what you fucking did. Those kids are going to live long, healthy lives because you're no

fucking pansy. And if you pooh-pooh us again, I'm gonna knock your head off."

I looked down at my hands, folded in my lap, and nodded. Then I remembered something pretty great. "Hey, Thad sent us a donation for our help. It's a generous amount. Very generous. I think we should give it to the local animal shelter. What say you both?"

Marty clapped her hands and hopped off Nina's lap. "Kibble for all!" she called, dancing toward Hank and the girls, who were playing Ring Around the Rosie.

The innocence of it all made my chest tighten.

Nina pulled me to her, resting her cheek on the top of my head. "You gonna sit around and wallow and miss the chance to play Ring Around the Rosie with fucking Bigfoot? I mean, Bigfoot, Wanda. Like a real Sasquatch. A yeti. Or are you gonna get off your ass and spend some time with us and the kids? Maybe laugh a little?"

Nina was right. So was Marty. I couldn't predict what was going to happen—if the future held more aliens like Groot. But I could change how I spent my time—with my family, with my best friends.

With Bigfoot.

Big-foot.

I chuckled and let Nina pull me toward the people who were most important in my life, joining the circle they'd made with Hank, laughing and—most importantly—living.

Living in the here and now.

And cherishing every moment.

Cherishing. Such a lovely, perfect word, don't you agree?

The End

Thank you for joining myself and the girls for their new adventure. I hope you enjoyed this, and that you had fun taking a peek into their personal lives, meeting their children, as much as I did writing it. And I really hope you'll come back for more Accidental Detectives, coming soon!