



The Accidental Detectives (An Accidental Detective Mystery #1)

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Category: Suspense Thriller

Description: Welcome to my worst effin' nightmare—The Accidental Detective Agency...

I'm Nina Statleon, a vampire (with a little bit of witch thrown in for good measure—a sucky, magic less one, if anyone asks), for those interested. My best friends, Marty, a werewolf and and Wanda, a halvesie, have talked me into opening a detective agency for paranormals.

Let me be real clear, I do not want to be a detective and I think this idea is bananapants. Now the dungeon in my castle in Long Island is our new office, I call the murder basement, filled with watercolor landscapes, throw rugs and uncomfortable furniture—all in the name of making our clients comfortable.

That said, my partners in this new adventure don't care about all my protests. That's how we end up with our first client, Brenda Bronkowski, an older vampire the human police are hunting down for murder...

Brenda fell for one of the oldest tricks in this new age of technology's book—a romance scam. Lonely and sad with only her pets for companionship, Brenda hooked up—with a human—a much younger one. You guessed it, Brenda was catfished.

Now that much younger human, Owen Barker, is dead, leaving behind a wife and two kids. Brenda swears she's never even met him, let alone murdered him and she's come to us for help finding the person responsible for his murder.

Not only is the suspect list low (like, we only have two), there's a glitch, and it's a big one.

The clan.

They don't like it when a vampire's been accused of murdering a human. They take you out, ask questions later. Brenda's technically a fugitive we're harboring while we investigate. It's bad enough the

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How it all began

Sitting up straight when my phone chimed a call, I scooped it up with a groan, still a little grumpy from our latest investigation. “Accidental Detective Agency. This is Nina Statleon. You buy we investigate how they died.”

Marty, one of my partners in our new side hustle into criminal investigations hissed her disapproval, “Nina! You can’t answer the phone like that. You’ll scare off any potential new clients. We’ve talked about this. Tone it down, Vampire.”

Wanda, my other partner frowned, too, clamping her fingers together to signify I should shut it down. “That’s no better than ‘Someone dies we fly,’ and you know it. Behave yourself.”

Man, I really thought I’d toned that tagline down enough for even the most sensitive of sensitive. I thought it was a shitload softer than, “If you got the bread, we’ll investigate why they’re dead.”

There was no pleasing some people, I guess.

Smiling, I noted who was calling. “As I live and breathe. It’s my favorite fairy, Primrose Dunham. Hang on and lemme put ya on speaker.” I set the phone on my desk with a chuckle.

“You don’t breathe, vampire,” Primrose teased.

Primrose had once been a client of ours not long ago. A human turned fairy. That had

been a trippy-trip of wings and sparkly dust, but she was good people.

“Heyyy, Prim!” Marty called with a warm smile. “How are you and Raff?”

The cellphone crackled a moment before she responded. “We’re good, Marty. Sorry it’s been a minute, but it’s been busy. How are you guys?”

“We’re good. Just off a case and catching our breath,” Wanda said. “It’s so great to hear your voice, honey! What’s up?”

Nina heard the smile in Prim’s voice. “Couple of things, but first, I hear you guys opened a detective agency? Everyone’s talking about it! Bet Ms. Vampire’s thrilled. So tell me all about how much you hate it,” she said, laughter in her voice.

I made a face at my two friends. “You wanna hear how much I hate that they’ve turned the dungeon in the castle into a damn showplace with bookshelves from floor to ceiling, landscape paintings that look like a five-year-old painted ’em with watercolors?—”

“They most certainly do not, Prim!” Marty protested. “They’re beautifully done copies of Monet; I’ll have you know and they’re gorgeous.”

I nodded like Prim could see me. “Yep. That’s the bullshit they fed me when they were ditching all my velvet Elvis paintings. Know what else we have? A reception desk, complete with a receptionist and throw rugs everywhere. What kind of dungeon has throw rugs? Oh, and a settee in peacock blue Marty couldn’t stand to pass up from Wayfair with scrolly arms that’s as damn uncomfortable as parking your ass on a bed of rocks.”

“Oh, Nina, it is not and they’re all things that make a space where people are coming to ask us to investigate murders comfortable and welcoming,” Wanda reminded.

Prim's laughter echoed through the phone. "I know you don't like change, Vampire, but I bet it's beautiful."

"If you can call a murder basement beautiful, then sure. It's fucking grand."

Prim laughed again. "Is that what you're calling it? A murder basement? I can't wait to see it. Anyway, I called because when I heard about this new gig you guys have from the Paranormal and More Newsletter, I had to hear the deets. I mean, a detective agency, guys? Don't you have enough on your plates? You had to add investigating murders, too?"

Popping my lips, I nodded my head. "That's what I said, but you know what these two are like when they get an idea. They run hog wild and a freight train couldn't stop them."

"So have you investigated any murders yet?"

Leaning back in my office chair, I snorted. "Oh, yeah. We sure as fuck have."

"Oh!" she cried, the excitement in her voice clear. "Tell me all about it—tell me everything. I'm dying to hear how that went."

Cracking my knuckles, I stretched with a smirk. "Lemme tell you all about our first case. Her name was Brenda Bronkowski. Holy pissed-off clan breathing down our necks..."

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Chapter

One

I do not want to be a detective. Do not want.

“ I f I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times, get that damn thing out of my sight, Bertrand ,” I snapped at the pimply kid shoving his camera at me—the one he appeared to have permanently attached to his nerdy face.

The annoying-AF kid in question is the offspring of one of Marty’s pack members.

Marty’s one of my BFFs.

Marty Flaherty: resident werewolf. Fashion enslaved. All things feminine and lip-glossed. Heart of gold. Mother of Hollis and an aging poodle named Muffin. Both of whom I love the crap out of.

Loves shopping at discount outlet malls. Loves dragging me with her when she goes. Owner of a globally successful cosmetics company called Bobbie-Sue Cosmetics. Married to a pack Alpha named Keegan, who also owns a cosmetics company called Pack (get it? Werewolf—pack? Hah!).

Her friend’s annoying kid, Bertrand, has been following us around like a hemorrhoid no amount of Preparation H can cure, filming us for some project in his cinematography class he feckin’ dubbed a Dracumentary .

You know, a Dracula/documentary mashup because I'm a vampire? Funny, right?

When Bertrand approached her about this, she thought it would be fun to have him make a documentary about our newest venture. A detective agency for paranormals.

"Nina!" Marty chastised me from her fancy office chair, shaking her red-tipped finger at me. "Don't be rude to Bertrand. You knew he was going to be here to film our new detective venture for a school project. You agreed to help the youth of America. Now be nice and cooperate, vampire."

No lies detected. I did agree to let the little Hitchcock in the making film us when we started this kooky detective agency. I agreed because Marty made me agree. She makes me do a lot of crap I don't want to do and it's always in the name of "friendship."

Bertrand moved the camera away momentarily to give me a smug, "Haha! Auntie Marty sure told you, didn't she?" look.

In return, I flashed my fangs at him with my perfected, "I'll eat your face off" glare.

Bertrand blanched, visibly cringing, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down along his scrawny neck. Then he eyed me like he was getting ready to push his luck. A big mistake where I'm concerned.

"If you would just wear the mask, Miss Nina, that would really help."

He licked his lips after he spoke, rocking back and forth on his sneakered feet, his expression cautious.

He's been the recipient of my unfiltered opinion.

In essence, Bertrand expects me to blow a gasket—which is why I won't. Oh, and also because Marty and my other BFF, Wanda, asked me not to choose violence and intimidation as a way to solve a problem. I'm only supposed to use that for the bad guys.

Anyway, next up? My other BFF. Wanda Schwartz-Jefferson: Half vampire, half-werewolf, all grace and refined elegance. She's often compared to the sophistication of Princess Grace of Monaco. Loves to shop as much as Marty. Loves to remind me we're a team, and if outlet malls are part of being a team, I'd just have to suck it and learn to tolerate shopping.

Peacemaker and referee between me and Marty. Consummate mother, wife, heart as big as a country and gentle in nature until pushed. Married to Heath, with two kids I also love like my own.

Who am I kidding? I love all the damn kids, and animals, and the elderly—until they get to a certain age. Kids, I mean. Not animals and the elderly.

Wanda gave me the old eyeball of death from across our desks—situated in a circle so we could all see each other as we worked—reminding me I'd made a promise not to upset Bertrand.

It was her mom look. You know, the one your mom used to give you when she knew you were about to act up? That one. If she could bottle it, she'd be even richer than she already was.

Popping my lips, I narrowed my eyes in Bertrand's direction, making his acne-riddled face and horn-rimmed glasses a tiny pinpoint in my vision. I held up the Michael Meyers mask he'd given me between two fingers, letting it dangle.

“You knew when you asked us to do this Dracumentary that you wouldn't be able to

see me on camera, Bertrand. I'm a GD vampire. I'm not wearin' a mask like some goon at a Halloween party just so I'll show up on film. You'll just have to use your movie magic and put a big smiley emoticon where my face should be. Be creative. My line's drawn. Live with it. Now go the hell away."

Bertrand backed away, probably in fear, and I was okay with that. It helped keep people at a distance when they were afraid.

Some call me intimidating, I call me dipshit proof.

I turned back to Marty, who wore a dumbass hat.

"Why are you wearing that?"

She smiled at me and tapped her head. "It's giving Sherlock Holmes, don't you think? I'm dressing the part of detective, silly. You know, to get into character?"

I barked a laugh. "It's giving 'this is whacked,' Marty. Why the fu?—"

"Stop! Stop now!" she yelled, cutting me off while waving her slender finger around. "You promised you'd try and curb your swearing so we don't scare off potential clients, Nina Statleon. No one wants to hire an irate vampire with the mouth of a sailor on weekend leave. We're helpers. Remember what Mr. Rogers said? Look for the helpers. Helpers don't cuss a blue streak. They help."

I made a face at her. "I'm betting my fangs even Mr. Rogers would cuss with you two knuckleheads for friends. You'd test the patience of Jesus himself. But okay. Let's play by your stupid rules. Not swearing doesn't change the fact that this is the single-most whacked effin' thing you've cooked up to date. Except for the other most-whacked thing you effin' cooked up in that scary little brain encased in your pretty blonde head."

My BFF forever—and I do mean forever because we’re immortal, which means I’m saddled with these yokels for eternity—made a return face at me, and then she gave me the middle finger.

She pushed her long, artfully dyed hair over her shoulder, letting the beachy waves (that’s what she calls them. I don’t know thing one about hair that has a beach in it) fall down her back and rolled her eyes.

Pulling herself closer to her desk, she showed me her computer screen with her inbox, chock full of unopened emails from other paranormals who needed investigative help.

“Look at all these messages. This is not whacked, Nina. This is the natural progression of where OOPS was headed anyway, Mistress of the Dark. I mean, when we aid someone who’s been accidentally turned, and they need our help to find out who turned them, it’s essentially a mystery, right?”

To be fair—because I don’t have a choice, and my two friends force me to be fair—we have successfully helped many humans who’ve accidentally been turned into one paranormal thing or another.

That’s what Marty means by OOPS, by the way. We also run something called Out in the Open Paranormal Support. We started it because do-gooder Marty figured there were more people like us who’d had accidental run-ins with a paranormal.

Humans who’d been accidentally turned into all manner of supernatural things you wouldn’t believe if I showed you in pictures and a damn power point presentation. We’re three examples. I was turned when my now-husband came to have his teeth cleaned where I worked as a hygienist. As the laughing gas took over, and he relaxed, he clamped down on my hand.

Voila. Insta-vampire.

Anyway, Marty got the brilliant idea for OOPS years ago after a pint of H?agen-Dazs and who knows how many bottles of wine while she was painting her toenails or something that had to do with being a girl.

I think by now you can tell, Marty's very girly. Makeup, hair, shoes, clothes. That's how we met. Because I was desperate for extra cash and she sold Bobbie-Sue Cosmetics door to door— before she owned it, that is. Long story, but it's why I, the fucking anti-girl, ended up being BFFs with her.

I could give a pickled shit if my shoes match my outfit, let alone a purse. I don't even carry a purse. I don't care about hair or makeup. And shopping with her? Christ on a crutch, it's like death by a million papercuts.

But Marty the Werewolf's such a good saleswoman. Remember I said she now owns Bobbie-Sue? She wasn't always the owner of the company. She was a door-to-door saleswoman at first.

I was desperate for cash when I answered her ad in a paper almost sixteen years ago, she talked my ass right into the whole kit and caboodle and had me going to cult-like Bobbie-Sue Cosmetic meetings before I knew what the hell the difference was between lip gloss and lip stain.

And there is a difference, in case any novices are in the house.

We've long since left behind the door-to-door sales malarkey. We got married, had kids, and solved what feels like a million paranormal accidents with our group OOPS since we met way back in 2008.

Anyway, she's right. There's almost always a mystery surrounding who turned an unsuspecting human into a paranormal, and some bad guy who wants to hurt the newb paranormal.

When we take a case, we spend however many days, sometimes weeks with the unsuspecting human, teaching them how to live in a paranormal world while we figure out who the hell did 'em dirty so we can string 'em up by their clangers.

That's my favorite part, because in our unlikely trio, I'm the one who chooses violence to root out the bad guy.

My two cohorts, however? They like to make everyone cookies and warm milk and coddle them while holding their hands and braiding each other's hair.

So fine. Marty's right. This bullshit detective nonsense was a natural progression, but—and that's a big-ass but—I never wanted to be a part of OOPS any more than I now want to be a part of this nutball detective agency.

I definitely didn't want to turn my castle dungeon into what we're now calling the murder basement.

But Wanda, our trio's hand-holder and resident sensitivity checker, gave me the speech about how we're a package deal, and we do everything together, blah, blah, blah.

In other words, she plays on my sympathies and always wins.

But that's not what hooked me when Marty suggested we start up this fucknut idea.

It was the part about catching a murderer and actually being able to choose violence without these two Karens (sorry, all you Karens. You're aces unless you're asking for the manager because your bread wasn't soft enough) breathing down my neck with their morals.

I don't hate a good smackdown, and I'm not ashamed to admit that. I'm the muscle.

The one who's the first to put up her fists and pop anyone suss in the face, asking questions later.

Okay, there's also the fact that I love them, and they're as much family as blood, and if some shit went down and they got hurt, or worse, dead (which can happen, even if you're immortal), I'd never forgive myself for not being there to protect them.

I'm not a hugger or into sappy sentimental words, but I am loyal AF. It's how I show I care. Mess with one of my own and I'm gonna eat your face off, right down to the bone.

So, that brings us here, in my castle's basement (yes, I own a castle. Don't all vampires have castles?) turned "detective agency," with a wannabe filmmaker, and my favorite standoffish, stiff-necked British dude named Tottington, who needed a job after the woman he'd cared for all her life was accidentally turned into a witch as our receptionist.

He's handling correspondence for all the emails and PMs we got when word hit the paranormal-sphere that we were opening a detective agency.

When we first started OOPS, word got 'round about the support we gave to new paranormals in crisis. Pack alphas, council members, clan rulers, and all manner of paranormal leaders became familiar with us, and at first, they didn't love us helping new people into our very secretive space.

It took a while, but they got over it...because we didn't give them a choice.

Now that we're making this kooky idea of a detective agency Marty's reality, we've been assaulted by every paranormal nut in the universe via the Internet.

Speaking of the stiff-necked British guy, he now hovered over me, dropping

something on my desk. “Ms. Statleon?”

I leaned back in my brand-new ergonomic office chair, courtesy of Marty. “It’s just Nina, Tater Tot. You don’t have to be so damn formal. Nina, vampire, Dark Master, they’re all fine. Treat it like your nose and pick one.”

He adjusted his red tie and straightened, clearing his throat in his shi-shi-foo-foo British way, almost knocking over the life-size metal knight I have standing next to my desk (the one I insisted my two favorite Karens leave the hell alone).

God, I love his awkward ass. I know he hates it, but I love him anyway.

Also, I guess people think it’s weird to have a suit of armor. Like I said, we’re doing this thing in my basement, and I live in a castle . I wasn’t kidding about the dungeon part of this. When I married my mate and husband, Greg (the vampire who accidentally turned me), we moved into his castle.

In Long Island.

With a hedge maze.

There was a lot of dusty old shit down here, like swords, lanterns tapestries, and books—so many books—from some long-gone century. My husband’s been alive a really long time. As a result, he has a lot of junk.

Anyway, the second I said yes to Marty and Wanda, they set up this office faster than they obliterate a frickin’ sale at Coach. Before I knew it, we all had desks, office chairs, computers—a damn receptionist.

And a humidifier, because the damp makes Marty’s hair frizz.

If your eyeballs just rolled so far back in your head they touched your brains because the notion is ridiculous, mine did, too, when she had my Tater Tot lug that big thing down here.

Tottington waved the pink sticky note in my line of vision again, lifting a haughty raven eyebrow. “I address you as such out of respect. That’s simply my good breeding, Miss.”

He always says shit like that—mostly to me, because of course he loves Wanda and Marty—as if to remind me he came from good stock and he views me as some prom night dumpster baby.

But again, I love him anyway.

“And for the record, Miss, I prefer Mr. Tottington .”

“And I prefer Master of the Effin’ Universe, BFF.”

He wrinkled his nose, but his “good breeding” obviously kept him from responding.

“You know she only does it to get under your skin, Tottington,” Wanda reminded. “Ignore her. We do.”

I picked up the bright pink sticky note and read what he’d written. “Brenda Bronkowski. Who’s she?”

Tottington folded his arms across his slight chest. “The first on your long waiting list of clients. Both Mistress Wanda and Marty approved her email request. She’s outside right this moment, Dark Lord. Shall I invite her in?”

Wanda clapped her hands in glee, before composing herself by smoothing her black

pencil-slim skirt. She rose with a smile. “Our first client! Tell her to come in, please, Tottington.”

While Totts went to get Brenda, I googled her name, because these two would let Ted Bundy in here if he added enough smiley emoticons and x’s and o’s to the end of his email.

Christ on a crutch.

As Brenda swept into the room, her hands clasped together in a fist, her angular face lined with worry, she brushed past Tottington and headed straight for Marty and Wanda.

“You have to help me!” she pleaded. “I’ll pay whatever you want, but I’m desperate. I’m in trouble with the law!”

“Yeah, you are,” I drawled, holding up my phone. “It’s called murder, Brenda. I looked it up!”

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Chapter

Two

Brenda's in deep donkey poo and I still don't want to be a detective.

To say Brenda was a hot damn mess, her eyes wide and her body shaking like a Yorkshire Terrier on ice, was an understatement. Dressed like she was going to dinner—with her stacked bracelets and shiny earrings—instead of on the lam from the law, she still looked terrified.

And with good reason, if the online news reports (the human ones) I'd read about her were true.

She was wanted as a person of interest for questioning, by both the paranormal council and the human authorities. The council had sent out an email alert to all of us about her.

The council doesn't like when you kill people. It kinda blows our cover if you're convicted and you get a life sentence from a human judge.

When you're immortal, serving life has a whole new meaning that can't be explained to a human prison warden. Not to mention, escaping a human jail would be like shooting fish in a barrel.

The clan council would wanna wrap this up, and fast. As in, they'd take her out if it meant avoiding our exposure to the human world, and her name all over the news as a

person of interest was def an issue.

Sure. We live amongst humans, but the risk of exposure is real and, if found out, could mean we end up in some damn science experiment. The various councils would go to extremes to keep us protected.

And if the human po-po was after Brenda, too, things could get hinky—quick.

But at least she wasn't crying about how she couldn't believe she'd been turned into a paranormal. In our other line of work with OOPS, there's a lot of crying, and proving the supernatural really do exist by lifting cars over our heads while Marty shifts into a snarling werewolf and makes a damn mess all over the floor with all her hair, with Wanda right behind her, shedding like a Malamute.

It's exhausting proving you're not somethin' straight out of a Spielberg movie to a human who's scared shitless.

But murder, and not just the human law, but the council hot on her heels, too?

We were gonna have to tread lightly in our world—eggshell light.

As Marty and Wanda got her settled in a chair and had Archibald, our manservant (I'll explain him later) bring her some tea, Bertrand swooped in on the poor woman, his camera pointed in her face during probably one of the worst moments of her life.

I gave him a nudge with my elbow (a light one, swear) as I leaned up against Marty's desk, setting my hip on the edge of the surface. "Dude, back off. Can't you see she's freaked out? Learn to read the room, buddy. Also, she's probably not gonna want this on film. Camera off, and delete whatever you've got on the client, um, please."

Bertrand instantly backed away, pushing his curly mop of auburn hair from his face.

“Sorry,” he muttered, scurrying to the corner of the basement.

As Arch brought in some tea, Brenda shook her head, her blue eyes tired when she acknowledged him. “None for me, thanks,” she whispered, barely glancing at him.

Arch, once a vampire turned human, recently turned cute blue troll, but most of all loyal family member, gave a curt nod. “Of course.”

I sniffed the air around Brenda. I didn’t only smell fear and desperation mixed in with a heavy spritz of Charlie. I smelled her essence .

“Vampire?” She hadn’t specified in her email.

I should have smelled that when she’d first waltzed in; meaning, her fear had overridden everything else about her.

Brenda nodded, twisting her pale fingers together. “Yes. A vampire who’s in a lot of trouble.” She paused for a moment, her eyes, artfully made up, going wide. “I’m begging you, please, please help me. I’ll pay you whatever you want.”

Marty gave her the Marty smile—the one that said everything was going to be all right, now that she was on the scene. “First, we don’t want your money. We will ask that you make a donation to an animal shelter or a children’s hospital, in accordance with your financial situation. Second, hi, Brenda. I’m Marty Flaherty—a werewolf, if it matters. How about you tell us what’s happening first. Your email was exceptionally vague.”

“I can help with that,” I offered. “Brenda’s in deep shit for allegedly killing one Owen Barker, who she thought was her online boyfriend, but turns out to be a married guy with a coupla kids.”

Brenda's shoulders began to quake as she let out a keening wail of despair. She pushed her artfully styled, chin-length hair from her face. "I didn't know! I swear, I didn't know about any of it! He said he was single and didn't have any children. I can show you the emails!"

Wanda patted her hand and gave her a sympathetic smile. Wanda's the comforting bosom you rest your head on when the world becomes too much. Not my head, mind you. I don't need her bosoms, but if you need a compassionate ear (and some bosoms), she's your girl.

"I'm Wanda Jefferson, Brenda," she offered, her eyes soft. "Please, take a minute to gather your thoughts. We're going to have a lot of questions for you. There's no rush."

"The hell there isn't a rush. Brenda's in deep poo..." I mumbled, but no one was listening.

While they doled out tea and sympathy, I decided to do some poking around online where Brenda was concerned. As paranormals, we have all the same social media platforms humans do, buried deep on the web by some gargoyle tech guru so only the supernatural have access. We have human profiles, too, to keep our covers and blend in the human world.

If Brenda's Facebook page was accurate, she was a sixty-two-year-old (in human years) vampire (turned over one hundred and sixty years ago), single, had an iguana named Doug and two dogs named Peppermint Patty and Linus. She loved needlepoint—there were plenty of pictures of her creations to prove it—swimming, astronomy, and '70s music.

Damn. She'd been turned at a time when vampires were the new Salem witches. People had gone from creating hysteria about witches and moved on to a fear of

vampires in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

I had a tapestry depicting some of that mad-cow shit that went on back then and the battles that ensued, but Martha Stewart one and two had decided it was too gory for clients to see, so they'd taken them down—as if a good history lesson didn't cure what ailed ya.

Anyway, she wasn't on Insta or TikTok, so the deets about her were slim, but it was enough to give me some insight into who Brenda was.

Brenda was lonely. Cripplingly lonely. Even though her relationship status said “complicated”.

That she'd been accused of killing some guy she'd met on an online dating site wasn't a surprise after scrolling her Facebook page. Her memes were all about clicking like if you (fill in the blank). Name any insecurity, and she had it. Her page screamed needy.

But if I'm being fair, when you've been hangin' around as long as Brenda has, outlived almost everyone around you, who wouldn't be needy? I don't know what the hell I'd do if my mate and kids weren't immortal, too, not to mention my two kooky friends and their families.

Scrolling Brenda's friends list, I noted she didn't lack for 'em. She had a shit ton, but just like human Facebook, were these people her friends -friends, or just some online acquaintances you're forced to label friends?

I didn't see any family members, which could mean Brenda's family was long gone. She was also on a zillion paranormal dating sites. E-Mortal.Com, to name one.

I set my phone down and settled into my office chair, ready to ask the harder

questions my friends would only tiptoe around. When I glanced up, Brenda looked like she'd mostly gotten her shizz together enough to tell us the deets about what happened.

“So, you're in deep shit with the law, Brenda. How'd that happen?”

“Nina!” Marty yelped, slapping her hand against the surface of her desk. “Could you use some tact here, please?”

See? Tiptoe. Tiptoe...

I rolled my eyes at her. “Piss on tact, Marty. She's got the cops breathing down her neck, both human and fucking otherwise. You got the email alert just like I did. We're harboring a potential fugitive. I don't know about pack law, but clan law says they'll have our damn heads if they find even a whiff of her here. We have to move fast.”

Brenda shook her stylishly coiffed blonde head, clenching her ringed fingers together into a fist. “It's times like this when I wish I could still cry. I didn't do anything wrong! I never even met him. How can I be a person of interest if I never met the man in person?”

“Well, he's kinda dead. So somebody met him,” I pointed out. “Any thoughts about why they think you did this and who'd wanna whack him? Especially this way?” I held up the newspaper article on my phone about Owen's death.

Someone had strangled him. There were few details about the actual crime, and no explanation as to why Brenda was a person of interest, but that was bound to be the case. The human cops were playing this close to their vest, not leaking any more intel than they had to in order to keep the killer out of the loop.

I've watched some Rizzoli & Isles . I know how this shit goes down.

Brenda buried her head in her hands with a cringe, her rounded shoulders shaking. "I'm sure it didn't take the police long to find his fake account and connect it with mine. We shared a lot of private messages on Facebook. It's the only thing I can think of."

Marty wrote that bit of info down while Brenda continued.

"Still, I can't believe anyone would think I killed Owen. I loved him. He reminded me so much of..." She looked wistfully over my shoulder before she said, "Anyway, that much was obvious from our private messages. I know it sounds silly, falling in love with someone over the Internet, but I did love him."

"Even though you never met the dude. Who's married and has kids..." I reminded her.

"Nina!" Marty hissed. "It happens all the time. You've watched 90 Day Fiancé with me. You know how it works."

"I know that shit doesn't work. Name one couple still married on that fiasco of a dumbass show," I dared her.

Wanda cleared her throat and gave us both her famously stern Sister Lucretia from St. Ignacious of the Hills warning look to shut up, before she turned to Brenda. "Let's start at the beginning," she soothed. "How did you meet Owen? Who's a human , FYI."

Aw, hell. Owen was a human? That shit would not go over well with the clan. But of course he was a human. I felt like a dipshit for not realizing that. Had Owen been a vamp, the clan would have swooped in and erased everyone's memories before the

human police could blink. Then they'd mete out justice the clan way.

Licking her dry lips, Brenda looked at Wanda, her blue eyes intense. "I met him on a dating site."

I cocked my head. "A human dating site? He wasn't on a paranormal one, was he?" Every once in a while, a human found our sites and it turned into DEFCON.

She shook her head, like maybe she was ashamed of dating outside her species. "No. He wasn't. Judge if you will, but you ladies must know the dating pool in our world is pretty limited. Most who've been turned like I was are stuck in the ways of the past or have already mated. I may have been around for well over a hundred years, but I've progressed with the times. Who wants to date a vampire who still believes anyone other than another vampire is our enemy? This is 2024, not 1824."

"So the dating pool got slim and you decided to human dip?" I asked.

Wanda sighed loud enough to let me know she disapproved, smoothing the hairs on her updo that were almost never out of place. "Nina, please. Can we skip the part where you ask questions that do nothing but make us all uncomfortable?"

In turn, I made a face right back at her. The same face I always made when she said I was being too whatever I was being too much or too little of. "I'm just asking the questions that need asking."

Brenda stared at me, her eyes wide, her painted-on eyebrow somewhere up in her hairline. "To answer your question, Miss Statleon, yes. Yes, I was tired of the same old, same old. So I joined a human dating site to see if I could shake things up a little."

"Mission accomplished. Bravo." I tipped an imaginary hat at her.

This time, Wanda threw a pad of sticky notes at me. A pink one, of course.

Marty gnawed at the tip of her pen, crossing her legs and leaning back in her chair. “You weren’t worried about having to tell someone you’re a vampire if things got serious?”

Brenda rubbed her weary eyes, her shoulders dropping beneath her fur-trimmed cape. “I wasn’t thinking that far ahead. It was stupid—impulsive. I know that now. I was just thinking about how handsome he was and...”

“And about your downtown bits,” I grumbled.

“Nina!” both Marty and Wanda cried, matching looks of displeasure on their faces.

But Brenda actually laughed, though it was cold and full of irony. “She’s right, you know. I’ve been alone now for almost fifty years. That’s a long time without some kind of?”

I held up a hand to thwart the inevitable images her words would create. “We get it. So, you found this guy Owen on a dating site. Did he contact you or the other way around?”

Her gaze got all wistful and sad. “He contacted me. I was as surprised as anyone. I mean, look at him.” She dug her phone from her purse and scrolled until she held it up for us to see. “I’m not exactly the hunchback of Notre Dame, but I’m not a supermodel either.”

Owen was a looker, for sure. Tall, dark, and lean, with long legs, and a chiseled jaw covered in a neatly trimmed beard. There was no filter on his pic, no photoshopping. He really was that good-looking. My eyes were not appalled by the sight of him.

And easily thirty years younger than Brenda.

Shit.

So, we had a lonely woman, hungry for attention and obviously frickin' flattered by this young buck who'd contacted her first.

Classic romance catfish scam.

That she'd fallen for it said Brenda wasn't as progressive as she thought. Forget her age, who isn't skeptical when a guy thirty years your junior in human years cozies up to a sixty-two-year-old?

Now, before everyone gets all janky, I'm sure there are lots of successful May-December romances. I'm just sayin', there are probably more unsuccessful ones.

"How long had you been communicating with Owen?" Marty asked.

Brenda licked her crimson lips as she set her phone on Wanda's desk. "I guess it was about six months, all told. At first it was just off and on, and then the last three months it was more frequent. We talked about anything and everything. He understood me. He loved a lot of the same things I do. Movies, books... I just can't believe..."

Tapping my finger on my desk to reroute her from another bout of disbelief, I asked the obvious. "Did ya ever ask to meet him? See him in the flesh?"

Now she really looked upset. She knew she'd been played for a damn fool, and when somebody started fishing around, asking all the questions you wouldn't ask yourself because you were high on love, the reality begins to sink in, I suppose.

And before anyone says I'm an insensitive cur (see Wanda), I felt bad for this lady. Now that her fear had settled, she smelled like a nice woman who'd been caught up in her loneliness. I get it. I'm not such a shit that I don't sympathize, but if we were gonna keep her lonely butt from the clan and certain death, we had to get to the point.

Brenda was hearing all her doubts out loud. It showed in her posture and the sad look on her face. "I did ask, but?—"

"He was working in some remote place in the world and couldn't get away, right?" Marty asked gently, sighing with understanding sadness.

Her cheeks puffed outward, her eyes looking down at her shiny red heels. "Yes. I...I know how that sounds, too, but I was just so caught up in the whole thing, I accepted his explanations whenever I asked. They all sounded so...so plausible."

"Did he bilk you outta any money?" That felt like it would be a given, but Brenda surprised me when she shook her head.

"Not a red cent. Not a penny. He never asked for anything."

Huh. Interesting. So what was the end game if not cash?

Wanda gripped her hand. "What did Owen say he did for a living that made him so unavailable to you, Brenda?"

Her snort was derisive and bitter as she tucked her purse close to her chest. "He said he was a geologist and that he traveled often to digs in far-off places. He knew so much about the subject, I never once doubted him."

Narrowing my eyes as I looked at his picture on her phone, I asked, "You do know you were catfished, right? Somebody stole his profile particulars, did a little research

and pretended to be him on this dating site.”

Brenda rolled her eyes at me, sitting up straight. If she still had breath in her, she’d sigh in exasperation. “Of course I know that now . I watched some YouTube videos about catfishing—of which there are plenty, if you wondered. I understand how it works. I know I was lucky that he didn’t ask for money. I also know I was an idiot. But now I’m an idiot wanted by the law, and you know what will happen if the clan gets hold of me. A mere whiff of this kind of sticky involvement with a dead human is enough to have me in deep trouble with them.”

When we sat silent, absorbing her words, she squeezed her temples.

“Look, ladies, I’m not a bad person. I work hard at various charities until things start looking suspicious because I don’t age. Then I move on to the next one. I volunteer at libraries for story hour. I volunteer at homeless shelters. I donate. I...I’m trying to fill my life up with things that have meaning and are of service. I was just...”

Lonely.

I hated how miserable she looked, so I reached out and patted her hand. “You don’t have to say anything else, Brenda, but we kinda need to get into the particulars here. So send me all the shit you guys sent each other. Emails, texts, any and all correspondence between you two, and we’ll get started.”

Both Marty and Wanda looked at me with wide eyes, and they didn’t have to say a word. I knew exactly what they were thinking—because we’re BFFs like that.

“What? Too sensitive? Not squishy enough? Jesus, you two. Pick a frickin’ lane.”

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Chapter

Three

The part of the story where we go undercover sniffing around where we don't belong, hunting for clues and looking like dingdongs while we do it...

"This is so damn dumb, Marty. Why can't we just go as ourselves?" I complained, swiping at my eye.

She swatted at my hand, the wind nipping at her long blonde hair. "Stop doing that, Nina! You'll mess up your mascara!"

"As if she needs mascara. I almost forget how utterly gorgeous you are even without makeup, until you put some on and I'm reminded there's nothing anyone can do to dull your level of beauty, young lady," Wanda said, licking her thumb to wipe at the corner of my mouth. "Now stop moving your lips and start walking up those steps."

She pointed to the long set of steel stairs to the second level of the apartments, leading to Owen Barker's place.

The place he lived in alone .

It turned out, Owen and his wife were separated and he was bunking by himself. It was easy enough to find out once I'd found the real Owen's page and done some digging around on his wife's page—digging Brenda had avoided doing, so her love bubble wouldn't pop and bleed all over her fantasy, I guess.

If she had, she'd have probably realized Owen's cloned page wasn't connected to anything but more fake profiles...but his real Facebook page provided a shit ton of insight—like his wife's name.

I threw up my hands to keep from smudging anything else on my face. “I feel ridiculous, Wanda.” I couldn't actually say because I can't see my reflection, but I'm still pretty sure I looked ridiculous. “Did you have to put so much crap on my face?”

Wanda smoothed the edges of her classy dark green trench coat as the December wind fought to ruffle it against her knees. “Not that you needed it, but we have to look the part, Nina. We're cosmetics saleswomen, for Pete's sake. You have to advertise the product you're hawking, silly. You know that.”

She held up the bane of my existence. An old Bobbie-Sue Cosmetics sales kit. The round, sky-blue suitcase contained everything you needed to present to the world the best you possible .

So sayeth Marty. That was the spiel she used to use to sell the stuff while I trailed behind her, stomping my feet in loud reluctance. In the cold. In the rain. In a heat wave. One time in a flippin' blizzard.

Marty had been hell-bent on getting to the level of sky blue on the rung of Bobbie-Sue success and she'd dragged us along with her. Well, me anyway.

At that time in my life, I was jobless, close to homeless, and desperate to make some cash. Wanda, on the other hand, had been a gazillion times better at it than me. But if you only knew how much I hated that damn case full of colored garbage, you'd know why I'm draggin' ass.

Not that it didn't eventually add an important piece of the jigsaw puzzle to my life and bring me everything I have now, or at least played a significant part in giving me

my current life.

But like I said, it came from a time when shit had gone sideways for me personally and selling cosmetics door to door was the only job I could get, even though I sucked hard—and I do mean hard—at it.

But Marty had made a very successful life from selling Bobbie-Sue, and eventually owning the company. It wasn't all bad. Her products were honest, no animal testing (duh), and all organic. It just wasn't my schtick.

And when they made me put on a skirt and heels I can barely walk in after slapping this goop all over my face that left me itchy and annoyed, it confirmed this wasn't my deal.

But here I was, in a skirt, blazer and heels with a pound of slop all over my face, right back where I started with these two quintessential specimens of femininity I loved to fucking infinity and beyond.

That's the only reason I'd relive this nightmare.

Avoiding touching my face again, I propped my hands on my hips. "So what the fuck are we doing here again?"

"We're snooping around. The crime scene is still fresh. Maybe we'll see something the human ," she whispered the word, "police didn't. Maybe we'll smell something they didn't. We do have keen senses, right? That's got to help in an investigation. So let's use them."

Wanda nodded, the tip of her nose red from the cold. "What Marty said. Also, we're going to talk to some neighbors. See if they saw anything. And we do have ears. You can bet your bippy everyone's talking about their neighbor being murdered. So we do

a little eavesdropping at doors. Bobbie-Sue is the perfect cover.”

“Except, Marty put an end to door-to-door sales a long time ago, Wanda. Because the world is a scarier place than when we first sold this junk. No one even does this shit anymore.” I plucked at my blue skirt and clicked my heels together. “It’s gonna look more like we’re scammin’. Besides, did you forget how people would hide from us? Remember that one lady we saw standing on her porch, mindin’ her own damn business, and when Marty got a glimpse of her from the corner of her eye, she went in for the kill? That poor lady ran the fuck inside and pretended Marty wasn’t pounding on her door with her fist while her dogs barked their tiny heads off?”

Wanda began to giggle, covering her mouth. “Do you remember how Marty spun it?” Wanda batted her eyes, letting her eyelashes flutter to her cheeks. ““Oh, it’s fine. She’s just afraid of unlocking her true potential. Everyone’s a little scared to be their absolute best and outshine everyone around them,”” she squealed, in a pretty damn good imitation of Marty.

We’d been in tons of humiliating situations during our Bobbie-Sue time, once at an IHop, but Marty had always turned that baloney into a positive. No matter how awful people were to us.

Marty swatted the air with a frown, tucking her scarf tighter around her neck with a wrinkle of her nose. “I do not sound like that, Wanda Jefferson.”

I barked a laugh. “Ya do too , Marty Flaherty, and it’s a badass quality to have when you’re tryin’ to foist your shit off on some unsuspecting schlub. But I get it. Your ass was desperate to make it to sky blue and get that convertible. Totally worth selling your soul for while you hunted your prey, right?” I teased.

Back in the day, becoming a sky-blue saleswoman was the ultimate level of success on the Bobbie-Sue ladder. It meant you got a sky-blue convertible for the most sales

and the worship of all your underlings. It rarely happened because the stakes were nearly unreachable, but Marty had done it.

When I met Marty, she'd been determined to scale the walls of Bobbie-Sue victory no matter the cost. She'd been deep in the cult of the Color Wheel—that was the infamous opening line to every sales pitch, by the way.

What's in your color wheel?

Am I ever glad when she inherited the company, she put the kibosh on all that shit after we finally managed to make her see it for what it really was. A kooky makeup cult with ridiculous sales expectations nigh-on unobtainable.

But a lot has changed since the days when Marty became a werewolf—mostly for the better of all of us and her zillion employees. Marty was a smart business woman and a good boss.

Wanda sighed a long-winded sound of exasperation as she scanned the parking lot around us, the cars of the apartment's tenants covered in a light dusting of snow.

“You have any better ideas, Dark Lord? We have to start somewhere. We can't keep Brenda hidden in the murder basement forever, and we certainly don't want the clan to find her before we figure this out and prove her innocent.”

While we'd gotten into disguise and Marty had put foundation on me with a trowel, we'd spent some time getting to know Brenda while we asked questions about who she thought could have killed Owen. But because she'd been catfished, she didn't know a whole lot about the real people in his life.

Regardless, Brenda was a nice, if not naïve lady who'd gotten in too deep. She was smart and even a little funny when she chilled the hell out.

I didn't want to see the clan eradicate her. I liked her. And if I'm honest, I sure as hell didn't want the clan to find out we were harboring a fugitive, because it'd be just as fucking ugly for us as it would be for Brenda if we got caught.

I shook my Bobbie-Sue bag at her as snow began to fall and the day became grayer. "Fine. Let's get this shit over with then. We goin' together, or splittin' up to cover more territory?"

Marty shivered, probably with nervous excitement, if I knew her. This revisit to her glory days was her dream come true. "Let's do the first couple together so we can warm up. It's been a long time since I did this and I'm freaking out a little about revisiting my cosmetic past."

"As if the sales chick in you isn't alive and well, dying to bust out and torture some poor, unsuspecting woman with blush colors. Please," I scoffed.

Marty made a face at me. "Together. Please ."

I motioned for them to head up the stairs ahead of me, mostly because I can't get a handle on these damn heels and if I fall on 'em, I don't want them crying about how I ruined their makeup and hair. "After you, chickenshit."

I made chicken noises at her, clucking the whole way up the stairs to the tune of Wanda's laughter.

Just like the old days. Good times, good times.

"Hi! I'm Marty Flaherty! Do you know what's in your color wheel?"

I fought a groan when the guy who answered the door—scratching his bare belly, no less, beer in hand—gave us the finger and slammed it in our faces.

“Asshole!” I crowed. “Can’t a girl try and make a living anymore?”

Marty deflated a little, but I poked her between her shoulder blades, swallowing a cackle. “Maybe look before you leap, test the waters and all, Ms. Color Wheel.”

She stomped her foot, kicking up some snow. “How rude was he?”

“That was just a warm up, Marty...uh, practice.” Wanda stabbed her finger in the air for emphasis. “Forget him and knock on the next door,” she soothed with encouragement, wrapping an arm around her shoulders. “You never let a closed door stop you before.”

My head fell back on my shoulders in irritation. I’ll admit, I felt whiny AF. I have zero patience for tea and sympathy. Call me a dick, but that’s my truth. I wanted to get the show on the road.

“For the love of Canada, why can’t we just sneak into Owen’s dumpy apartment and snoop around instead of playing these stupid fucking games? Why do we have to be undercover?”

Wanda made a face. “Because we need information, Nina! Who knows if someone saw something. We can’t just show up and ask people to tell strangers if they saw or heard something surrounding Owen’s death.”

My eyes bulged. “Isn’t that what private investigator’s fucking do, Wanda?”

Wanda’s lips thinned. “Yes, Nina. That’s what they do, but in this particular case, we have to be extra careful. Owen was a human, with human neighbors. If the police come asking questions, we don’t need them telling the authorities some private investigators were snooping around. With human police involved, we can’t have it lead back to us. We need to carefully ask questions, and selling Bobbie-Sue is the

perfect opener. Now put a sock in it and move along.”

Much like back in the day, I trudged reluctantly behind them as they stopped at the apartment two doors down from Owen’s—one with a dilapidated Christmas wreath and a crooked bow.

The moment the door popped open, a middle-aged lady with yellow-blond hair and enough perfume to choke a horse poked her head out, a cigarette dangling from her mouth.

Fighting a gag from the thick scent of whatever she’d doused herself with, I watched as Marty held up her Bobbie-Sue bag, her smile bright while she flapped a hand at the puff of smoke. “Hi there! I’m Marty Flaherty. Do you know what’s in your color wheel?”

The woman blew a ring of smoke at us, making Marty cough. The lines around her mouth from her bad habit deepened as she frowned, eating up the garish red lipstick on her mouth.

She wrinkled her wide nose. “What the hell’s a color wheel?”

Marty tapped the bag with her sparkling saleslady smile. “It’s all right here in this cosmetics bag. I’d be happy to show you, if you’d like.”

She flicked her cigarette out over the balcony with a sour expression, her forehead wrinkling in a suspicious frown. “Is it gonna make me look like her?” She pointed at me, which I found ridiculous. I was the most awkward of the three of us, for Christ’s sake. Who’d want to look like me?

But I nodded and grinned the best grin I knew how to grin. The one that would hurt my face if I could still feel it.

“Just like me,” I assured her with a sweet tone. If I’ve done nothing these past years, I’ve watched and learned from my friends how to appease, how to persuade. Marty and Wanda turned their back to her for a moment and gave me their “what the fuck?” eyes. But I shooed them toward her with a wink and a nudge of their shoulders. “Go on and work your magic, ladies. Do it for the team! While you do that, I just remembered something that would be perfect for... What’s your name, ma’am?”

She blinked, tucking her old, pilling sweater into the waistband of her rumpled jeans. “Sonja...” she said with obvious hesitance.

“Sonja,” I repeated. I lifted my shoulders in that cute way Marty and Wanda do when they’re playing coy, and grinned again. “I’ve got the perfect lip stain just for you, but I forgot it in the car. Be back in a jiff!”

I scurried off before my nutty friends could stop me. I was gonna go snoop around at Owen’s place while they tiptoed through a bunch of bullshit about makeup just to try and get some miniscule bit of information from Sonja.

As I made my way back toward where we’d started, Owen’s place wasn’t hard to find. It was cordoned off by a bunch of yellow police tape.

The welcome mat in front of his door was ratty, scuffed by time, the door crisscrossed with crime scene tape.

I don’t know what I thought I was gonna uncover, but it couldn’t hurt to poke around and it beat talking about shit I knew next to nothing about.

Peering over my shoulder to make sure no one was around, I gripped the door handle and gave it a quick pop, trying not to leave any damage behind before looking at my hands and realizing I’d forgotten to put on the plastic gloves Marty had given me, along with some paper shoe covers.

Shit. I wiped it with the edge of my blazer before I pushed at the door. It opened easily enough, the stench of death instantly assaulting my nose.

I slipped under the crime scene tape and took my first step inside, closing the door behind me, making sure it was locked.

Christ, it was dismal in here. The walls, painted a dull gray, were slightly warped, but there was a poster of Paw Patrol, reminding me he had children who were young.

Then I saw a picture of Owen, his wife and his kids, and my chest got tight. It hung lopsided on the wall, above the couch. I eyed it from across the room and the pit in my stomach grew. His kids were dark like him, cute little munchkins who now had no father. Owen and his wife sat behind them, smiling for the camera, their hands on each of the kids' shoulders.

I had to look away and focus on what I was here to do before the sadness rooted me to the spot.

For a bachelor, he was mostly clean. No empty pizza boxes and beer cans strewn across the floor or on his Ikea coffee table. There was a well-used plaid couch, with the cushions opened up and tossed, obviously from a search by the cops, but it wasn't exactly a Home and Garden photo shoot, either.

I pulled the plastic gloves from the pocket of my uncomfortable blazer and put them on. I don't know if I still have fingerprints as a vampire, it wouldn't be the first thing I no longer had since I'd been turned, but better safe than sorry.

Heading to the kitchen, I was grateful for my vampiric vision, because Jesus and some Swedish fish, it was dark in there. I began pulling open his crooked, creaky cabinets to find a minimal number of dishes and cooking utensils.

Lots and lots of boxed macaroni and cheese and instant potatoes. Even when I could eat, I didn't eat shit like that, but I'd probably choke a bitch out for a chicken wing. His fridge held some juice boxes, half a gallon of milk, and a six-pack of non-alcoholic beer. All mostly unremarkable.

My phone buzzed then to the tune of "I Like Big Butts," Marty's ringtone. I dug it out of my pocket and answered, "Yeah?"

"What are you doing?" she hissed into the phone, the crackle of her voice grating against my ear.

"Getting my prostate checked. What are you doing?"

I heard her rasp a sigh, meaning my work here was done. "Shut up, meaniebutt. Stop being a jerk and tell me where you are. You were supposed to be getting lip stain!"

I peered in a drawer in the kitchen, where I found coloring books and some crayons, and jiggled them around to make it sound like I was digging through stuff in the car. "I'm still looking for it. It's the puuurfect color for Sonja. If you taught me nothing, you taught me flippin' color wheels. Am I making you proud, sensei?"

"You are not either in the car, Nina Statleon! I can see it from Sonja's bathroom window. But you are a liar-liar-pants-on-fire!"

"Why are you in her damn bathroom, Marty? I thought the Bobbie-Sue rule was no using a potential client's private facilities no matter how bad you have to go? Remember Hackensack, where Wanda almost peed herself?"

"I make the rules now, Nina! Now get your butt back here before Wanda has a nervous breakdown trying to make Sonja look like you. I only have so much magic, and while Sonja is perfectly lovely, she's never going to look like you!"

“Then as the great RuPaul says, you bettah werk! Gotta go. Bye!” I clicked the phone off before she could protest.

I decided to give up on the kitchen. So far, I was batting a thousand because there was nothing to see in here but the sad life of a bachelor dad just tryin’ to get by.

Bedrooms were up next, there were two of them.

When I poked my head around the corner of the first one, I was surprised. He’d decked this out for his kids with hanging lights and a tent.

One half of the room had a bunch of superhero posters and the other half was covered in Barbie. The tiny, pink single bed had some frilly pillows Wanda and Marty would snatch up before you could blink.

The boy’s bed had a comforter of the solar system and some red and blue pillows. There was a train track on the floor beside his bed, and a big Barbie playhouse by his daughter’s.

All tossed by the cops.

If nothing else, Owen had been trying for the sake of his kids, which left me feeling kinda shitty for him. It also made me wonder what was up with his marriage and his wife. Could she be a suspect?

What if she’d found the fake account the catfish had set up and saw all those private messages between him and Brenda, and thought he was cheating? I wondered if she’d talk to us. Maybe I could smell if she was lying.

Jealousy, according to Marty and her true crime shows, was one of the top five motives for murder.

While I considered what undercover crazy Marty might come up with to get Owen's wife to talk to us, I moseyed to his bedroom, where I found he'd def poured his heart only into his kids' room.

His room was a depressing disaster of rumpled bed sheets and comforter, and a scarred wood nightstand with all the drawers yanked open. But when I sniffed, I discovered it was also where he'd been strangled. I stood in the spot where his essence had been drained from him.

Damn, damn, damn. My throat tightened up. I think I've said I can't cry, but I can get choked up, and I was choked up. I got the sense this separation had been hard on Owen and his kids. His misery lingered.

But that's also when I saw it.

Our first legit clue.

If the forensic people had been in here and done their jobs, I don't know how they could've missed it. Or maybe it was just my vampiric eyesight. But there it was, stuck to the backside of the nightstand with only the very tip sticking out.

A fake nail, just like the ones Marty and Wanda wore.

A red one with a white tip.

Just like the ones Brenda wore...

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Chapter

Four

Brenda has some splainin' to do...

I took a picture of the fingernail, cursing the cops for missing it. I don't know what good it was going to do me, but you can bet your ass I'm gonna wanna know why one of the same nails Brenda wore was stuck on Owen's nightstand.

When I looked behind it, I noted there was an outlet for the lamp sitting on the surface, and the torn remnant of the cord sticking out the back—like someone had yanked it out of the lamp. Maybe that's what he'd been strangled with, and she'd broken a nail in the middle of ripping it from the lamp?

My phone rang again with "She's a Lady," Wanda's ringtone. I dug it back out of my stupidly uncomfortable blazer and barked, "What?"

"Don't you dare take that tone with me after you abandoned us! Where are you, Dark Lord?"

I paused, holding the phone away from my ear and listening. Shit. Someone was unlocking the damn door. I clicked my phone off and put it on silent, ceasing all movement.

"Yeah. You heard me," a gruff male voice growled. "Those knuckleheads in forensics screw shit up all the time and you know it, Dunst. I'm gonna give the place

a once-over just in case that dingbat Sharna missed something. The only suspect we have is the broad who met him on Facebook, but the wife claims this guy Owen said his profile was cloned and he had proof like a day or so before he was knocked off. Doesn't make a shit's worth a sense. But this Brenda Bronkowski had motive."

There was a pause and some heavy breathing, and then the male voice said, "Yeah. She was probably pissed about findin' out he had a wife and kids and she whacked him. I'm betting she didn't even know she was catfished. It's pretty cut and dried, dummy. Now we just need somethin' to connect her to him. Ya know, the physical evidence the DA's always bitchin' about? And we need to find that Brenda Bronkowski and bring her in for questioning... At least it's a place to start. Don't call me up and cry about how you can't find her—look harder!"

His heavy footsteps moved toward the small hall leading to the bedrooms—which meant I had to split, and fast.

I cracked the fingerprint-smudged window open and looked out to see the parking lot below. Crap. I was gonna have to jump.

Crawling out of the window, I clung to the ledge in my stupid heels while I cursed my BFFs for making me wear them, closing the window as gently as I could. I didn't think about where I'd land, I was just thinking about getting the hell out of there before I got caught.

Unfortunately, I landed in a dumpster and a cloud of stench.

"Fuuuck!"

I was rustled around in the junk, ungluing my feet from the debris, when I heard Wanda call out, "Found her!"

Marty's exquisitely highlighted blonde head peered over the top of the dumpster, a light dusting of snow icing her coat. "It's nothing less than you deserve, you deserter." She held out her hand to me, her lips thin.

I grabbed it, letting her yank me up. "Listen, if I had to stick around and listen to you two yahoo's kvetch about eyeshadow colors, I was gonna yak."

"Why are you in the garbage, for heaven's sake?" Wanda asked, hands on her hips.

Straightening my shoulders, I yanked my gloves off and threw them over my shoulder. "I put my time to good use, that's why, and if you don't get off my hump, I'm not gonna tell you what I found out."

Hauling myself out of the dumpster, I jumped to the ground, brushing someone's leftover pieces of pizza off my skirt in disgust.

We began to walk toward Marty's SUV, Wanda looping her arm through mine, cozying up to me. "You show us yours, we'll show you ours," she cooed, as we sloshed through the parking lot, my ankles wobbly.

"I'll show you mine when we get back to the castle. I can't think with all this shit on my face. Though it does explain why Marty's head's so empty."

Wanda giggled, playfully swatting my arm. "Be nice, vampire. Marty just pulled off the makeover of a lifetime and we got ourselves a clue."

Marty came up on the other side of me, hooking her arm through mine. "Yeah," she crooned. "Be nice to the empty head or she's not going to give you the wipes to remove the adhesive from your fake eyelashes."

I stopped dead in my tracks. "You wouldn't fucking dare..."

She winked before she ran toward the SUV and called out, “My head is so empty, I might not remember where they are!”

Back at the castle in the murder basement, I’d changed back into my jeans and a hoodie after Wanda coaxed Marty into giving me the damn wipes to get the gunk off my lashes.

Plopping down in my office chair, I caught Bertrand making a beeline for me, camera in hand, but I stopped him with a withering glance. “Back away. I just crawled out of a garbage dump to get away from a cop. I’m not ready for my closeup, Mr. DeMille.”

Bertrand frowned, rocking back and forth on his feet. “ Who ?”

“Never mind. Just beat it.” I pointed to the other end of the room.

He sighed his discontent, long and forlorn, but he went to the farthest corner of our office and plunked himself down in one of the puffy chairs.

“Where’s Brenda?” I hadn’t seen her since we’d been back from our Bobbie-Sue escapade.

Marty hitched her jaw toward the spiral stairs leading to the first floor of my castle. “She’s in the kitchen charming the pants off Arch. She really is delightful.”

I chuckled, dropping my phone on my desk. “Arch is fine, but my Tater Tot better keep his pants on. He knows I’m the only girl for him.”

“Tater Tot is terrified of you. If you’re his girl, it’s only by force,” Wanda teased. “Tottington is, as we speak, getting her pets.”

“You let him go alone ?” I crowed. “What if he gets caught? The cops are probably

crawling all over her place, waiting for her to come home. They want to talk to her because they have no other leads.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Wanda scoffed. “I sent Darnell with him. He’ll make sure no harm comes to your side piece. Plus, he’s going to take a peek around her place and see if there’s anything that can help us solve this.”

Darnell would indeed keep my Tater Tot safe. He’s my big teddy bear of a demon who loves animals as much as I do. According to Brenda, she’d been away from home, in hiding, for two days. I couldn’t stand the idea that her dogs and her iguana, Doug, hadn’t had anyone to look out for ’em.

I didn’t know what having an iguana around was gonna be like with my dog Waffles, but I love all animals. We’d figure it out.

Wanda tapped her pen on her desk. “So, let’s get down to business. Can you think, now that all that junk’s off your face?”

I wiggled my feet, encased in my bunny head slippers with the floppy ears. “Much better. So what did you torture out of Sonja? Did you trash her bank account with a bunch of useless moisturizing undereye cream?”

Marty tsked, giving me a sour expression. “Hush. We didn’t torture her. We made her over and she looked beautiful. We also gifted her the makeup because she gave us so much help. So there, smarty. No torture required.”

Wanda blew at the hair in her face. “Yikes on a bike, that woman has the gift of gab. Once she got going, we couldn’t stop her. It was exhausting but worth it.”

I cocked an eyebrow. “Because?”

“Because she’s got eyes and ears on every single person in that apartment building, and seeing as Owen only lives a couple doors down, she knew an awful lot about him and his children and the troubles in his marriage.”

“She also knew an awful lot about that horrible Coraline Brown,” Marty said on a mock scowl. “If I heard one more time about what a cheap jezebel she is, a new man in and out of her apartment every other day, I was going to scream. But in the midst of her hate-fest for Coraline Brown, she yapped about Owen. She actually heard him arguing with someone on the phone the day before he was killed.”

“Does she know who he argued with?”

Marty’s pretty face fell, a frown forming on her forehead. “That’s part of our problem.”

Wanda nodded, gnawing on her lower lip as she looked at her notes. “She thinks it was his wife, because he called the other person on the line ‘babe’...but he also said Brenda’s name, Nina. This phone call was a day before Owen was killed. Granted, Sonja didn’t hear the whole conversation, so who knows what it might mean in context, but he said, and I quote, ‘I don’t know who the hell Brenda Bronkowski is!’”

Oh, hell. I sat up straight, shoving my hands into the pockets of my hoodie. “So he knew about Brenda? I guess he found out about the catfish?”

Marty sucked in her cheeks. “She also heard him arguing with his wife one day in the parking lot, when she was dropping off their children for a visit. Sonja says he was so angry, his face looked like a ripe tomato, and they were arguing about him stepping out on their marriage once before.”

“Something else to consider. He was a software engineer . He could very well have discovered the fake profile and the messages with Brenda. Maybe he hacked into it?

But Sonja didn't have any idea how his wife found out about his alleged cheating because she, of course, didn't want to pry." Wanda rolled her eyes at her words. "Maybe Owen's wife meant someone else entirely. He could have a history of cheating."

Crap. "We need to talk to this dude's wife. She should definitely be considered a suspect. I found her Facebook page. Her name's Astrid."

"Yes! She should definitely be considered a suspect." Marty hopped up from her chair and clapped her hands with glee, making her way to a whiteboard that had appeared almost out of nowhere. "Speaking of suspects..."

"Is that what I think it is, Blondie?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"If you mean a murder board..." She flipped it over with a wide grin. "Uh-huh! Surprise!"

Headshots of Brenda and Owen were on the board, with a blank black square labeled "Owen's wife". There were red strings, and question marks, numbers, and a whole bunch of arrows that made my head hurt.

I groaned. I don't know what it is about these two and the opportunity to make everything a GD production, but if it involved sticky notes and colored Sharpies, they were all over it like flies on strawberry pie.

God, I miss pie.

I shook my finger at her. "You promised no flippin' murder board, Marty. We established boundaries before we started this nutty gig, remember? I promised not to be insensitive and you promised not to do stupid, cliché stuff. JFC, does a murder board get any more cliché?"

She wrinkled her nose at me, sticking her tongue out. “Oh, hush, sourpuss. It’s a great way to keep track of all our clues and suspects.”

My lips went thin with distaste. “We don’t have enough clues or suspects to warrant a murder board, Fibonacci.”

“Are you guys gonna fight?” Bertrand asked from behind his camera with a hesitant glance. “Because if ya are, I don’t wanna miss it. Conflict is good for ratings. It adds texture, too. All good directors say so.” He tapped the camera.

“If you keep hassling me, little cub, I’m gonna introduce you to fights. You’ll become so familiar, they’ll put your pic in the dictionary right beside the word,” I growled at him, snapping my teeth.

Marty planted her hands on her hips, her bangle bracelets clinking together. “We are absolutely not going to fight, Bertrand. We’re going to investigate. Now, tell us what you found, Detective Statleon?”

I told them about the cop and what he said to whoever the hell Dunst was, and about the fake fingernail on the backside of the nightstand, showing them the picture I’d taken.

Wanda gasped, hopping up from her chair. “Oh, dear. Brenda has those nails on right now.”

That made me wonder. My nature is suspicious from the jump, but this made no sense. “Are we fucking being played here? Maybe she did kill the dude, and she’s using us as...”

“As what?” Marty asked, tapping the whiteboard. “That makes no sense either. What would be the purpose of hiring us then?”

Wanda clucked her tongue. “Deflection? Maybe she’s using us as a distraction so she can plan her getaway? Buy herself some time?”

Marty crossed her arms over her chest. “But they haven’t even accused her of anything yet. So far, she’s just a person of interest, according to the news. Even the cop Nina heard in the apartment said they had nothing to connect her to the crime. No physical evidence.”

“But he did say he thought Brenda whacked Owen. Maybe she fucking panicked? Put the cart before the horse?” I pointed out, throwing my feet up on my desk. “When you hear shit on the news connecting you to a murder, I think it’s fair to say it can make you panic, right? Maybe we’re a panic hire? Maybe she knew the clan would shit a yak, hearing her name mentioned in an investigation for the murder of a human, and she’s headin’ shit off at the pass?”

“Or she’s guilty and she’s covering her tracks,” Wanda murmured, tapping her pen against her desk.

Rolling my tongue along my cheek, I gave what I’d heard the cop say some thought. “You know, that fingernail... The cop said he was gonna go over the place because some chick in forensics named Sharna sucked at her job. What if he finds that damn fingernail? What if he takes it to wherever the frick they take stuff to check for DNA, and find Brenda’s DNA on it? That the same kind of nail she’s wearing turned up there can’t be random. But here’s another question for the wonderful fucking whacky world of the paranormal. As vampires, do we even still have DNA?”

Marty rubbed her temples before taking another sip of tea. “That’s not something I’ve ever even thought about, but it sure would help if we had someone on the inside to help us navigate.” She pointed to Wanda. “Put that on your list of things to look into, would you?”

Shit. We really could use a connection or two. “We could always tap Mara. Maybe she can help?” Mara, Marty’s sister-in-law, was a scientist.

Wanda pushed herself away from her desk and began to pace. “Let’s do that, but in the meantime, it stands to reason that if a vampire is dead, so is their hair, nails, etcetera, right? And don’t they have to have something of hers to prove it’s her DNA on the fingernail?”

“But think of all the archeologists who dig shit up and use DNA to figure out who they’re digging up. It’s called ancient DNA analysis. I saw it on National Geographic. But beyond that, we don’t even know if it’s hers, Wanda. It’s one of those press-on doohickeys you two divas use all the time. I mean, can they even get DNA from a press-on nail?”

“They can get DNA from a rock. I saw it on Investigation ID ,” Marty said with a cluck of her tongue. “But it must be hers, Nina. It’s too much of a coincidence not to be Brenda’s. It’s the same color, same length.”

I shifted in my chair. That didn’t sit right with me, and it wasn’t just because I liked Brenda. It just didn’t fucking feel right.

“So here’s what we’re lookin’ at. Either someone wants to frame Brenda for murder, or she whacked Owen.”

Wanda stopped pacing. “But what’s her motive?”

I shrugged. I wanted to be on Brenda’s side, but she was making shit difficult. “Maybe she really didn’t know she’d been catfished, found out he was married and wanted revenge. You know, whack him first, ask questions later? I mean, those messages got a little hot. I’d be pissed if the dude I was making the verbal sexy-sexy with was married and had kids.”

Marty rolled her eyes, straightening some string on the whiteboard. “That’s a Nina move if I ever heard one and it makes no sense. You smelled the fear on her as well as I did. She can’t fake that.”

“Yeah, but what was she afraid of? Maybe she was just afraid she’d be caught by the clan. We can’t smell specifics, Blondie. We just smell fear.”

“While that’s true?—”

“Boss!” Darnell yelled as he came down the stairs, the thump of his high-top sneakers music to my ears.

I loved my big squishy demon. That he’d decided to join us in this frickin’ crazy warmed my nonexistent heart. He’s helped us with more accidental turnings than I can count on my fingers and toes. He’s always willing to back us up, no matter what. You had to love that kind of loyalty.

He came into view, a dog under each arm.

“Buddy!” I hopped up to give him a hug and thank him for helping Tater Tot—but the frown on his round face worried me.

I squeezed him and took a dog, one that looked just like Benji. “Who are you, snookums?”

He licked my face in response, pressing his wet nose to my cheek.

“That’s Linus, and this lil’ lady here,” Darnell held up a tiny little thing that couldn’t weigh more than a coupla pounds, with a tuft of hair on top of its head, “is Peppermint Patty. She’s a nice girl, ain’t ya, sugar?”

As though to seal her nice girl label, she wagged her scruffy tail and bonked her head against Darnell's chest.

Marty wiggled her fingers in Darnell's direction. "Gimme that baby," she demanded, scooping up Peppermint Patty and snuggling the dog under her chin. She sighed contentedly. "Ahh, puppies."

"Wait. Where's Doug the iguana?" I asked, cradling Linus under my own chin.

"He's with me, Miss Statleon," Tottington called out, sounding oddly shaky, his footsteps awkward as he came down the stairs.

When he came into view, I cackled out loud. "Hah! Looks like someone's found a new buddy." Doug was wrapped around Tottington's stiff neck, his tongue darting in and out, slashing Tater's cheek.

Poor Tots looked a little green around the gills. "Indeed, Dark Lord. When Doug saw us, he scurried up my leg as though he'd seen a ghost and now it doesn't appear he wants to let go. If I'm not being too forward, from the feel of him and his hot breath on my neck. I'd venture to guess he's no worse for the wear after missing a few meals."

Chuckling, I scratched Doug under the chin. "Are you tryin' to steal my man, Doug? How rude." He curled his floppy feet around my finger, his round eyes staring intently at me as he attempted to climb from Tottington's shoulder to mine.

Wanda chuckled as she relieved me of Linus. "I swear, there isn't an animal on the planet you can't charm."

I stood closer to Tottington, letting Doug transfer to me. He slithered over, wrapping himself across my shoulders, letting his long tail drape across my arm.

Tottington cleared his throat, brushing the arms of his formal suit jacket. “Thank you, Miss.”

“Anything for you, Tater Tot.” I gave him a wink, turning to Darnell. “So why the frown, buddy? Bad news?”

Darnell drove his beefy fists into the pockets of his jeans. “Well, if the cops showin’ up at Brenda’s with a search warrant, and findin’ a lamp cord hidden in her closet they think is the murder weapon qualifies as bad, then yeah. It’s bad.”

Tottington swallowed hard, his gray eyes meeting mine. “So awfully bad, Miss.

I stomped over to the spiral staircase and hollered up, “Brenda! Get your vampire ass down here right now. You’ve got some explaining to do!”

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Chapter

Five

W herein Brenda denies, denies, denies...

“I swear to you, Nina, I don’t know how that got there! I had nothing to do with Owen’s death. I didn’t even know where he lived, let alone strangle him with a lamp cord!” Brenda cried, holding on tight to Peppermint Patty while Linus snuggled near the fireplace, and Doug happily sat on my desk near my desk lamp, where it was warm.

I braced my hands on the arms of her chair as I glowered at her, sticking my face in hers. “Then why the fuck did I find your press-on nail at Owen’s, the same ones you have on your little piggies? Either you fucking whacked the dude or someone’s trying to frame you for murder. Why’s that, Brenda?”

Darnell and Tottington had gotten the animals out just in time for the cops to arrive. Thanks to Darnell’s exceptional demonic hearing, he was able to hide in the backyard of Brenda’s big, fancy house when they busted her door down and listen to what they were saying.

The guy he heard talking sure sounded like the cop I heard at Owen’s. Darnell even heard him call someone Dunst. So it wasn’t a stretch to assume it was the same dude.

What I wondered was how they’d gotten a search warrant on so little evidence, unless her fingernail had her DNA? I didn’t know how the fuck that was possible, since I’d

only found it this afternoon. That'd be a pretty quick turnaround, and even then, how would they have her DNA on file?

Wasn't that how it worked? Wasn't that how they busted criminals, because the perp had fingerprints and DNA on file in some big computer for bad guys?

Wanda pulled me from Brenda, who once again had the stench of fear all over her. "Nina! Ease up, would you. Let her explain before you crawl down her throat."

I shook off my anger with her, rolling my head on my neck to ease the tension at the base of my skull. There was nothing I despised more than a liar, and I couldn't be sure if Brenda was lying to us, but it wasn't looking good.

"Then get to explaining. What the hell is going on here, Brenda? Because the cops couldn't just demand a search warrant without cause. They must've found some shit on you. Where were you when he was killed?"

Brenda clung to Peppermint Patty as she rocked back and forth, stroking her sparse fur. Her words were shaky when she said, "I was at home. Like I was almost every night, hoping I'd hear from him. Waiting around like some pathetic, lonely old woman by a computer. Do you suppose the police and the clan will believe that?"

Darnell padded across the room, his finger in the air, his round face full of concern. "I think I know how they got the search warrant, Boss."

"How?" we all yelped.

"I heard 'em say someone had one of those doorbell videos, showin' her goin' into his apartment around the time he was killed..."

I was so close to my head exploding, I almost couldn't speak. But somehow, I

managed. “What the fuck, Brenda!” I yelled. “I swear, lady, if you’re playin’ some kind of game with us to hide from the clan council, I’m going to eat your face off. And don’t think because you’re considered an ancient who’s probably pretty strong, I can’t do it. I’m a violent bitch when necessary.”

Anyone who’d reached her age as a vampire we respectfully called an ancient. They’d accumulated a shitload of strength and could probably whoop my ass.

But when I’m this pissed off, I don’t care. Everyone’s always bitchin’ about how I need anger management, but I say everyone needs to stop actin’ a fool and there’d be no reason for me to get so angry.

Brenda literally cowered in her chair as I glared at her. “I’m telling you all, I was at my house when he was murdered! All night! I didn’t go anywhere, and I didn’t see anyone!”

Marty grabbed my arm to keep me from latching onto the collar of Brenda’s green silk shirt and launching her across the room. “Nina! Cut it out. I’m not going to spend a whole investigation keeping you from killing our client. Get a hold of yourself!”

Wanda began to pace again, back and forth in front of Brenda’s chair, her heels clicking in agitation the whole way “Do you have anyone who can verify where you were? Did you talk to anyone on the phone? Beyond that, how could whomever did this plant an electrical cord in your house ? Who wants to frame you for murder, Brenda?”

Her pale face went paler. “I don’t know who’d want to frame me for murder!” she declared with a sob. “I know a lot of people, but surely no one who’d want to see me in prison. I don’t think I have any enemies. I don’t allow myself to get too involved with human people because of what I am. Never forget how lucky you all are to have each other, because it’s a lonely row to hoe if you don’t.”

As fair as that statement was, as much as I understood the meaning behind it, it didn't make me any less sure she didn't kill Owen. And she had no business lecturing us at the mo.

I ripped off a piece of paper from the legal pads Marty had stocked our desks with and dropped it on her lap. "Start writing. List all the people you know, even just casually—and you'd better hope one of them is trying to frame you for murder, or I'm going to hand you over to the clan myself."

I took Peppermint Patty from her so Brenda could start making a list, snuggling her under my chin as she shook. "I'm sorry I scared you, Nugget, but your mommy might be a murderer. If she is, do you wanna live with Auntie Nina?"

"Nina!" both Marty and Wanda yelled in protest.

Brenda slammed her fist down on the arm of the chair, cracking it in two. See what I mean? She's strong. Those arms are made of teak . Not an easy wood to break. "I am not a murderer!"

I narrowed my gaze at her. "And I'm not sure I believe that shit, Brenda. So write."

Marty flicked her fingers at me, her blue eyes angry. "Knock it off and let her make the list. In the meantime, we need to talk to Owen's wife and see if we can get anything out of her. Maybe someone was unhappy with Owen and decided to take care of him, and this has nothing at all to do with Brenda."

"Someone who planted the electrical cord in Brenda's house? Left a fingernail just like the ones she wears in Owen's apartment? How flippin' likely is that, Marty?"

Marty threw her hands up in the air. "How flippin' likely was it the Wright brothers would build a plane that actually flew? Test tube babies? A country album from

Beyonce? Unlikely things happen all the time, Elvira.”

See what I mean about my optimistic slash saleswoman bestie? She can turn anything into a positive. I’m not inclined to do the same. “Whatever,” I said, pointing to Brenda. “Just get writing.”

While she did that, sniveling the entire way, I went to do some more research on Brenda. I was headed for a deep dive into her two-hundred-sixty-plus years of life.

I wanted to know where she came from and what she’d been doing all these years. From the pictures Darnell had sent of her house in the burbs, graced with trimmed hedges surrounding the perimeter of the front yard, she didn’t look like she was hurtin’ for cash. She also lived in a neighborhood filled with newer homes, all boasting sprawling front porches and big wooden double doors.

She paid for that place somehow.

I wanted to know how.

The next morning, after a long night of trawling the Internet for info on Brenda, I headed downstairs to the murder basement where Marty and Wanda had the TV on, a news anchor’s blaring voice filling the murder basement.

“Well, look who’s decided to rise and greet the day. It’s Mommy!” Wanda crowed at my daughter, Charlie, planting a kiss on her chubby cheek. She pointed to the TV. “There’s some news about Brenda. As in, she’s no longer considered just a person of interest, but a dangerous suspect wanted for questioning in the death of Owen.”

Well, balls.

“Speaking of, where is she?” I asked, grumpy from a fitful night of tossing and

turning.

“Sleeping, silly. All vampires sleep during the day unless they’re trying to stay out of the pokey,” Marty said on a giggle, offering me a mug of blood before taking Charlie from Wanda, planting a kiss on top of her dark brown curls and setting her on her hip.

“Except this vampire,” I groused. “Because she has annoying friends who make her get up during daylight hours to do stupid things.”

I accepted the mug with gratitude. No need to freak out. I don’t drink real blood. It’s synthetic. The clan banned drinking human blood a long time ago. That was before my time. I hear it’s fucking amazing, but I also hear it’s addictive—which is why it’s forbidden.

Because imagine the pile of bodies if it wasn’t...

Either way, I’ve gotten accustomed to the sun (with boatloads of sunscreen) and the daytime hours because of the cases we take with OOPS.

Not to mention, my little girl Charlie is half witch/half vampire. Five a.m. is what we jokingly call her witching hour. Being half vampire, she also ages slowly. You might think that’s a good thing, because it all goes so fast, right? But imagine teething and the terrible twos in perpetuity. It doesn’t go so fast when you’re a vampire.

But she was a miracle, and I won’t ever forget how lucky I am to have her, and all the family (that’s what I call the people in my life who came to be as a result of my change) that dotes on her because I’m a vampire. I wasn’t supposed to be able to have kids, but that’s a story for another time.

Speaking of my little devil, who’s actually ten in human years but still looks like she’s two (mentally and physically), held out her arms to me. “Mommy!” she cried,

her toothy grin making my stomach clench.

I scooped her up from her Auntie Marty and gave her a kiss. “How’s my little princess today?”

“Tell Mommy while she was lingering in her coffin, we had pancakes with blueberries. Grampa Arch made ’em and she ate them all up, didn’t you, Sugarplum?”

Charlie nodded. “All up!” she agreed, rubbing her belly.

I snuggled her neck, making her giggle. “Who’s such a good girl?”

Marty shook Charlie’s favorite stuffed toy at her with a grin. “You know, I know her aging so slowly has its grievances, but I’m here to tell you, I don’t mind at all that she’s stayed so cuddly for so long. It won’t be but a bit before she’s a teenager like Hollis, with all her teenage ills. Believe me when I tell you, we’ve been locking horns a lot these days. Count your blessings.”

Nodding, I actually had to agree with Marty. Trust and believe, it doesn’t happen often, but it does happen. “I hear when they go from the toddler stage to like six or eight, shit happens almost overnight. I’m not sure I’m ready for that crazy just yet.”

Because Charlie’s a rarity in our world, we don’t have any specifics on the rate of her growth. Add in that she’s half witch and it’s all wonky. In other words, we don’t know a lot about how she’ll mature. All I know is, my life is a zillion times better because of her.

Charlie struggled to hop down from my arms when she saw her brother Carl. Carl is my adopted son—I took him from a witch doctor years ago who had zero clue how to take care of him, and he’s been with me ever since.

We don't have official paperwork or anything. I don't know how he became a zombie or why he was with that witch doctor. I just know, he's mine and I'd dare anyone to say different.

He's also the sweetest kid to ever walk the face of the fucking Earth and the best big brother Charlie could ask for.

"Carl!" Charlie teetered over to him, holding her arms out so he'd scoop her up.

He grinned his pale green grin and knelt down in front of her. "Pi...piggy...back?" he asked in his choppy, jumble of words. Carl struggles with his speech, and he's forever losing a part of his body—fingers, toes, you name it. We could own stock in duct-tape for all the patching we do.

Charlie hopped on his back instantly with her perfect smile. "Yes, please!"

"P l ease," he corrected as he hiked her up.

"Hiyah!" she ordered with a gentle pat on his back, her pigtails bouncing as Carl played her favorite game of horsie.

He burbled a laugh, looking to me for direction. "Up...st-stairs?"

I dropped a kiss on her cheek and ruffled his thick head of dark hair. "Yeah, buddy. If you don't mind, that'd be great. We'll do story time later, okay?"

He nodded with a warm smile and galloped off while Charlie screamed with delight, yelling "Giddyup!"

Wanda draped an arm around my shoulders. "He's such a great young man, isn't he? You've done an amazing job."

I nodded, the familiar warmth of seeing them together settling in my belly. “He really is the best.” Then I set my mug down and cracked my knuckles. “So let’s get the show on the road. I don’t know how the fuck we’re going to get Owen’s wife Astrid to talk to us, but we gotta do it if we’re going to get anywhere. Anybody got a plan?”

Marty smiled and shook a clipboard at me. “Oh, I’ve got a plan, all right. How do you feel about the white-cheeked spider monkey?”

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Chapter

Six

The white-cheeked spider monkey is a thing. Not a lie...

“The white-beaked spider monkey?” I said again, as we stood at the base of the driveway, leading to Astrid Barker’s very cute house in the burbs. “Like, seriously, Marty. Is she gonna give a shit about saving a monkey with a beak when her husband’s been wasted?”

“Cheeked ! It’s white-cheeked, ninny!” Marty wrinkled her red nose at me as the wind bit at her cheeks. “Didn’t you read the article from the link I sent you? Get it right or you’re going to make fools of us. I told you everything you need to know about them on the ride over.”

“As if you need any help with that shit.”

Wanda tugged at my jacket. “We just need a way in, Nina. That’s all. Just be quiet and let us do the rest. And I do mean, be quiet.” She drove a finger into my shoulder. “Don’t you dare get mouthy. The woman is grieving and so are her children. Kid gloves are needed here, not a two-by-four.”

I scoffed at her as I scanned the home Owen and Astrid had shared. It was a little white farmhouse with black shutters and a small front porch, all decorated for Christmas.

Damn, I hated that if this had to happen at all, it happened during the holidays. What a crappy memory to have for the rest of your life. I felt like shit for Owen's kids, and I hoped like hell their mother hadn't been the one to take him out.

But she'd have a good motive if she was our killer. I'm not sure why they separated—if it was related to Brenda, if she found out about what was going on and thought Owen was stepping out—but jealousy and revenge were high on my list of shit to consider.

Marty squared her shoulders like she was a matador, preparing for a bullfight—which I hate, by the way—and began walking up the short fieldstone pathway to Astrid's house. "Let's go, and remember what Wanda said, keep your yap and your snarky comments to yourself."

"Yeah, yeah." At least this time I didn't have to dress up and wear makeup.

While I tried to get my head right about the facts on these damn monkeys, Marty and Wanda were already at the red door, pressing the doorbell.

When Astrid answered, she looked like she'd been through the wringer. Her dark hair was sticking up at odd places, her eyes were red-rimmed and swollen, and her skin was ashy AF.

But was she crying because she was in deep shit for killing her husband or because she was sorry he was dead? Or both?

"Please," she said tiredly, tucking her fuzzy bathrobe around her waist. "I don't want whatever you're selling. Just go away."

As she started to close the door, Marty went into instant sympathy mode. "Are you all right, Mrs...?"

“Astrid. It’s Astrid...” Then her slim shoulders began to shake as she leaned against the doorframe, tears streaming down her face.

This was where Marty and Wanda lived, a person in distress. Instantly, they sprang into action, inching their way inside as they offered soothing words of comfort.

Wanda placed a hand on her arm and gave it a gentle squeeze. “Let us help you, Astrid. I’m Wanda Jefferson, and this is Marty Flaherty and Nina Statleon. I make a mean cup of tea and Marty is a great listener, and Nina...she knows a lot about the white-cheeked spider monkey—which is why we’re here. But forget about that, you look like you need someone to talk to, honey.”

I don’t know how anyone can resist Wanda’s soft eyes and gentle nudging. She exudes motherhood. Her charisma’s off the charts.

Sure enough, before I knew it—before I’m sure even Astrid knew it—we were all stuffed into her small, tiled entryway. There was a basket filled with little shoes and a space to hang backpacks labeled with the kids’ names, Owen Jr. and Lacy.

A big Shepherd mix rushed toward Astrid, looking pretty protective, until I held out my hand and he came right to me. I knelt down and gave him a scruff of the ears. “Hey, buddy,” I whispered, until he relaxed against me.

Astrid looked surprised. “Bode never does that. He’s...afraid of everything and everyone.”

Marty gave her a small smile, helping her to the big ivory sectional couch stained with something purple. “All animals love Nina, which is why she’s part of our Save the White-Cheeked Spider Monkey group.” As she settled her in, she flapped a hand. “Forget why we’re here. Just sit down and Wanda will make you something warm to drink. It’s a cold one today.” She reached for a Christmas themed throw blanket and

covered Astrid's legs, tucking it around her gently.

"Thank you. I...think...I don't..." She sounded like she was going to explain, but then she stopped, almost as if she was too tired to go on.

"Don't say another word," Wanda soothed, pressing a finger to her pale pink lips. "You've obviously been through a tough time. Sit and warm up and let us do the rest, okay?"

Astrid looked so small, sitting on the big couch, the look of defeat on her face very real. Running a hand through her disheveled hair, she blew out a breath. "I'm sorry, but my husband was kill... killed ." She choked the word out with a snuffle. "And I'm a wreck..."

While Wanda fished around in the kitchen, open to the living room, Marty gasped in feigned surprise, gripping Astrid's hand. "Oh, I'm so sorry! Do you mind if I ask what happened?"

I guess there's something to be said about the kindness of strangers, because Astrid collapsed into Marty, spilling the whole story about Owen's murder in gulps and sobs.

As we listened to her story, one we knew part of already, I heard Owen Jr. and Lacy down the long hall, playing quietly. I looked at the framed black-and-white pictures of Astrid and Owen with their kids, decorating the wall in the entryway, and they made my throat tighten up.

They were a nice-looking family who'd been dealt a shitty hand.

Bode sat near me, pressing his big body against my thighs. It was obvious he sensed the pain his mistress was experiencing.

“He... He’d stepped out on our marriage once before,” she whispered, obviously looking to see if the kids were nearby. “It was early on, right after Owen Jr. was born, but I forgave him, and I thought I could trust him again, but then...”

“Then?” Wanda prompted gently, as she placed the teacup in Astrid’s hand.

She took a ragged breath. “Then his profile came up as a friend suggestion on Facebook, and I almost couldn’t believe my eyes,” she cried, pressing a hand to her face. “First, the irony of my husband being a friend suggestion was too crazy to be believed. So I went digging, and I found the page with his picture that said he was single. Single ! But I just couldn’t process that he’d cheat again. Not after all the counseling we’d been through. We worked hard to overcome his betrayal. But there it was, plain as day! He’d made another profile so he could hook up with random women!”

I wondered why she didn’t find it suspicious that Owen would create a profile with his actual name, but I’ve heard when a partner cheats, everything they do creates suspicion. That suspicion clouds your judgment and your critical thinking.

Marty slipped out of her coat, setting it aside to fold her hands in her lap. That usually meant she was going in deep. “Oh, Astrid, how awful. But...are you sure he was cheating? Did you find any proof?”

Astrid’s chest heaved as she cried. “I didn’t have to look very far. The woman he was cheating with sent me screenshots of their messages.”

Well, fuckity-fuck-fuck. That meant, either Brenda was a damn sadist or someone really was setting her up. She’d have to be a Meryl Streep level actress to pull off what she was handing us.

Wanda took Astrid’s hand, pulling it to her lap. “So did you confront him? Give him

hell for treating you that way?”

Her heart-shaped face went angry with flashing eyes and thinned lips. “I did! I kicked him out about a month ago. I sent the kids to our neighbors, and he came home to all his clothes and stupid gaming magazines on the front lawn. He denied and denied, but I had the proof! I showed it to him, and he still denied everything!” Astrid paused for a moment, bowing her dark head, chin to chest. “But now...now he’s dead!” she wailed.

Wanda gripped her hand tighter. “Oh, Astrid, how did that happen?”

She stopped suddenly and looked at us like she was seeing us for the first time. “I don’t know why I’m telling complete strangers this. I’m not usually an over-sharer. I’m an absolute wreck, is what I am.”

But Marty smiled warmly with beaming reassurance. “Maybe because we are strangers, you can sense we won’t judge you. We’ll just listen. Everyone needs to be heard, and we’re happy to hear you, Astrid.”

See? I’m telling you, these two probably could have gotten confessions from all the infamous serial killers if the FBI had given them a crack at ’em. They have this way about them that can’t be defined or denied. Ask me, I know. That’s why I’m here instead of at home with my kids, baking Christmas cookies I can’t even feckin’ eat.

Now Astrid crumbled, falling back against the couch. “The way I feel, I almost wouldn’t care if you were crazy killers except for the kids. Right now, I just want to die...”

Wanda pulled her into a hug and began to rock her. I did mention she’s always the soothing bosom, didn’t I? “But you won’t,” she said fiercely, giving Astrid a hard squeeze. “You won’t because your babies need their mama. Now let it out, tell us

what happened to your husband.”

“He’s dead...someone killed him! He was strang— Strangled . Oh God, I don’t know what happened! I don’t know who’d do this,” she groaned miserably. “One minute we were arguing on the phone about what a liar he is, the next, the police were here, telling me he’s dead!”

“What did the cops say?” I asked.

She dabbed at her red eyes, her cheeks raw from all the tears. “The police said he was communicating with some woman named Brenda. The same one who sent me all those screenshots. Worse? She’s...she’s older than me! I don’t understand why Owen would do something like this.”

I clucked my tongue. I didn’t know if we should mention the catfishing bit if she didn’t. I’m new at this, and I’m trying real hard to keep shit together and not let any cats outta the bag.

Fortunately, we didn’t have to wait long.

“You saw screenshots from this woman? Gracious, what a terrible thing,” Marty sympathized, her round blue eyes wide.

“Yes, and they were awful . Ugh, the things he said to her. And don’t think for one second I didn’t want to hunt her down and...” She shook her head as though to ward off her murderous thoughts. “But I learned in our first round of therapy that I can’t control what Owen does. Who knows if this woman Brenda even knew he was married when she started up with him. It’s not up to her to investigate him.”

That was a healthy way to view continuing a relationship with a cheater. Astrid definitely had more restraint than me. I mean, I’d toss my husband Greg in the nearest landfill if

he cheated, but I'd be hard-pressed not to want to kill whoever he cheated with, as well.

Wanda said out loud exactly what I was thinking. "That's very generous of you, Astrid. I can't say I'd behave the same way," she said with a scowl. "Your restraint is admirable."

Astrid slapped her hands against her lap. "But look what I've done! Instead of taking him at his word, I kicked him out. Now the police say they think his profile really was cloned and that maybe he wasn't cheating on me after all! He swore to me he didn't cheat. It's enough that someone killed him, but he went to his grave knowing I thought he was a cheating liar!"

Grim.

I wasn't getting killer from Astrid. I was getting distraught and scattered, followed by a deeply-rooted sadness. But I didn't get killer from Brenda, either.

"So the police questioned you? I mean, of course they did. They always suspect the spouse in a murder," Marty said, spouting some of her true crime facts.

Astrid tightened the blanket around her. "I got that impression. They questioned me for hours and hours, but I stood strong. I didn't kill Owen. I sure wanted to, but I didn't. I would never."

"Do you remember the names of the cops who questioned you?"

She cocked her head, her face confused. "What a weird question. Why would you want to know that?"

Thank Jesus for Wanda and her improv, because my lips slammed the hell shut,

refusing to answer the question.

“Nina knows a lot of police officers. Maybe she might know the ones who questioned you, that’s all.”

I leaned against the wall and nodded as I scratched Bode’s ears, nodding. “Yeah...”

Pinching her temples, Astrid winced. “Um, a Detective Wazinski and a Detective Dunst. They told me not to leave town, as if I’d do that anyway. This is all so crazy.”

“So I suppose they’re looking for this woman who messaged with him?”

She nodded, pushing her tangled hair from her face. “Yes. It’s been all over the news. I can’t believe you didn’t see it...”

“We don’t watch the news much,” I assured her, forcing the lie from my lips. “Too busy trying to save the white-beaked?—”

“Cheeked,” Wanda corrected. “The white cheeked spider monkeys. Much of our time is dedicated to saving them. But forget that. You said they were looking for this woman, but do they have any other suspects? I mean, it makes sense this woman would have a motive if she found out Owen was married with children, but are they sure it was her?”

A look of disgust crossed her pretty face. “You’d think they were going to pin me for it, the way they grilled me because I don’t have an alibi for the night he was killed, either, but when I talked to them yesterday, they said they had some new evidence they couldn’t discuss. The only detail I know is, he was strangled. I don’t know anything else for sure. I only know Owen is dead. He’s dead ...” she said on a shaky whisper.

Marty encouraged her to sip her tea. “Do you know if anyone else would want to hurt Owen? Anyone in his life who was angry enough with him to do something like this?”

Astrid shrugged, but then she sat up straight. “Oh, my God, I can’t believe I didn’t think about this! I guess I was so blown away by Owen’s death, so scattered, my head was a mess. But he had a really ugly argument with his partner.”

I looked up from petting Bode’s soft fur. “His partner? In what?”

“His software company. Owen owns... owned a software security company with his college roommate. But they had a huge falling out a few months ago, when he caught Derek beefing up quotes for potential clients and keeping the extra fees for himself. It’s been a huge, ongoing legal battle for rights to the company between the two of them. Owen trying to prove the company was his idea, funded by his money, and Derek swearing up and down that it was his idea and Owen gave him the start-up cash.”

Ding, ding, ding!

Maybe we had another suspect. Maybe now we were gettin’ somewhere.

But how did you forget something so important when the cops were breathin’ down your neck, trying to pin you for murdering your husband? Especially when you had no alibi for the time frame he was killed? Was this just a blame shift?

Marty tucked her red purse deeper into her lap. “Did they have anything official—paperwork or something that said it was Owen’s concept and money?”

Astrid looked down at her feet encased in striped pink and yellow socks. “No. That’s part of the problem. They were best friends. Who knew Derek would do something

like that? They've been friends since college."

Marty cocked her head and looked at Astrid with gentle eyes. "Had he been in touch with Derek since the argument?"

She fisted the blanket in her hands. "Not that I know of, but there seems to be a lot I didn't know that had to do with Owen. I only know the fight was ugly and it got physical—in front of their employees and everything. They almost called the police to break it up."

"Then you need to make sure you call the police right away and tell them what happened," Wanda directed. "You don't want them eyeballing you for murdering your husband."

That made Astrid begin to cry again, this time deep, gulping sobs I almost couldn't stand to hear. While Marty and Wanda soothed her, I decided to see what her kids were up to and if they were okay, because Mom was such a wreck. I don't just love animals, I love kids, too. Seeing them suffer breaks me in a way I can't find a word for.

I made my way down the long hallway, following the sound of their voices, Bode right by my side.

"Good boy," I whispered to him. "You're lookin' out for your family."

Stopping in the doorway of what looked like a colorfully decorated playroom, I watched them playing quietly. Owen Jr. with a big red firetruck, and Lacy with some Barbie dolls. They were still in their pajamas, hair mussed from sleep, their chubby cheeks flushed.

I smelled their sorrow. It was deep, jarring me to the bone.

And I fucking hated that.

Bode went and sat near them, watching as they played. Owen Jr. noticed me first, his velvety brown eyes looking at me with suspicion. “Who are you?”

I grinned at him with playful eyes. “I’m Nina. Who are you?”

He got up from the carpeted floor, traipsing over to me, the belt of his checkered bathrobe trailing behind him. He stuck out his hand with a jab. “I’m Owen Jacob Barker Jr. and I’m eight years old.”

I took his hand and gave it a shake. “I’m Nina Blackman-Statleon, and I’m not eight years old. Good to meet ya.”

He looked up at me, his round eyes full of curiosity, freckles dancing across his nose. “Did I shake your hand right?”

I winked and nodded. “You did a fine job, Owen Jacob Barker Jr. Well done.”

Those big eyes went soft with sadness. “I learned how to do it from my dad. My dad died.”

If I could cry, I would. I hated that I couldn’t shed tears. It left for bottled-up emotions that were never allowed to fully process. I felt the sting of the onslaught of tears, I felt the tightening of my throat and the empty feeling in my belly, but no tears. No relief.

So I squatted on my haunches and looked Owen Jr. in the eye. “I’m sorry to hear that, Owen. You must be pretty dang sad, huh?” There was no need to give this revelation a silver fuckin’ lining. The kid’s dad was dead. That sucked ass. He deserved to let it hold space, to let his sorrow breathe.

He took a deep breath, his small chest lifting and falling. “I miss him. He used to make us banana pancakes on Saturdays. He was a good daddy.”

I’d caught Lacy’s attention now, too. She padded over to me, her light brown hair catching the weak December sunlight sifting through the blinds.

She held up her doll, her eyes dull and tired. “This is my Barbie. Her name is Ariel.”

“Like the Little Mermaid?” I asked, brushing her wispy hair from her face.

She gave me a shy glance, her thick lashes sweeping her cheek. “Uh-huh. Everybody likes Moana and Elsa, but my favorite is Ariel, and I don’t care that stupid Destiny Evans says she’s dumb. She’s still my favorite.” As if to reinforce that, she jutted out her bottom lip in “so there” fashion.

I gave her belly a light poke. “I like a girl who sticks to her guns. Good for you. I like Ariel, too.”

But Owen nudged her with a frown. “Don’t call people stupid, Lacy. It’s mean.” Then he looked to me as though he’d taken on the role of his sister’s keeper. “She’s only five. She doesn’t know any better.”

I tapped him on the shoulder. “You’re a fine role model, Owen. Bet your dad would be proud.”

“My daddy’s in Heaven. Mommy says it beautiful and Daddy’s going to be so happy living there, but...I wish we could visit him sometimes,” Lacy said with a tiny shudder.

What the hell do you say to that? How do you make that better? “I’m sorry, Lacy. But you know what, pretty lady? You can still talk to him. He might not answer, but you

can always talk to him—I bet he listens, even if it stinks that he can’t answer.”

She nodded, wrinkling her nose, her hair bouncing along the fabric of her purple pajamas. “It is stinky. Like poo.”

This time, Owen agreed, his freckled face going cold. “It’s stinky like that lady where Daddy lived. She was stinky, too.”

So look. When I agreed to do this with Marty and Wanda, I didn’t think for a flippin’ second any kids would be involved. I know, I know, that sounds naïve, and I’m far from falling off a turnip truck. I mean, I’ve seen some shit, but kids were my soft spot.

I didn’t want to poke around inside their little heads and ask probing questions better left to therapists and the adults in their lives. I didn’t want to upset or trigger them, either.

But what if I didn’t ask, and Lacy and Owen Jr. never got justice for their father? Astrid was a trainwreck. She was so terrified she’d be blamed, she didn’t tell the cops Owen had an argument—a physical one—with his best friend, with witnesses and everything.

Maybe she was playing us with an act, but her kids had nothing to do with that.

So I asked in the gentlest way I know how. “A stinky lady, huh? That sounds mysterious, little dude. Who was she? Do you know her name?”

He shrugged his little shoulders and turned away. “I dunno. My dad said to mind my business and ignore her. But she smelled real bad. So bad, I had to cover my nose with my arm.”

At this point, Lacy tugged a piece of my hair. “You’re pretty. You look like Jasmine from Aladdin . Can I brush your hair?” She tugged at my hand, pulling me to a pink and purple vanity not unlike the one my kid has, where she could play dress-up and put on pretend makeup in front of a lighted mirror.

Grampa Arch had gotten it for her for Christmas last year—among the zillion other things my people showered her with, but it was one of her favorites, much to Marty and Wanda’s delight.

I smiled at her sweet face, following her to the tiny chair in front of the playset. I pointed to the hair clips. “You bet, but only if you promise to put some of those butterfly clips in my hair. The blue ones. I like those the best.”

She giggled softly, grabbing a purple brush as I sat down. “So what did this lady smell like that was so bad, Owen?” I casually asked, as he went back to playing with his firetruck.

He paused like he was giving that some thought, and then he said, “Like my grampa’s shirt. My grampa from Arizona. Not the one from Colorado.”

His grampa’s shirt. Did that mean like Old Spice or Stetson, maybe? That was probably popular for a guy his grandfather’s age. That’s not what I’d classify as stinky. Though, maybe to a kid it was smelly.

As Lacy brushed my hair, twisting strands into what she called braids, I didn’t know how to dig any deeper if Owen couldn’t define the smell, and when I asked what she looked like, his description wasn’t really clear. She was old, and that was all he had to say on the subject.

Owen had officially tapped out of the conversation.

I don't know if it meant anything, anything at all, but maybe this stinky lady had played a part in Owen's demise.

But then Lacy said something that made me sit up straight. "I think Owen means the lady who has sparkles on her fingers."

"Sparkles? Do you mean like her fingernail polish?"

Lacy shook her head. "Nuh-uh. She has sparkles right here." She pointed to the pad of her finger. "I sawed 'em when she didn't know I was looking."

A lady with sparkles on her fingertips, who was stinky and might have nothing to do with Owen's murder.

We were killin' it.

Chapter

Seven

Operation Find a Clue (JFC, any clue will do)

Wanda looked at me in the rearview mirror of Marty's SUV. "How is it that a five-year-old can convince you to wear a dozen butterflies in your hair, but we can't convince you to wear anything but hoodies and work boots?"

"Because neither one of you two nutcases are anywhere near as cute as a five-year-old?"

I couldn't get those two out of my head. They were sweet kids who faced a fucked-up situation and it pissed me off, but it also made me sad.

Marty plucked at my hair and chuckled. "You're so fancy," she cooed at me. "My one true wish is that you could see it. The new swear words we'd learn would be off the charts."

I didn't have to see it to feel it. I had more clips in my hair than a teenager had pimples. They were hanging in my face, swinging by my ears. Oh, and there was ribbon threaded through this mess in my least favorite color—yellow. I'm pretty sure I looked like My Little Pony had exploded all over my head.

But I'd promised Lacy I wouldn't take it out until I washed my hair. I never break a promise—especially to a kid.

“I know you hate the color yellow, but I still say it’s in your color wheel.” Marty tugged the length of my hair, still wrapped up in a weird sort of ponytail on the side of my head.

I swatted at her intrusive hands. “Forget my damn hair and focus on what I’m telling you about the sparkles Lacy said she saw. That sounds fishy...maybe even paranormal...”

I’d given that some thought as we prepared to scour Brenda’s place for anything that might help us figure out if she was being framed. From everything she’d told us so far, it didn’t seem like she had any friends, let alone enemies who hated her enough to frame her for murder.

But if the lady who was stinky was a person of interest, and nothing the kids had said really led me to believe she was, it was still fucked up the way Lacy explained her fingertips. It felt like it meant something.

Paranormals walk among us. We’re all over—mingling with humans, living our lives right beside them while they’re completely unaware. Maybe it was just a paranormal who lived in the apartment building...or maybe it wasn’t...

“Sparkles on her fingertips, you say?” Marty asked as we pulled up a few streets away from Brenda’s house. “What in all of heaven’s name does that mean? Did she say what the lady looked like?”

I pushed a strand of my bedazzled-to-death hair out of my face. “Neither one of them had a whole lot to say about what she looked like. Owen said they saw her sometimes when they were going to their dad’s apartment. So she lives in the apartment building or visits someone there—they didn’t know for sure. She’s old was the best I got out of ’em. No name, and Owen Sr. told them to mind their business and not talk to her. Maybe she sent up parental signals—you know, stranger danger?”

Marty clucked her tongue. “The bit about his grampa from Arizona, too. That stuck with me. Astrid said her parents were coming from Arizona to help. Maybe we could pop back over and give him a sniff?”

Wanda turned the car off, planting her hands on the steering wheel. “Well, I don’t know about a smelly grampa, but sparkles could definitely mean someone paranormal, which leans toward Brenda being framed, but why? Who’d want to frame her?”

“That’s definitely the million-dollar question. We also need to question this dude, Derek...did you get his last name and information?”

Marty grinned. “He was easy enough to find. Derek Simpkins, in his early thirties, lives somewhere here on the island. I bet his address wouldn’t be hard to discover.”

“We need to pay him a visit, for sure,” I said. “Hey, I meant to ask, how did you guys get out of Astrid’s, anyway?”

One minute I was playing with the kids, and the next, Wanda was wagging her finger at me because it was time to go.

“Thankfully, she forgot all about the white-cheeked spider monkeys, but we promised to check on her in a couple of days, to be sure her parents got in all right from Arizona and the kids were squared away.”

I felt a little relief that she’d at least have help. “Okay, we’ll hunt down Derek tomorrow. Right now, we need to worry about getting into Brenda’s house without you two being caught on someone’s security cam. It’s a pretty frickin’ ritzy neighborhood. I’m sure there are plenty of cameras everywhere. She said if we stick to the bushes in the back and stay low, we should be okay to get into her cellar door. But we’re quick. If we do show up on someone’s security camera’s, we’ll be a blur.”

Marty nodded. “Another reason I insisted we wear all black.”

I held up the black ski mask she’d given me to wear. “The hell, Blondie. You insisted we wear black so you’d have another opportunity to play fucking dress-up.”

She shrugged her shoulders at me with a sly smile and a wink. “I like to get into character. So sue me.”

Wanda held up a finger. “Okay, you two, let’s get this show on the road. I want to get this over and done with without getting caught. I’d prefer not to have to call Heath and ask him to cough up bail money.” She turned around and looked at us in the backseat. “You two ready?”

I nodded my fancy head. “Ready.”

We’d parked on a side street by a convenience store, so we wouldn’t raise any eyebrows in Brenda’s shi-shi-foo-foo neighborhood. I put the ski mask on—even if I didn’t really need it because I won’t show up on cameras—and popped the back door open, sliding out, preparing to make the mile or so hike to Brenda’s.

I have to admit, the good parts involved in being a vampire are really sweet. There’s nothing like being able to run as fast as a bullet train. I battle with myself every day, wondering if it’s better than being able to eat chicken wings and slug down a cold beer, though.

As we ran toward Brenda’s, kicking up snow as we went, streets passing us at the speed of light, the freedom I felt invigorated me, helping to clear my head. I let my worries about the kids go for a sec and focused on finding clues at Brenda’s.

Marty stopped short just shy of Brenda’s property, plastering herself up against a tree on the sidewalk. I nearly took her out, skidding to a halt just before I ran into her.

Wanda looked up and down the street, signaling to us that it was safe like she was some kinda air traffic control employee, wildly waving her hands and jumping up and down.

JFC, I swear, there's nothing subtle about us. We might as well put our names on a billboard with flashing neon lights and arrows so everyone knows we're gonna break into Brenda Bronkowski's house.

Following Wanda's lead, we scurried across the street like cat burglars, diving into the bushes that lined her house in the backyard. Like in a cartoon, I could almost hear the keys of a piano plink, signifying each step we took.

We looked like idiots dressed in black, pretending to know what we were doing.

Creeping our way to where Brenda said her cellar door was located, I heard Marty hiss and Wanda swear as we crawled through the bushes. P/s, Wanda almost never swears.

I found the cellar door first, hunkering down low before yanking it open. We flew down the stairs, leading to another door Brenda had given us a key for.

I jammed the key in the lock and stepped inside a musty cellar holding nothing much but cobwebs and a bunch of boxes the cops had torn open and rifled through. Christmas decorations were strewn across the floor—Halloween, too—but a quick scan didn't reveal anything of interest.

Yanking off my stupid face mask, I stuffed it in my pocket, knocking off some of the clips in my hair. I bent to scoop them up so I didn't leave any evidence behind.

We took the staircase to the first floor, pushing open the door to reveal Brenda's kitchen—a high-tech wonder of appliances she probably never used. I wouldn't use

mine if not for Charlie and Carl, though Arch makes good use of it often to cook family dinners.

Marty busied herself plucking leaves from Wanda's black turtleneck (which explained the swearing) while I scanned the kitchen that opened to an enormous great room with big, puffy furniture, a fireplace, and lots of throw pillows tossed everywhere.

No wonder Marty and Wanda felt a kinship with Brenda. The multitude of throw pillows she possessed said it all. What is it about throw pillows that speaks to so many damn people?

All the kitchen cabinets were open, but they didn't have much in them. If you didn't eat, you didn't need utensils. The drawers were the same deal, open and tossed by the cops with nothing much to see.

Marty whistled as we looked around. "This is some place, huh? Those marble floors in the entryway alone cost a fortune. Not to mention, real wood floors. Ask me, I know."

"So she's not poor. We can expect a big donation to the charity of our choice. Yay. We're not here to flip her house, Marty. We're here for some damn clues, which we desperately need or there's gonna be no donations but toward our bail money when this whole fucking Operation Find a Clue lands us in jail."

But Wanda wasn't listening to me. She was goo-goo eyed over the décor. "Brenda said she comes from family money. Oil or some such thing. She said investing wisely was the key."

I planted my hands on my hips, leaning back on the gigantic island with a shiny silver sink in the middle of yet more white marble. "You know, did she ever say how she

was turned in the first place? According to Greg, it happened during a time period when shit got crazy-hinky for vamps. Humans were hunting them left and right.”

Wanda provided the answer. “She claims it happened in a raid at some big gala ball her family traditionally threw every year. They were warned vampires were on the loose, but her brother, a stubborn guy, refused to cave and call it off.”

“She was a widow at the time, and in that day and age, she became her brother’s responsibility. I guess they didn’t get along, and her dead husband left her destitute. Anyway, he wanted to marry her off. He thought the ball was a good way to find a suitor,” Marty added, with a wrinkle of her nose.

My disbelief was real. “He wanted to find her a husband at sixty-two?”

Wanda clucked her tongue. “Well, yes. Back in the day that’s how it was done, and if they didn’t get along, he’d want to foist her off on any takers available—especially at her advanced age. The dowry paid would be small, and she’d be out of his hair.”

Rolling up my sleeves, I shook my head. Heathens. All of ’em. “So where does being turned to a vamp fit in?”

“These vampires raided the ball and went on a rampage. Brenda’s entire family was killed, including her brother. But somehow she survived, and therefore inherited everything. She ran the company from that point on, until she sold it in the seventies. I have no clue how she kept her true identity hidden for all those years, though. I mean, surely someone noticed she didn’t age...”

Huh. I’m proud to be a vampire, but I’m not so proud of the ways of old. I like a good tussle as much as the next ragey bitch, but I’m pretty sure I wouldn’t have survived a fucking era where vampires ran rampant and drained everyone in sight.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I asked, “So then there must be some record of a massacre like that, right? You know vampires love documenting every fucking thing. When we’re done here, we should dig deeper. Maybe it’s someone from her past who wants to frame her?”

Marty tapped the marble counter with her fingernail. “That’s a long time to hold a grudge, don’t you think?”

“Well, when you’re immortal, it gives you a lot of time to think. We weren’t turned in the dark ages of vamps. Shit was different for us. Hell, it’s even more different now than when we first opened OOPS. Maybe someone’s just been waitin’ around to mess with her. It’s a stretch, but not impossible.”

Wanda pointed to the living room. “Fair enough, but for now, we need to get moving. We’ll discuss that angle later when we get back to the castle.”

I jabbed a finger in the air. “I’ll take upstairs, you guys down here, agreed?”

They both nodded. “Agreed.”

I made my way through the living room to another staircase, wide and shiny, taking me up to an open room where there were tons of bookcases and one of those chairs-and-a-half.

And I only I know it’s called a chair-and-a-half because Marty spent three months hunting for the right one for her house. The information did me about as much good as an algebra class ever did. Sitting next to it, Brenda’s beloved needlepoint, half hanging out of a big wicker basket.

The hallway beyond was long and broad, with four bedrooms total. There were lots of pictures along the way, some I’m assuming of her family, due to the clothing they

wore.

I decided to start with Brenda's room first. Unsurprisingly, it was in the same condition as the rest of the house—all torn up.

Her silky comforter was half on, half off the bed, with more pillows thrown on the floor than on the mattress. Even the flowing curtains were crooked.

I put my gloves on, because I still don't know if I have detectable DNA, and began sifting through her nightstand drawers. Nothing but a bunch of girly stuff like creams and moisturizers and spongey things I think were used for applying makeup.

I looked under her bed, felt around the floor just in case the cops had missed something small the way they did with her nail, but I was comin' up dry.

Noting the walk-in closet the size of a small mobile home, I decided that was next on my list. Until I heard Marty call me from downstairs, her voice filled with her typical hectic energy.

“Nina! Get your gorgeous butt down here, vampire!”

I blew out of the closet and raced back down the stairs to find Marty and Wanda looking at a picture, holding it up with their gloved hands.

A picture that sparkled .

What in the name of glitter?

“Where the hell did you find that?” I asked, pulling out my phone to take a picture. My nostrils flared as I did. I smelled... magic . I knew the scent because of one of our more recent OOPS cases with an accidental turning. Her name was Robbie, and she

was a great kid who'd accidentally been turned into a witch.

In fact, she'd set my damn hair on fire with her out-of-control magic. I knew the smell well.

Marty held it up, squinting at the bright light it omitted. "It was taped under the mantel."

"Taped under the mantel? Who the fuck puts a picture under the mantel and what made you look there?"

Marty rolled her big baby blues at me. "I was looking to see what kind of wood it was. I mean, it's gorgeous."

"You're supposed to be looking for clues, Marty," I reminded her.

"I'm a decorator at heart. I can't help it. Decorating is in my blood. It's like Nate and Jeremiah possesses me and I lose all control of my faculties, okay? Forget that. Take a really good look at the picture, Nina."

Now I squinted, the sparkles surrounding the pic irritating my sensitive eyes. It was a pic of a guy...an incredibly good-looking guy, dressed in an ascot and a suit, a lot like the suits Greg's ancestors wore.

But whoa Nellie! Holy spitballs—he looked like... "What the hell is going on? He looks a lot like Owen."

Wanda rocked back on her heels as she sucked on her teeth. "Darn tootin' he does."

The moment she agreed with me was the second the picture flew from Marty's hands, up into the high tray ceilings, before it exploded into a million pieces.

That's when the room began to quake.

I looked around for the source of the chaos, but Marty fell into me, knocking me to the ground. Her head slammed against the floor, knocking her out cold.

Swirls of light rushed through the air, shooting streaming flames.

Hauling Marty into my arms, I looked for Wanda as the furniture began to lift into the air, turning into heavy projectiles aimed directly at us.

Wanda blocked the couch, catching it like some kind of NFL quarterback, hurling it toward the other end of the room. The furniture that wasn't airborne skidded across the hardwood floors at a scarily high rate of speed.

"Wanda! Duck!" I hollered as a mirror unhinged itself from the wall, heading straight for her.

She dove for the kitchen, sliding across the floor to scramble behind the island before the mirror crashed to the ground, splintering and scattering everywhere.

Dragging an unconscious Marty with me, I fought my way to the kitchen, trying to dodge pillows that somehow managed to hit me square in the face anyway.

"The cellar door!" Wanda yelled as the floor literally rocked beneath our feet. "Get to the cellar door!"

I forced my way to my feet, trying to keep my balance enough to get to the cellar. Throwing Marty over my shoulder like a ragdoll, head down, I steamrolled my way through plants flying at me while the rumble of the furniture nipped at my heels.

Wanda grabbed my hand as she hauled open the door, which ripped off its hinges,

tearing ass out of the room. She pulled me down the wooden stairs to the cellar while the entire house rumbled and groaned, racing across the room and up the stairs to the door that would lead us outside.

I heard her yell a warrior cry one last time as she shot through the door leading to the backyard. We fell out of it, hitting the ground hard with grunts.

Dogs began to bark, porch lights flickered on, doors opened.

Shit, shit, shit. “Go!” I hissed. “Run!”

We took off back the way we came, Marty on my shoulder, her limp body bashing against my back.

I was never so glad to see Marty’s big SUV as I was tonight, sitting there in the dark, a behemoth of a machine.

Wanda beeped the car, throwing open the back door before climbing into the driver’s seat. I launched Marty into the back with more force than I’d intended. So much so, she was gonna feel it tomorrow.

We took off like a shot just as police sirens sounded around us, tearing ass toward the highway.

Tucking Marty to my side, I pulled some tissues from what I laughingly called her Mary Poppins purse because it always had everything in it but the kitchen sink and began to dab at the gash on her head as she stirred.

As we drove back to the Long Island, I fought my anger. Did Brenda know about this guy that looked a fucking great deal like Owen Barker, and if so, who was he and why was his pictures stashed under her mantel?

All things that made me go hmmm .

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Chapter

Eight

If being a detective means death by throw pillows, I want out...

Wanda blew out a deep breath of relief when we finally sat our tired asses down in the murder basement to dissect the situation. “So, ladies, what the heck was that? Let’s talk about it before we let Brenda know we’re home.”

I shook my head. What was that ? I reached down and pulled Doug off my leg as he climbed up my calf, looking for attention. I draped him across my chest, stroking the top of his head.

“I have no frickin’ idea, but it smelled like witch magic to me, too. It smelled just like Robbie’s.”

Wanda bobbed her mussed head, smoothing her hair from her face. “You’re right. It smelled a lot like Robbie’s magic. So then, any thoughts on why Brenda has witch magic in her house? And why was it attached to a picture that blew up in our faces?”

“And who is this guy who looks a whole lot like Owen?”

Marty, looking ragged from our encounter but healing quickly, narrowed her eyes. “You know, when we first interviewed Brenda, she said he reminded her of someone, but she didn’t go into detail. Bet this is the guy Owen reminded her of. So it makes sense she’d be drawn to him. Tack on that they allegedly had so much in common,

and voila—instant attraction.”

Doug curled into me, tucking himself close while I wondered out loud, “But how is that connected to Owen’s murder, and why were we attacked by furniture possessed by frickin’ Martha Stewart?”

Marty rubbed her head, the bruise under her eye still a little purple. “Before we go any further, what happened to me?”

I snorted a laugh. “You got clocked by some of that décor you love so much, that’s what. It was like a scene straight outta when good furniture goes bad. I carried your ass outta there. We made it back to the car by the skin of our teeth before the cops came.”

She blew me a kiss. “Thanks for that, pal. Now, we need to get Brenda down here pronto, and I need to update my whiteboard.”

I texted Arch and asked him to send Brenda down to the basement.

As she floated down the spiral staircase, Linus and Peppermint Patty in tow, I fought to keep my shit together. I’m pretty sure she didn’t know anything about the picture under her mantel, but I’d bet she knew who was in the photo.

My gut told me someone was screwin’ with her, but why, and would she have any idea—or was this going to be a big old nothing burger again?

When she approached us, her face filled with concern, she took one look at Marty and gasped. “Oh, Marty! Are you all right? Archibald and Tottington told me you texted them saying you had some trouble at my house.”

I pointed to the chair in the middle of our desks. “Trouble is an interesting word,

Brenda. Have a seat and we'll discuss the trouble .”

Peppermint Patty hopped into her lap, but Linus opted for Wanda and the big fluffy blanket she had draped over her legs.

Clinging to her dog, she had that worried look that had graced her mug since we'd met her. “Tell me what happened. What did you find?”

We gave her the rundown on what happened at her place, leaving out the part about Owen 2.0.

“Any idea why we smelled witch magic in your house?” I asked, making sure she heard my tone was filled with suspicion.

Brenda's stare was blank, her eyes wide. “I have no idea. I swear to you all. I don't know any witches. I couldn't even tell you what witch magic smells like, let alone why it's in my house...”

I held up my phone to show her the picture of the guy who looked like Owen. “ Who is this?”

Brenda blinked as though she'd seen a ghost—and I know what that looks like, because I've literally seen a ghost. So have Marty and Wanda. They had that same damn expression on their faces when they saw one, too.

Her hand flew to her mouth, her gray-blue eyes wide. “Where in the name of Nosferatu did you get that?”

“It was taped under your mantel in the living room, Brenda.” Marty's tone was gentle.

“ What? That’s crazy. I never had a picture of him... I don’t...I don’t understand what’s going on?”

Wanda’s gaze wasn’t as gentle as Marty’s tone. “Neither do we. So can you explain it? Let’s start by telling us who that is, and why he looks so much like Owen Barker?”

She looked at us all, her eyes bleak. “That’s...that’s Winston. Winston Blackheart.” The sob that followed was raw, the scent of her emotion fight-or-flight.

But the minute she opened her mouth, I started googling his name. “And? How do you know him?”

Pressing a fist to her mouth, her pale face revealing obvious sorrow, she said, “He...he was the love of my life...”

Huh. That’s not what Google said. “Google says the love of your life was Jeremiah Bronkowski. You were married to the dude for thirty-five years until he died of scarlet fever.”

But Brenda shook her head vehemently, her words fierce. “No! No, no, no. I never loved Jeremiah. Never! He was a terrible husband, especially after we discovered we’d never have children. He certainly wasn’t the love of my life. The love of my life was and always will be Winston. No matter how long my infernal life lasts.”

Marty lifted her chin, eyeing Brenda. “Surely it occurred to you that Owen looked a lot like Winston when you accepted his friend request and started messaging him?”

“Of course it did! I told you he reminded me of someone. But he’s so painful to talk about—even after all these years. I didn’t want to dig it all back up again. Comparing him to Owen, it’s obvious I have a type.” She shrugged with a sorrow that reached

me in my bones from across my desk. “I never had a picture of Winston. I don’t know where that came from. I know I must have said ‘I don’t know’ a hundred times since we’ve met, but I truly don’t know how it got under my mantel. I promise you.”

My anger had long since cooled and my throat tightened, even though I’m pretty sure that can’t happen anymore. While Brenda reminisced about Winston, I typed his name into Google. “So what happened to this Winston? If he was the love of your life, why didn’t you marry him?”

She groaned, tugging at the collar of her red silk shirt, her sudden anger making her eyes flash hot. “Because my brother, Edmund, wouldn’t allow it. Winston didn’t have any money, and he was from a poor family. In those days, making a good match was the only thing anyone thought of, and a good match meant money--prestige. And, let’s not forget, I was older than most of a marriageable age. Much older, if you consider the fact that my father, as my brother called it, indulged me and didn’t force me to marry young. Edmund wanted to be rid of me after my father died. He saw me as a burden.”

I popped my lips. “He sounds like a real tool.”

Brenda nodded. “Tool is a good word. Anyway, seeing as my brother was the head of the family after my father’s death, he got to choose, and Jeremiah had everything he needed to add to his good name—he also didn’t mind that in those days, I was considered a spinster. Feelings didn’t come into play back then. Especially not a female’s.”

Marty flicked the top of her pen, her eyes watery after hearing about Winston. “So Winston...he wasn’t acceptable marriage material. What did he do for a living back then?”

Brenda’s laugh was bitter. “Money really is the root of all evil. That and societal

status and he had neither. He was a stable boy—inconsequential to everyone but me. I loved him so much, it almost took my breath away. But we were young, and in those days, our stations in life... We were considered as far apart as the sun and the moon.”

The romantic in Marty reared its head. She clasped her hands together at her chest. “Oh, Brenda. I’m so sorry...”

Brenda let her eyes fall to her feet, her tone grim. “We were going to run away together but he never showed up. In fact, I never heard from him again, and then I was pawned off to Jeremiah, so my brother could be rid of me. End of the story. We were married for a torturous thirty-five years before he died of the fever, and my brother put me back on the auction block again at that ball I told Marty and Wanda about. Only this time, Edmund’s greed and stupidity got the best of him, and everyone ended up dead.”

We all sat silent for a moment, I don’t think any of us knew what to say. Her story was tragic, for sure. But I couldn’t find much about a Winston Blackheart, likely because the dude didn’t have any cash or much importance to historians.

When Brenda spoke again, it was soft and filled with clear regret. “In those days, we women didn’t have much of a choice about our futures, but if I could change one thing, it would be that I hadn’t lived during that madness...or rather, that I wasn’t turned into... This. This is a lonely life, and I kept to myself for a very long time because of what I am—a monster to some, I suppose.

“When I met Owen, and he reminded me so much of Winston, he brought back so many wonderful feelings. I just wanted to feel that again. I know it was stupid to believe he was interested in me, but I got swept up in the romance of it all. I hate that the real Owen left behind a wife and children, and that I might be the cause of that.”

The softer side of me—and believe me, there isn’t a lot of me that’s soft—kinda felt

like shit for Brenda. “You’re not a fucking monster. That would mean we’re monster’s, too.”

“Correction!” Marty said with a teasing tone, rising from her chair to hobble over to Brenda and give her a small hug. “Nina’s definitely a monster, but we’re not, and neither are you. I think when this is all over, we need to introduce you to some of Arch’s friends. He has tons of them, some of them are even from your era, but one thing I know, I’m sure he’d be willing to share them.”

Her smile was small but hopeful as she gave Marty a pat on the back. “I wish I’d known how many of us there are. I’ve isolated myself for so long due to fear, too afraid to step out of my comfort zone. Maybe, if I don’t end up eradicated by the clan or in jail, it’s time to start being a part of something.”

I nodded my head, pulling Doug from me to set him under my lamp so I could think. “That sounds like a start, but in the meantime, we need to know who the fuck wants you framed for murder, if it has anything to do with this picture of Winston, and why that picture of Winston sparkled and turned to dust.”

Her eyes looked worried. “I wish I had answers for you. I simply don’t, but with all this evidence piling up around me, the video of someone that looked like me entering Owen’s apartment, the fingernail, the extension cord, I’m beginning to think it’s time I handed myself over to the clan. I can’t let you women, who’ve been so gracious and kind to me, get into trouble. I’ve had some time to think, and to talk with Archibald and Tottington. You’re good people—good people who don’t deserve me and whatever’s happening darkening your doorstep.”

I don’t know what it is about this lady, maybe it’s her loneliness I can feel to my bones, but pinning her for Owen’s murder felt all wrong. For sure, I’ve battled with her innocence, but fuck all, every time I’m almost sure she’s guilty, she says something that changes my mind.

Brenda's sadness felt like a living entity. If I still had tastebuds, I'd probably be able to taste it—it was palpable.

I don't like people a whole lot, but I don't wanna see 'em suffer either. All this time she's been hiding away, living in solitude, and the one time in a zillion years she reaches out, she gets her hand slapped.

Her words made me make what might be considered a rash decision, and I don't make those often, but it wasn't just Owen's kids that deserved justice, Brenda did, too. "Nope. You're staying put. We're gonna figure this out, come hell or high water."

I know that surprised Marty and Wanda because it wasn't like me, but I meant it.

There were pieces to this puzzle we still needed, and I was determined to find them.

For Owen Jr. and Lacy.

And yeah, for Brenda, too.

"Vampire?"

I leaned against the arched window frame in the murder basement, watching the snow fall. Marty and Wanda had them added so it wouldn't be so gloomy down here, and now, I was glad they did because I was definitely feeling gloomy.

"Halfsie?"

Wanda grabbed my arm, giving it a squeeze as she rested her head on my shoulder. "You okay?"

“What makes you think I’m not okay?”

She rubbed my arm. “I’ve known you for a long time, vampire. I know when you’re in your head. Talk to me?”

As the huge snowflakes drifted to the ground, I knew there was no hiding how I was feeling from Wanda. She had an emotional barometer unmatched by many.

“I can’t get those kids out of my head. They’re so young, and it’s fucking Christmastime, Wanda. Astrid’s such a frickin’ mess, who knows if she’s even gotten anything for them. It’s a shitty time. They need to have something to look forward to. They need some kind of stability. I don’t get the feeling Astrid’s got her shit together enough to keep them together, ya know?”

Wanda nodded, her eyes sad when I saw them in her reflection in the window. “She did say her parents were coming from Arizona. I’m sure they’ll help her get situated.”

I nodded. “I hope so. What would make me feel better is finding out who killed Owen. I’m fucking tired of running into roadblocks, but where do we go from here?”

“I think we go talk to his ex-business partner Derek, and maybe we go back to the apartments and see if we can find anyone else besides Sonja the Neighborhood Spy to talk to us.”

“I’ll even put on another skirt if it means we can figure out who did this.”

Wanda stood on tiptoe and kissed my cheek. “I don’t care how much we tease you, and you might no longer have a beating heart, but you’re soft and gooey on the inside, and I love you because you’re so real—every day, all day.”

“I love you, too,” I whispered. I gave her a hard hug, and then I set her from me.

“Now knock it the fuck off and help me find out who killed Owen.”

“Hey, you, two!” Marty poked her head into the sitting room of the murder basement with a goofy smile. “Guess who made the morning news? Come look.”

I scoffed as Wanda peered around my shoulder. “Brenda again? What’s she wanted for now, grand larceny? Did she snatch the ‘Mona Lisa’ right out from under the cops’ noses?”

I think some of my anger comes from the fact that the police hadn’t looked at anyone else since the beginning, and now that they’d found the cord from Owen’s lamp in her house, she was screwed if they got their hands on her.

Marty shook her head, the messy bun on top of her head bobbing. “It’s not quite that bad. Not for Brenda anyway, but according to the news this morning, we’ve gone viral.” She held up her phone and pressed play.

We watched a grainy video of three black blurs, zipping down a street lit up with Christmas lights.

My eyes went wide. “Is...is that us ?”

Marty nodded with a mischievous smile. “The news is reporting it as some strange, unexplainable lighting phenomenon, but the best part? There are some hardcore conspiracy theories going around that these are images of—are you ready? Aliens !” She began to howl with laughter, tears streaming down her face.

I looked at the number of views it had and it was already up to five hundred thousand. But some of the comments?

To my very untrained eyes, those look exactly like the aliens that abducted me from

sleepaway camp when I was nine...

Do you see the outline by this shadow's head? If you look closely, it almost resembles a butterfly.

"Fucking butterflies!" I began to howl with laughter, too.

And that felt good in the middle of us all feeling like so much shit.

Chapter

Nine

Got a brick wall we can run into? Because I think we've run out of 'em here...

On our way back to the apartments where Owen lived, to see if we could drum up someone—anyone—who had some information the police might have missed, Marty insisted we touch base with what we had so far.

Which was kind of like a pile of hot, steaming shit, but I indulged them anyway.

“So let's go over everything we have to date,” Marty encouraged.

I groaned from the backseat. It had only been two days, but it felt like two years. Or was it three? I'd lost track. “How the fuck can we do that without your whiteboard and sticky notes?”

She popped open her iPad and held it up, a picture of the whiteboard appearing. “Like this!” Pointing to a sticky note that read “possible murder weapon,” she said, “Now, here's what we have so far. The electrical cord the police found at Brenda's house. We don't have confirmation that it's the murder weapon yet, but why else would there be a cord hidden in her house, that Darnell heard the police say belonged to the lamp, if it wasn't?”

Wanda nodded, tapping her gloved hands on the steering wheel. “Then there's the fingernail Nina found. I haven't heard back from Mara about DNA yet, but we can't

find any other explanation for it being at Owen's. If they couldn't get DNA from it, we're all the better, but along with the cord, if they did find a nail, and she's got a zillion pictures of herself on her human Facebook page with those dang things on her fingers, it'll help prove their case against her, I'd guess."

Jamming my hands into my hoodie, I nodded. "But we think it was planted there, just like the cord at Brenda's. Not that it'll matter if we can't find out if she's being framed by someone. But framed is still the working theory, right?"

"Yep. Then we have the doorbell video of her leaving Owen's apartment right around the time of his death. I mean, obviously she says it wasn't her, but she doesn't have an alibi for the night he was killed. So who was it if it wasn't her?"

"That video..." I murmured. "I know that shit kinda damns her, but I still don't believe it was Brenda. It sits wrong with me."

"It sits wrong with all of us, Nina," Wanda reminded me.

"Then there's the picture of Winston, Brenda's long-lost love." Marty turned and looked at me from the passenger seat. "Did you have any success finding anything on this guy?"

"Not a fucking thing," I replied. "But I did find that ball Brenda was talking about. Someone documented it, and it did happen, though, they don't say it was vampires who instigated the carnage. Over a hundred and fifty people were wiped out, including her brother and his wife. No lies detected there. But I was hoping to find somethin' on this dude Winston so maybe we could at least tell Brenda what happened to him, so she finds some peace—closure. But I can't find a damn thing."

Marty tapped the iPad, sliding her fingers over the screen. "So a no-go on Winston. But he's the least of our problems. If we're to believe Brenda, she knew nothing

about the photo anyway. What we need to worry about is, who put his picture under the mantel and what this witch magic is about.”

“We can’t just go around asking people in the apartment complex if they’ve seen a fucking witch, Marty, but what else explains the sparkles Lacy talked about and the glow around that picture? Maybe whoever this person is put a spell on the picture?”

“Put a spell on it,” Wanda murmured softly. “On a picture of Brenda’s lover...”

That made me sit up straight and grip the seat under me. “Remember we talked about grudges? Maybe this is a grudge? And it has to do with Winston? But Brenda didn’t mention anything...”

“Well, she forgot to mention Owen looked like the guy she was once bananapants over, too, but there we were, in her house with the furniture barreling down on us like an NFL team. We need to talk to Robbie and see if she can help. I texted her to see if she could add anything to this sparkly picture phenomenon, but I haven’t heard back yet,” Wanda said.

I nodded. “But if Brenda didn’t know about any grudge, she couldn’t tell us about it. I’m trying to give her the benefit of the doubt here.”

“I’ll text Arch and have him ask her if there was ever any jealous rivalry over the stable boy, how’s that?” Marty offered.

Wanda pulled into the apartment complex and began to drive around, looking for a parking spot. We pulled in under a carport just beneath Owen’s section of the apartments.

“So what’s the plan? Are we just gonna skulk around with our ears to fucking doors, or are we knockin’ on ’em again?”

Wanda's finger whipped up as she scrolled her phone. "Hold that thought. I just got a text from Arch with a link to a news report. Derek, according to a source at the police department, wasn't even in Long Island when Owen was killed. He was in the Bahamas..."

Wanda pressed play on her phone so we could listen to the news, my stomach sinking with every word. According to the report, Derek was questioned extensively and released due to a solid alibi. Astrid must have told them about him, and the argument he'd had with Owen.

"Damn it all!" I barked from the backseat. "He was pretty much all we had in the way of suspects, for fuck's sake!"

Wanda and Marty both blew out breaths of air, fogging up the windshield. "It isn't over yet, Nina. Maybe they did as poor a job questioning Derek as they did when they tore up Owen's apartment. Maybe there's something they missed just the way they missed that fingernail behind his nightstand."

"Maybe, or maybe he was in the fucking Bahamas, Wanda, living it up with the money he ripped off from Owen," I spat.

Marty held up her hands—her universal sign for peace. "Let's not give up the ship yet. Who knows what we might find here. We never got much further than Sonja before we had to run away so Nina wouldn't get caught by the detective because she went rogue on us."

Flicking my fingers in her face, I groused, "Piss off, Marty. I went rogue and found a clue, which was more than you two found with your lip gloss and eyeshadow, thank you very much."

"You sure did. A clue that strengthens the case against Brenda, Columbo," Marty

taunted me, craning her neck and sticking her face in mine.

I hated when she did that.

“Marty, I swear on all that’s fake blonde, I’m gonna kick your werewolf ass?—”

The sharp slap of Wanda’s hand against the steering wheel made us both jerk our eyes in her direction. “Enough! The two of you are like toddlers. Stop arguing and behave like adults. We have a murder to solve and a woman who’s going to end up exterminated by the clan because you two can’t get a grip on yourselves. Do you have any idea how awful an extermination is? Just ask Heath or Arch. Now get it together, apologize to one another, and join me when you’re done”

She popped open the door, leaving both of us in the car, simmering.

I rolled my eyes while Marty sat with her arms crossed over her chest, lips thinned.

“Okay, fine, I’m sorry.”

Marty flapped her hand upward. “Oh, you are not, you beast.”

Wanda rapped on the window with her knuckles, her stern teacher’s frown in place.

I leaned forward and planted a kiss on Marty’s smooth cheek. “I am, too,” I said with a teasing grin.

Marty sighed nice and loud, so I was sure to hear she was being forced to apologize and didn’t like it. “Whatever. I’m sorry, too. Now let’s go.” She pushed open the door, letting the falling snow drift into the car and hit me in the face.

I hopped out, too, but without nearly as much hope as I’d had before we found out

stupid Derek had an alibi.

“There’s nothing like a big fat nothing burger to fuckin’ fill you up, huh?” I asked Marty and Wanda as we moved silently back down the stairs of the apartment building like we were casin’ the joint.

Night had crept in as we snuck along the balconies of people’s apartments, listening at their doors, running and hiding in the shadows when someone came up the stairs.

The bruised purple sky had gone an inky black. The snow had stopped, leaving a fresh dusting over the cars in the parking lot.

Wanda tucked her red nose into the fur around the collar of her jacket. “And it’s getting cold. I guess we can call this a wash. We need to get back and talk to Brenda—see if maybe there was someone else in the mix of her relationship with Winston. There has to be something we’re missing or something she hasn’t told us.”

Marty cocked her head. “Maybe she doesn’t remember? I mean, it was a pretty long time ago, Wanda. Like, over a hundred years.”

“Bullshit. She sure remembered who he was and that he was the love of her life. I’m pretty sure she’d remember if someone else was involved, Blondie.”

Wanda nodded as we walked toward the car. “Nina has a point, Marty. It’s a pretty big thing to forget.”

The disappointment we were all feeling was real, evidenced by the silent walk back to the car.

Just as we were about to get into the SUV, I heard, “If it isn’t the makeup ladies! Hey, how are ya?”

Crap. I fought a groan. Sonja. I'd know that husky-rough smoker's voice anywhere.

We all turned to wave to her as she chucked a cigarette on the ground, which sizzled as it hit the fresh snow, her hand hooked around an older guy's arm.

"Hi, Sonja!" Marty gushed with a wave as she approached us, her over-processed hair glowing in the night. "Who do we have here?"

She winked a saucy wink, tightening her grip. "My hot date for the night. His name's Calvin."

The guy who'd all but spit at us when we'd knocked on his door the other day, right before we knocked on Sonja's. Interesting.

"Ladies," he said with a nod, the snow sticking to his thick, bushy beard. "Sorry 'bout the other day. Didn't mean to slam the door in your faces."

Wanda gave him a smile that never reached her eyes. "Apology accepted."

Marty grinned at him before she asked Sonja, "How's the new skincare routine going?"

She smiled, revealing yellowing teeth, pressing the backs of her hands under her chin and batting her eyelashes. "You tell me."

Wanda squeezed her arm and smiled warmly. "You look beautiful, Sonja, but you were always beautiful." Her phone beeped a text, making her pull it from her jacket pocket to hold it up. "Excuse me, would you?"

As Wanda drifted off, Sonja held up her grocery bags in the hand that wasn't latched to her lumberjack. "I gotta go, too. We're makin' dinner, but it was good seein' ya. I

hope you made some more sales today. I told everyone about you girls. Even that horrible Coraline Brown. Out of all of us old biddies here, she's the one who could use it the most."

I snickered. You gotta love the neighborhood gossip. Rocking back on my heels, I waved to her. "Bye, Sonja. Good seeing you again."

As she climbed the stairs to her apartment, Marty whispered, "She's going to kill herself with those cigarettes. She must've smoked half a pack in the forty minutes or so we were there the other day."

Wanda trudged back toward us, her expression distressed.

"What's up?" I asked, concerned.

"Arch just texted to let me know that Brenda's gone."

I tugged my knit hat down to keep the wind that had suddenly whipped up from pulling it from my head. "Gone? Where the hell did she go?"

Wanda bit her bottom lip, her eyes wide. "Arch said she left a note that said she didn't want to cause us any grief with the clan."

I blinked as the snow started up again, lashing at my face. "Where the hell could she go with two dogs and an iguana?" It was cold out. Doug was gonna freeze to death.

Wanda shook her head. "That's the thing. She didn't take Doug and the dogs..."

We didn't say another word, but we sure as fuck dove into the car. I'd barely shut the door before Wanda was backing out and hightailing it back to the castle.

Brenda loved her pets. They were all she had. I had a hard time believing she'd take off and leave them behind.

Something smelled here, and it wasn't just Sonja's cigarettes.

Chapter

Ten

W herein Brenda flies the coop

“Bertrand, get that shite outta my face. Now isn’t the time to capture our conflict, you feel me?”

I know Marty agreed to let him film us in action, but I had to put the kibosh on him coming with us when we snooped around. He’d kill the whole vibe if the people we investigated had a camera in their faces.

I growled at him and snapped my teeth. “Back up.”

He shrank back, almost dropping his camera.

“Nina, leave the boy alone—we have bigger fish to fry!” Marty ordered, pulling off her coat and gloves and throwing them on the chair in the waiting room as we ran to our desks.

Tottington ran behind her, picking up her outerwear as he went, his eyes concerned.

But Bertrand hovered in the background, shifting from foot to foot. “Seeing as you won’t let me go with you when you investigate, I gotta get all the action I can when you’re here.”

With a huff, I whipped around, jamming my finger in his face. “I’m gonna show you action like you’ve never seen if you don’t stop crawling up my backside, buddy. We put limits on this documentary thing for a reason—because not everyone wants a camera in their faces. Now, I can’t think when you’re everywhere I am. Now go!” I shouted, and this time I didn’t regret it.

Wanda came up behind him, wrapping an arm around his skinny shoulders. “Why don’t you go see if Arch made some dinner, Bertrand. You must be hungry. Aren’t all teenage boys, especially werewolf boys, eternally hungry?” She turned him in the direction of the stairs, giving him a nudge, then giving me her disappointed gaze. “I know you’re worried about Brenda, but stop taking it out on the child. You’re going to give him nightmares that stay with him the rest of his life.”

She was right. I sucked. “I’ll make it up to him later, okay? I’ll even wear that stupid fucking mask or whatever for his Dracumentary. Right now, I need to think.”

Her nod was curt before she whisked herself away to her desk. “See that you do.”

Marty held up the note Brenda left us as I stooped to grab Patty and cuddle her, looking for her pink sweater. She trembled against me, burrowing her sparsely furred head under my chin. Sorry. No way would Brenda leave these guys.

“Dark Lord, I think this might be what you’re looking for.” Tottington handed me the dog’s fuzzy sweater, helping me to put her little stick legs through the holes.

“Thanks, Tottington.”

He cocked his head, his usually placid face confused. “Might I inquire as to your well-being, Miss?”

That stopped me cold. “My well-being?”

“Yes, Miss. You didn’t call me Tater Tot. As much as I despise the moniker, I fear I must admit, I’m rather fond of it as well. It lets me know your state of mind, if you will. If you aren’t using my nickname, it surely means you’re troubled. I’d like to know if I can help ease your burden.”

I gave his shoulder a squeeze for his concern. He kinda winced, but whatever. “I’m okay. I’m just worried about Brenda. It makes no sense that she’d just pick up and leave, especially without her dogs and Doug. Where is Doug, anyway?”

He smoothed the lapels of his jacket with a small smile. “Rest assured, Master Doug is well, basking under the heat lamp I ordered, upstairs in my room.”

I managed a smile. I loved Tottington for many reasons, but that he cared about animals made me love him even more. “You’re a good guy, Totts. Thanks.”

“Also, the gifts you ordered from Amazon are here. I’ve wrapped them all especially with the children in mind. I think they’ll be quite pleased.”

I’d ordered some things for Lacy and Owen Jr. on the off chance Astrid didn’t think to shop. She was such a damn mess when we’d met her, I decided what could it hurt, and at least I’d know the kids would have something to open Christmas day, which was right around the corner.

I yanked his stiff frame into a hug I’m sure he hated even more than admitting he hated that he liked the nickname I’d given him. “I fucking reiterate, you’re the best, Tater Tot. Thanks for your help.”

He gave me a curt nod, but the corner of his mouth lifted a little— just a little. “Of course, Miss.”

“Heard anything from Robbie? We could sure use a witch’s input. Anything that

might help explain what that picture with sparkles meant.”

Robbie was Tottington’s former charge, so to speak. He’d been a manservant to Robbie and her mad-rich family. When she left her thieving mother’s money and lies behind, he’d gone with her—and stayed with her, even when she was accidentally turned into a witch.

But she’d fallen in love and gone off to live her new witch life, and for the first time in as many years as Robbie had been alive, he’d decided to do something for himself. So he’d come to work for us, and he was pretty great. Even if I freaked him out, he was a damn good organizer.

“Robbie is on her way here as we speak. In the meantime, do be mindful of your safety and keeping your head clear so that all the information you have thus far is processed with reason.”

In other words, Tater Tot thought I was a hothead. I’d heard him ask Arch once if I’d always been so quick to offer to kill people.

It made me laugh at the time, but he wasn’t wrong. I am a hothead, and it does cloud my vision sometimes. Being a straight shooter with zero filter can often keep me from seeing the bigger picture. Sometimes it works in my favor and sometimes it doesn’t.

I smiled at Tottington with a nod. “I’ll do my best to keep my thoughts together just for you, okay, buddy?”

He snapped his heels together and nodded. “Well done, Miss.”

Arch made his way down the steps, pressing the button to the dumbwaiter we’d had put in especially for him, so he could keep everyone fed without breaking his neck.

“Coffee!” Marty barked with a clap of her hands. “Oh, Arch, you’re a mind reader. Thank you—we’re going to need it so we can figure this out. Now tell us what Brenda was like all day?”

Arch put his hands behind his back in his familiar manservant pose, the blue tuft of hair on top of his head wafting in our drafty murder basement.

You couldn’t take the manservant out of Arch, no matter how hard you tried. He was once Wanda’s husband Heath’s manservant, way back in the day, when they were both vampires. Then Arch had been human for a long time, after a weird circumstance where their sire died and turned everyone back to humans. But then, during one of our OOPS cases, Arch was turned into a troll—by accident, of course.

It’s kind of a crazy story, but Arch’s duties are ingrained in him in a way we’d never been able to tease him out of. No matter how many times we told him he didn’t need to cook or clean for us, he wouldn’t hear it. He adamantly told us he lived to serve, but always reminded us that he lived to serve the people he loved most in the world, and we’d just have to be satisfied that our needs would always be met—whether we liked it or not.

Now, he gazed at Marty, his sharp eyes somber. “She was quite distraught today, Miss. After you texted me about the possibility there had been a third party involved in her affair with Master Winston, I did as asked, and she quite plainly told me that she knew nothing of the sort about anyone who might be upset over her affair with Winston.”

I threw my hands up in the air in exasperation. “JFC, I swear, does anyone know anything? We’ve hit more brick walls than full-time crash dummies.”

Arch reached for my hand, giving it a squeeze with sympathetic eyes. “Miss Brenda was also quite concerned about the danger she was putting you in with the clan. Yet, I

had no indication she would take her leave. None. She was frightened and worried about you and Owen's wife and children."

"Archibald is correct." His new BFF, Tottington, backed him up. "In speaking with her, Miss Bronkowski's biggest concern was for your safety—all of you and the children."

"Lemme see that note, Marty." I held out my hand, taking it from her to give it a scan and a good hard look. It was pretty brief and didn't say much more than what Arch had told us, but I was still suspicious.

For some reason, I put it to my nose and took a deep whiff.

"Smell that," I said to Marty. "It's faint, but it's there."

"Witch..." Marty whispered, pressing her fingers to her lips.

I planted my hands on my hips. "Yeah. That means someone was here—in my damn castle—near my damn kids and Arch and Tottington. That means, someone has to die," I seethed.

Wanda joined us with her phone, and held it up, pointing to an email. "It's gets worse. Ring-a-ling-a-ling, the clan's calling—and they're coming here tomorrow because they somehow found out Brenda contacted us, and they have questions."

Fuck all.

Chapter

Eleven

B ad habits can get you killed...

While we waited for Robbie to show up and give us some guidance, because we were lost AF, I decided to take the gifts I'd bought over to Astrid and the kids. I had to do something to keep busy or I was gonna lose my ever-lovin' mind, worrying about Brenda and the fact that someone had the clangers to come to my house and snatch her.

Tottington had gone all out, decorating the presents with what he called "whimsical items," like Hot Wheel cars for Owen Jr. and tons of shiny hair clips and ribbons for Lacy, along with beautiful foil paper and more ribbons than Lacy had put in my hair—which was saying something.

We'd hit another dead end with nowhere to go from here. We had two frickin' suspects, Brenda and Astrid, and that was it. A picture of a guy who looked a lot like Owen—a picture we suspected was cursed—a fingernail, a video of Brenda, and an electrical cord that was probably the murder weapon.

And now Brenda was missing, and we also suspected she'd been kidnapped by a witch. A witch we didn't have a single clue about. Not who they were, or where to look for her or him, for that matter...nothin'. Not even a hint. How could we look for an invisible witch?

Shit was not looking bright.

As I pulled up to Astrid's, I took some comfort in the fact that Robbie was coming to help. Witches had varieties, dark, light, good, bad. We were hoping she could give us an idea about where this witch had come from and where to go from here, because time was ticking away and who knew what could happen to Brenda while we tried to figure this out.

A spike of fear skipped up my spine, thinking about Brenda being kidnapped. She was a gentle soul. That worried the shit out of me. The only solace I could take was the fact that Brenda was a vampire, and she had to at least have strength on her side. I hoped like hell she'd fight back.

Pulling into the driveway, I was happy to see that more lights had been added outside and in the big picture window, a Christmas tree glowed brightly.

That made me smile a little. Maybe the grandparents from Arizona had encouraged Astrid to get it together.

Grabbing all the gift bags, I slammed the door shut and headed toward the front door, ringing the bell as I admired the big Santa, sitting in a chair on the front porch. I dropped the packages by him while I waited for someone to answer.

A well put-together lady answered the door wearing a fun but classy Christmas sweater and creased tan slacks. Her ornament earrings swung at her earlobes, hanging just beneath her chin-length chestnut-colored hair.

She smiled at me warmly. "Hi there," she said cheerfully. "How can I help you?"

"Nina!" I heard Lacy and Owen Jr. call out. They ran toward me, both wearing little aprons and waving wooden spoons as Bode followed close behind in protective

mode.

I squatted on my haunches, giving them each a hug and Bode a scratch on his muzzle. “Little dudes! Are you making cookies for Santa?”

Owen shot his spoon in the air with a superhero stance. “Yes! Do you wanna make some with us?”

I grinned at him, ruffling his hair as Bode nudged my thigh. “I should introduce myself first, don’tcha think?” I held out my hand to the woman I assumed was their grandmother. “I’m Nina Statleon. I met the kids the other day when we were looking for donations for...” What the fuck had we been getting donations for?

“The monkeys!” Lacy shouted, doing her best monkey impression as she danced around. “The monkeys, Gramma!”

“Yes!” I almost shouted, before I looked down at my feet in guilt for being such a liar. “The monkeys. The...er...white-cheeked ones. They’re almost extinct...”

Their grandmother clapped her hands together with a wide grin. “Of course! The kids told us all about you ladies.” She grabbed my hands, giving them a warm squeeze as she leaned into me. “I’m so glad you dropped by. You really turned the kids’ day around. Thank you for that. Won’t you join us inside while we make some cookies?”

“Yay! Cookies! Cookies! Cookies!” Owen yelled.

I laughed. “Somebody’s had some sugar, huh? You’re buzzin’, buddy.”

Lacy grabbed at my hand, tugging me toward the entryway, but I held back, swinging her up into my arms. “Listen, Munchkin, I’ve got some stuff to do to help Santa. You don’t want me to ditch Santa, do you?”

Lacy smiled at me, her toothless grin making me grin, too. She wrapped her arms around my neck and gave me a hard hug, placing a sticky, sugary-sweet kiss on my cheek. “Bye, Nina! Tell Santa I said hello!”

I dropped her back on the floor and she scampered off to finish her cookie making. Then I smiled at Owen. “You, too, big guy. Santa’s gonna need those cookies so he can make all his deliveries.”

Owen wrapped his arms around my waist and hugged me before running off behind Lacy.

Their grandmother beamed at me, standing in the doorway surrounded by the Christmas lights around the door. She gripped my forearm with a warm smile. “I’m Beth, by the way. Astrid’s mother. You made them so happy at such a dark time, I can’t thank you enough. Are you sure you can’t stay? We’d love to have you.”

I smiled at her in gratitude. “I can’t. I have somewhere to be.” Then I leaned into her and whispered, “Santa left some stuff at my house for them.” I pointed to the gift bags I’d set on the chair by the big Santa.

“Oh!” she cooed with obvious delight, her bright eyes so much like Astrid’s. “What a kind gesture. Thank you for thinking of them. We haven’t had much time to do any shopping since we arrived, with the police in and out and Astrid being in such a bad way. You have no idea how much we appreciate this.”

The police had been back. Maybe they’d found something else to take the heat off Brenda? “Happy to help where I can. She told us all about how the police had grilled her for hours. I hope they didn’t come back to do more of that.”

Now Beth’s eyes filled with worry. “No. It was nothing like that. We were with her. They’re just gathering evidence. I don’t know if she told you about Owen’s ex-

partner, but they questioned him, too. But he was away when Owen was... Well, you know..."

I drove my hands into my hoodie as the wind picked up. "So they haven't found anything else? No suspects?"

She shook her head, tucking her hair behind her ears. "They've been very close-mouthed about any information they have. They just keep telling us they're investigating. But my husband Simon's hired Astrid a good lawyer, so we can protect her."

More nothing burger—this time with cheese on top. Damn. "That's good to hear. How's she doin'?"

"She's exhausted...devastated. Not knowing about this other woman... It's torn her up. She wants to believe what Owen told her about his profile being cloned and used by a catfish, but she has no proof. I almost think it's hurt her more than his actual death. The not knowing is heartbreaking. For her. For us."

So the police hadn't even mentioned the catfish was true. I knew they were aware Owen had been catfished. With all their bullshit tech, they'd probably found at least that much.

I couldn't deny they had solid proof against Brenda, but they could have, at the very least, told Astrid that her husband had never actually been chatting with anyone, and he def hadn't been cheating. Not with Brenda, anyway.

If we could just figure out who'd done this, Astrid wouldn't have to live with that, along with her husband's death, for fuck's sake.

Gripping her hand, I did something I don't normally do. I gave her a hug. "I'm glad

you're here for her. I've got to hit it, but will you tell her I asked about her and if she needs anything, I think my friends left our number with her. Just call us. We're happy to help."

Beth hugged me back. "I don't know where you ladies came from or why you were so nice to my Astrid, but you were a godsend. I believe everything happens for a reason, and you girls helped her hang on just long enough for us to get here. Thank you, Nina, and please thank your friends, too."

I gave Bode one last scratch to his soft ears. "I will. Promise. Don't forget the stuff here on the porch. Hope to see you soon," I said, with a wave over my shoulder.

I skipped back down the steps, heading for the car—when I saw movement by the side of the garage.

Instantly, I was on high alert. Would a motherfucker come here and skulk around? I wish a motherfucker would...

I crept toward the garage, trying to keep my work boots from crunching on the snow. Peering around the corner, I saw a tall man leaning against the siding, digging around in the pocket of his plaid flannel jacket.

Without thinking, I rushed him, bracketing his body with my hands until he was pressed as close to the side of the house as he could get.

"Who the hell are you?" I growled.

"Who the hell are you ?" he boomed back, with a deep voice that rang in my ears.

Grabbing him by the collar of his jacket, I gripped it, twisting the fabric. "Maybe your worst nightmare, pal. What are you doing sneaking around back here? Answer

fast, or I'm gonna reach down your throat with my nimble fingers and yank your intestines through your nose."

"I'm visiting here!" he roared, panic evident in his tone when he obviously realized I was strong enough to hold him up with only one hand. "This is my daughter's house!"

Oh.

Oh, fuck.

Yeah. That made sense, now that I looked at him. Owen Jr. had his nose.

I dropped him instantly with a guilty glance, straightening his flannel and patting him on his broad shoulders to make it all better. "There. All better." Then I stuck my hand out. "I'm Nina Statleon...uh, sir. You must be Owen and Lacy's granddad. Nice to meet you."

He eyed me for a second as he blustered, shrinking back away from me, making me feel even worse than I already did. "You're that lady the kids were talking about? The one who let Lacy do her hair?"

Looking at him, his dark eyes filled with storm clouds, his lean face still masked in anger, I nodded. "Yes, sir. That's me. I'm sorry I... I'm sorry. That's all. I was worried about the kids and your daughter, and with everything's that's gone on, I just... I acted before I thought. I was just looking out for them."

Jesus, I'd threatened to pull his intestines through his nose. I could hear Wanda in my head. "Can't you, just this once, not choose violence?"

I felt his big hand clamp down on my shoulder—then his deep laughter. "It's all right,

young lady. I'm Simon, by the way. Thanks for lookin' out for my grandbabies and my daughter. What brings you here on a night so dang cold? Sure miss the sun in Arizona."

"I'll bet. It's good you came. They need you right now."

Relaxing a little, I took a couple of steps back as he fished around in the pocket of his shirt again, pulling out a cigarette and lighting it with the flick of his thumb on a shiny lighter. His expression was wry. "I was just hidin' out here so the kids wouldn't see me smoking. It's a dirty habit, but it's been damn stressful around here, with Owen's death and Astrid is in such a bad way."

Smiling at him, I held up a hand. "You don't have to explain yourself to me, Simon. I get a good vice."

Did I ever. I missed the hell out of my old vice, chicken wings.

He barked another laugh, a cloud of condensation puffing from his mouth. "Little Owen's always saying how stinky my shirt is. He wrinkles that little nose up at me and gives me hell about it."

Owen's words rang in my ears. It's stinky like that lady where daddy lived. She was stinky, too. She smelled real bad. So bad, I had to cover my nose with my arm .

Stinky like that lady where my daddy lived...

Shut the fucking front door.

Like a ton of bricks from the wall we kept slamming into, they all crashed around me, landing on my head all at once.

I had to go, and I had to go pronto.

Sticking out my hand, I grabbed Simon's. "I hate to cut this short, sir, but I have to go. It was a real pleasure to meet you. We'll check back in with you soon."

I didn't give him a chance to answer. I took off running to the car, stomping through the snow as fast as I could while my mind raced, trying to put the pieces of this puzzle together.

Jumping into Marty's SUV, I dragged my phone out of my back pocket and started to text Marty and Wanda.

I think I figured this shit out. I don't have all the pieces put together yet. I just need to ask a couple of questions. Meet me at ? —

That was the last thing I remember before Marty's car lifted off the ground, the windows imploding, glass shattering everywhere.

And then everything went dark.

Chapter

Twelve

How it's going...

When my surroundings filtered into my unconscious brain, it took me a sec to get my bearings. My eyes didn't want to open and my head felt heavy.

Wherever the hell I was, it was uncomfortable, as uncomfortable as that damn peacock blue settee Marty loved so much and had to have for the murder basement.

I tried shifting positions but something kept me from moving. My eyes finally popped open to find myself in total darkness.

Flaring my nostrils, I smelled the scent of damp and musty.

Pulling at my wrists, I felt the rigid clamp of something binding them together... Zip-ties? Yeah. They definitely felt like zip-ties.

I almost laughed. Seriously? What kind of moron thought zip-ties could keep me from escaping this bullshit?

Yanking at them, I tried to break them apart, but a sharp sting and an electric zap to my wrists prevented me from ripping them off.

Obviously, a smart moron.

“Ow! What the fuck?” I bellowed, my voice echoing in the inky darkness.

“Nina?” I heard someone groan in a weak voice.

I leaned into the room, realizing my feet were bound by whatever this was, too. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Brenda...it’s Brenda.”

I sat up straighter, clenching my fists. She sounded wiped out, thoroughly exhausted. Her normal lilting tone sounded dead. “Are you okay? What’s going on? Where the hell are we?”

There was a long pause with nothing but the silence of the room before I heard her whisper, “I don’t know... Weak. I’m so weak. She... she’s starving me.”

Alarm bells sounded in my head as what happened before I was knocked out cold came back to me in small slivers. “Starving you?”

Brenda’s laugh was bitter but depleted. “That’s one way it’s done when you want a vampire dead. Surely...surely you know that. It’s a spell... She used a spell...”

Of course. Wanda told me what Heath and Arch had shared with her, about how a vampire was expunged if you crossed the clan or darkened their doorsteps with a scandal involving a human. Starvation was only one of the ways they went about punishing you for a misdeed they perceived threatening to the strength of the clan.

And I heard it was ugly-painful, creating a hunger so desperate, so raw, it ate you from the inside out.

Shit.

We had to get out of here.

“Where are we?” I asked into the darkness, my own voice sounding groggy to my ears. “Do you know?”

Brenda didn’t answer for a few moments before she moaned. “I... I don’t know. She took me from the castle. One minute I was alone in my room, the next...poof, I was here where it’s dark a-and cold.”

Cold? She could feel the cold? I didn’t know fuck all about what happened when you actually died as a vampire, but that she could feel the temperature scared the shit out of me.

“Brenda.” I tried to keep the alarm out of my voice, but she had to wake up and I had to find a way to feed her. I wasn’t sure exactly when she’d been kidnapped, but it couldn’t have been that long. “Listen to me, stay awake. Do you hear me? You have to stay awake until I can get free.”

I strained to figure out where her voice was coming from, but it was GD dark.

She laughed again, more bitter than before, while I continued to struggle to free myself. “Impossible,” she muttered.

I grunted, twisting and turning my wrists and my feet, only to feel that same hot sting crackling over my skin. “What’s impossible? Staying awake?”

“Free. Locked...the ties are locked w-with magic.”

Shit, shit, shit. “Who’s doing this? Do you know who it is?” Because I sure thought I knew who was doing this, and when I was done with them, they’d pray for death.

Brenda huffed and shivered, a shiver I not only heard by the chatter of her teeth, but felt to my bones, settling deep in my veins like ice. “A witch. You were right. You were all right.”

Not at all helpful, but when I got my hands on this witch, she was going to fucking regret waking up today. “Do you know her, Brenda?”

Here’s the part where I fully expected her to say she did, and the admission was gonna piss me off because it was someone she’d “forgotten” to tell us about from her past.

But Brenda surprised me. “I-I don’t know who she is, but I smelled her...just like you girls said. She smells...different...”

Clenching my teeth together, I fought another fit of swearing, trying to keep my anger at bay. “Smell? You smelled her magic?”

“Yessss...” Then she gagged, a retching, gurgling sound coming from her throat.

“Listen to me, Brenda, keep your damn eyes open. Do not sleep, do you hear me? I’ll get us out of here, but do not sleep!” If she fell into a vampire coma, we were sunk. I can’t remember ever hearing about anyone who’d come back from that.

The dismal sounds she was making served to make me work harder to break free.

I couldn’t see a damn thing, even with my vampiric vision. It was all just black, but I began shifting my butt around, scooting along the hard wall I was pressed up against to see if I could bump into Brenda.

“Brenda!” I yelled. “Talk to me, and keep talking. I need to find you.”

When she didn't respond, I yelled to her again. "Brenda! Wake the fuck up! Talk to me. Tell me what this witch looks like."

Her chuckle was a dry rasp. "Beautiful. Not like you, but still beautiful."

Inching closer to the sound of her voice, I demanded, "Describe her."

As Brenda gave me the description in stilted words and sluggish sentences, I kept scooting around, trying to find her. While I listened to her tell me what this witch looked like, she sounded nothing like who I'd thought it was when I left Astrid's house.

But she was a witch who had magic—magic that could change her appearance...

Finally, I bumped into Brenda, her body limp, the scent of her death rife in my nose.

"I'm sorry," she whispered hoarsely.

"Don't be sorry, be awake!" Nudging her, I grimaced when she fell into me with a hard thump. "Brenda! Wake the fuck up! You have a lot of shit to look forward to. Remember what Arch said? He said you could play bingo with him and all his little troll friends. Tater Tot loves it. I bet you will, too, and then there's Doug and the dogs. Peppermint Patty and Linus need you. You can have a life if you'll just stay the fuck awake! "

"Aren't you a delight?" a melodic voice asked.

There was a sharp snap of fingers, and then there was light.

So much damn light it burned my eyes like somebody had rubbed raw onions in them, singeing them. Clamping them shut, I tried to ignore the searing pain and

demand answers. “Who the fuck are you?”

From behind my eyelids, I saw a shadow pass before me, blocking out some of the abrasive light. “I can’t believe you don’t know. I guess I’d be hurt if I cared.”

Forcing my eyes back open, I stared into the face of a strange lady. Brenda was right. She really was pretty. Lots of long, flowing blonde hair shrouding her shoulders, eyes bluer than Marty’s and skin like that silk scarf Wanda wears around her head at night.

Ace detective that I am, this wasn’t at all the person I’d thought had killed Owen—or was it? How the fuck would I know? If I got out of this still undead, Marty and Wanda were going to have to come to the realization that we sucked at this.

“Who the fuck are you?” I said between teeth that I clenched so hard, I thought they’d break.

Her shoulders slumped beneath her floaty white dress. She snapped her fingers again before using her hand to make a circle around her face.

As she morphed into an entirely different person, I wanted to fucking gloat that I had been right about Owen’s killer, she was the stinky lady Owen Jr. was talking about, but my eyeballs were on fire from the glow of her magic light. When I’d smelled Grandpa Simon, it hit me, for all the good that revelation’s doing me now.

“Sonja,” I muttered, but then I sat up straight. The hell I’d let her see me sweat. That wasn’t how shit went down with me. If I was goin’ down with Brenda, I was goin’ down with my head held high. “Care to explain what the hell this is about?”

She squatted, chucking me under the chin with an evil smile. “You mean this? How I look? It’s called a cloaking spell. Easy enough if you’ve been around as long as I have. You met Sonja, the messy divorcée and neighborhood gossip. And now you’ve

seen the real me. ”

I lifted my chin, yanking it away from her touch—a touch that sent a slimy slither of dread along my spine. “Cut to the chase. What the fuck do you want?”

I’d been in plenty of dangerous situations in our line of work with OOPS, and despite the fact that this bitch filled me with a serious case of the icks, I was ready for whatever she was dolin’ out.

Sonja pushed my hair from my face with tender fingers. “You haven’t figured that out yet?”

Brenda moaned beside me, meaning, I had to get her fed soon. “Pretty sure you wanna tell me, so how about you get to it so I can beat your ass and be done with it. What do you want?” I ground out, the words thick on my tongue, the restraints around my wrists embedding themselves deeper into my flesh.

She chuckled again, soft and light, but the subtext screamed, “You’re gonna die.”

“What do you think I want, Nina?”

“Revenge...” Brenda husked out. “She wants revenge...”

Well, we’d been right about that, hadn’t we? It was one of the only things we’d been right about, but we’d been right. Sonja had a grudge, and I’d bet my bippy she wanted to tell us all about it.

Straining against the zip-ties, digging my heels into the hard ground, I asked, “For what, Sonja? Why do you want revenge?” Every word I spoke was fucking torture, my tongue weirdly, suddenly raw.

Sonja rose from her haunches, backing away, her hair swinging around in a cloud of blonde Marty would envy. “Didn’t Brenda tell you?”

“Seeing as you’re starving her to death, she was too weak to explain. Why don’t you tell me?”

She shrugged her shoulders, giving me a coy smile as her face reverted back to her true self. “Alfred, of course. You did find his picture, right? Under Brenda’s mantel? I put it there as part of my revenge spell. You know, a picture of your lost love in the home of the tramp who stole him from you? I know it was you ladies who found it. I smelled your essence when it incinerated.”

Note to self, in the paranormal world, a whole lot of identify-by-smell happened. We needed to tread lighter—or shower more.

That aside, who the hell was Alfred? “Who the hell is Alfred?”

“The man in the picture, silly! His name is Alfred!”

“He lied,” Brenda said, weaker with each word, her voice raspy and slurred. “His name...wasn’t...Winston...”

I needed to forget the details about his name and why he’d lied. We had to get the hell out of here and get Brenda fed. When I had this bitch in a choke hold she’d remember into the afterlife, I could ask questions.

“But didn’t this thing with Win...er, Alfred, happen a long-ass time ago? I don’t wanna play armchair psychiatrist, but this shit? It’s not exactly healthy to hang on to stuff this long, let alone hundreds of years. Maybe you should get help?”

Sonja tipped her head back, revealing her creamy throat as she laughed—before she

lifted her head and balled her fist, hurling a fireball at my head.

The hot ball of her anger hit me square in the head, singeing my hair. Not the first time this has happened, by the way. When Robbie was learning how to be a witch, she'd set my hair on fire, too, but I would've liked the previous time to have been the last, thanks very much.

While my hair crackled and sizzled, and Brenda slid farther down my body, Sonja leaned into me, her face hard, her blue eyes fiery. "Alfred was the love of my life! He was supposed to marry me. Meeee ! It was all arranged by our families, and she stole him! This tramp—this jezebel —ruined my life! He was mine!"

Wait. Their families had arranged it? Did they do that for stable boys back in the day? I ground my next words out, trying to stay focused, but the pain of the zip-ties digging into my flesh was becoming a distraction I couldn't ignore.

"But he was a fucking stable boy, Sonja. Why would your family want you to marry a stable boy? Back then, wasn't that like marrying the guy who works at the gas station?"

Sonja looked surprised at first, but then she got her footing. "Alfred was no stable boy! He was a mining heir. His father owned half of Pennsylvania, and he was my fiancé!"

"So what the fuck was he doing, pretending to be a stable boy?"

Planting her hands on her slim hips, Sonja made a face. "He hated his father and he hated mining. My father owned railroads. We were the perfect match. Perfect until he ran away and went to work for her brother." She looked away, like she was lost in a memory. "He left me at the altar, humiliated me in front of hundreds of people..."

I dug the toes of my work boots into the hard ground, trying to stand up. I'd feel better if I could look her in the eye. "So why did you wait all this time to get your revenge? And girl, that's called obsession, not revenge," I spat.

Tears formed in her eyes, sliding along her rosy cheeks. "After Alfred ran away, my father lost his business. Without that merger, we became paupers. We were thrown out onto the street—and all because he fell in love," she said, her words dripping with sarcasm. "I was married off to a horrible man who beat me, abused me, for money that my father just wasted anyway," she growled, hissing the last words.

Brenda was fading fast. Her silence beside me, her limp form sagging, told me so. We needed to get this show on the road.

Rolling my head on my neck, my burnt hair falling in my eyes, I pushed harder to get an answer. I knew what Sonja wanted. She wanted to brag—gloat about the work she'd put into besting Brenda. I wanted her to get it the hell over with so I could get my hands on her.

"But you still didn't answer the question. Why did you wait so long to get your revenge, Sonja?"

She sighed, long and beleaguered, letting her fingers flutter to her mouth. "Because I couldn't find Brenda! I didn't know where she was. We didn't have social media back then. But I never gave up, and while I waited, I met someone who showed me how to practice the art of dark magic, and we made a deal."

A deal . Darnell had once made one of those—not for the reasons Sonja had, but deals were common in the paranormal world. It happened all the time, mostly with the devil.

"A deal?" I spat. "A deal that did what Sonja?"

“A deal that turned me into a witch and bestowed me with immortality. A deal that gave me more power than you can ever imagine.”

Drops of blood began to slide along my wrists and onto my fingers. That meant the force of Sonja’s spell had a rare magnitude. Vampires don’t readily bleed, our healing powers too great, unless the wounds have a whole lot of power behind them.

“Great. So you were turned into a witch. Yahoo. Get to the point,” I ordered, my jaw tight, knowing my temper was getting the better of me and the tearing of my flesh wasn’t helping my patience.

Sonja lifted her chin, the smile on her face fond. “Eventually, I grew strong...strong enough with my new powers that I could hatch a plan to make Brenda pay for ruining my life, for leaving me destitute. It took time— so much time —so much research, but once I found Brenda, and then I found Owen, it was all a breeze from there.”

She grinned then, like she was proud of all her hard work, putting her hands behind her back and clasping them together.

“But she didn’t even know you existed...”

“Well, she does now, doesn’t she?”

To say I was rapidly becoming tired of this game of cat and mouse was a fucking understatement. If I didn’t get these damn ties off my limbs, they were going to sever them.

“So ya catfished Brenda. Made her fall in love with Owen. You found a guy who looked a lot like Alfred, moved in next to him, murdered him and framed Brenda. Planted that fingernail at his apartment, the electrical cord at her house, cloaked yourself to look like her in the video...all so you could frame her for the murder of a

guy who had two kids and a wife and knew nothing about your grudge. The icing on the cake? You tried to friend his damn wife with his fake profile. You're an evil genius. Blah, blah, blah. Oh, and I bet you killed Alfred, too—which is why he never met up with her the night they were supposed to run away together. Amiright?"

If I could get my hands around this bitch's neck, I'd choke her until her eyeballs popped out of her head. She'd obliterated Lacy and Owen's lives, tried to ruin Brenda's and had the gall to come to my house, because she was a total flippin' nutcase. Love does some strange shit to people.

The anger inside of me churned, twisted until it almost made me uncomfortable.

Waving a finger at me, Sonja winked. "Aren't you a smartypants? Yes, I killed Alfred. And Owen wasn't just any old guy, gorgeous. Owen—whether he knew it or not—was a direct descendant of Alfred Barker . Pretty good match, don't you think? God, think about that kinda luck, huh?"

Again, I repeat, we sucked at this private investigation thing. Would a skilled detective have thought to look up Owen Barker and his lineage? Probably.

"Yeah, you lucky fucking ducky," I mocked, pressing my lips together to keep from screaming while blood drained out of me and pooled at my feet. "So what's the end game here, you whacked-out jealous bitch? I mean, you had to know that no human jail could hold Brenda. You could frame her all you wanted, but human prison was the wrong answer."

Letting her shoulders slump, Sonja sighed again. "Of course, I know that. But I knew what would happen if the human police investigated. I knew it would be all over the news. I knew the clan would see it. But I really thought the clan would have gotten to her by now. I know what they do to your kind if you put them in danger, and it's ugly. Painful. Agonizingly painful. That's so much better than any kind of

punishment I could have doled out—to have your own kind turn on you. But they couldn't find her! Why couldn't they find her, Nina?"

The angry side of me, the side that comes out with both fists ready to ram down someone's throat, wanted to rip this bitch to shreds. The side of me trussed up like a damn turkey, bleeding dry, my flesh almost ripped to the bone? Not so much.

"Why—couldn't—I—find—her—Nina?" she screamed at me, her eyes wild.

She was due to lose control any second, and I had no way out. None that I could see, anyway.

Reckless bitch that I am, I smiled, cool as a cucumber. "Because she was with us."

"Exactly! She was with you . Of course, you know that's how I found her—because you fools took the picture of Alfred, and it led me right to her, and to you. And soon your little friends will be here, too, and I'll finish you all off. I can't leave evidence behind, right? I'm going to kill you, and then I'm going to kill your friends, in the most horrible way possible."

I finally got a foothold, managing to rear upward. The intent behind it? To steamroll her into oblivion.

I hurled myself toward her, my wrists bloodied, my feet tangling until I heard a crack, my ankle twisting with such force, I had to fight not to scream. I fell forward onto the ground to the tune of Brenda crying my name.

Then Sonja was there, hovering over me, toeing me until I rolled over to look up and find her swinging her arms.

I assumed it was for the big wind-up, where she socked us with some kind of heinous

magic spell. Instead, she asked, “How about we make this a pick-your-death kind of adventure? Remember those? They were so much fun, don’t you think? So what’ll it be? Starvation? Endless, relentless burning by sunlight? Oh, wait!” She hopped around with glee. “I know! What about a garlic cross around your neck?”

Choices, choices, right?

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Chapter

Thirteen

O h, oh, oh, it's magic, ya knooooow!

So here I was, somewhere dark and smelly, Brenda slumped over in a pile of limbs, waiting to be executed.

Gotta tell ya, not a fan of not being the one with the upper hand.

I'm a vampire, for Christ's sake, and some witch was gonna beat my ass? I've been in a showdown with a witch, and even though I hate to admit it, witch magic is a helluva thing. For all my brute strength, it didn't beat magic.

If I didn't mention it before, I'm also, by accident, half witch—a useless half I could never seem to get the hang of. This sitch was feeling pretty ironic about now.

As Sonja gloated, and I wanted to eat her face off, she circled us. “Whaddya say we do all three? Maybe a little of each?”

Look, if I was gonna die, it was gonna be with my head held high. I didn't want my kids to think I'd left this earth a chickenshit or that I hadn't fought my hardest to stay with them.

“Do your worst,” I growled. “But if the afterlife's a thing, I'm gonna come back and haunt the fucking shit out of you until you beg for death!”

The second I said those words, I felt a heat like I've never felt before. Not when I was a human and Gramma Lou had taken me to the beach in Florida, not even when Marty and Wanda had almost let me fry to death by forgetting I'd fallen asleep in a hammock on our girls' trip in Acapulco.

The ball of light Sonja created with the flick of her wrists shined down with the heat of a thousand suns, making my skin instantly sizzle, hammering at the open wounds until I writhed like a snake in the grass.

I fought the urge to scream as blisters began to form on my arms and the friction of my skin against my clothes became unbearable.

Clenching my teeth against the agonizing burn, I fought fruitlessly against the restraints and barked, "That the best you got? Work harder, bitch!"

"As you wish," she called out with devilish glee. With another flick of her wrist, she twirled her fingers like she was turning a dial and ratcheted up the heat.

Brenda screamed, thrashing against the ground as her body began to smoke.

To say we were gonna be toast was an understatement.

Did that shut me and my big mouth up? Nah. "If I ever get my hands on you, I'll kill you, you sick bitch!"

All I could think about were my kids, Charlie and Carl. My husband Greg, who'd worried about situations just like this ever since we'd started OOPS.

As my skin began to smoke, I thought about Owen's kids, about Wanda and Marty, Darnell, Arch and Tater Tot, and it enraged me that this lunatic was going to take me away from them.

No one knew where I was. I don't think I ever even finished the text to Wanda. We were fucked—but that didn't mean I was going to stop fighting.

My ankle was twisted, hanging off my leg awkwardly, blood left my hands slippery as my skin bubbled, blisters bursting all over every inch of my skin.

And still I fought because of my kids, my husband, my friends. If they ever heard what happened today, I wanted them to know I'd fought to stay with them. Crawling, digging my torso into the ground, I inched toward her while she cackled at my efforts.

“Did you hear me?” I howled, while the light, hot and white, ate at my flesh. “I’m going to find you and kill you, you miserable, weak bitch!”

Out of nowhere, there was a sharp gasp—and the sound of thunderous footsteps.

“Lorelai Bettencourt, stop!” I heard a familiar voice boom. “Stop now!”

My eyes had hazed over, my skin peeling, the zip-tie had torn my wrists almost to the bone, my ankle hung off my leg like a Christmas ornament from a tree branch...when suddenly, the scorching heat of the light Sonja had created dimmed.

I fell over onto my back, wincing at the pain. When I looked up, I saw one of my favorite people on the planet. Roberta—Robbie Tisdale—standing in the middle of the suddenly mellow light of the room, feet planted wide, eyes full of fire.

“Make one more move and I’ll turn you into the pile of shit you are, Lorelai!” Robbie hollered.

Um, who the hell was Lorelai Bettencourt? Didn't anyone have one name anymore?

From the corner of my eyes, I saw Robbie run forward, standing in front of Brenda and me to block Sonja. Then she roared, her arms spread wide. “Stop now, or I’m going to obliterate you!”

“Who the hell are you?” Sonja snarled, throwing up her hands, clearly preparing to cast another spell, but Robbie was quicker.

From where I lay, I was able to see Robbie curl her hands into fists before spreading her fingers wide and flinging her hands at Sonja.

Handcuffs appeared around Sonja’s slender wrists, thick bands of shimmering steel preventing her from moving and rooting her to the spot.

Robbie, her long hair flying around her shoulders, rushed Sonja and grabbed hold of her. “I’m your worst nightmare! Now back the hell off !”

Wanda and Marty rushed in from somewhere I couldn’t see, their floral perfumes a welcome, familiar scent, two faces I was happy AF to see.

“Nina!” Marty yelped, stooping beside me, pulling me close, and rocking me, and I let her. She smelled like home. “Just hold on, vampire. Let the healing begin.”

“Get Brenda,” I whispered hoarsely. “She needs to feed... now . Right now...”

Marty hugged me closer, letting her cheek rest against the top of my scorched hair. “Man, Vampire, this is some pickle you found yourself in, huh?”

I didn’t have the energy to push her away. I felt weak as a newborn. “A whole damn vat of ’em.”

She chuckled, the sound rumbling against my ear as she palmed soothing circles

along my spine. “You scared me. Don’t do that again.”

“How quickly you forget this shit was your idea.”

“How was I supposed to know you’d have to go toe to toe with a witch?”

“You’re smushing my face,” I complained, beginning to feel better every second that passed.

Wanda reached out and touched my hand with a gentle pat before she saw to Brenda. Hauling her up, cradling her against her body as she dug into her Mary Poppins purse (yep. She has one, too) for the pint of blood she always carried for me.

Tearing off the corner of the packet, Wanda held it to Brenda’s lips. “Drink, Brenda. Drink it all.”

The ache radiating through my body began to subside, and as it did, my anger grew. When my hands finally pulled apart, so did my feet. Pushing away from Marty, I was on them in two seconds flat. My skin looked like I’d been through a damn shredder, but my anger was bigger than any pain I was feeling.

Feeling so helpless always made me ragey, and I wanted blood. Sonja’s blood. The awesome power of my vampiric healing surged through me as I ran at Sonja, pushing Robbie out of the way and grabbing her by the front of her floaty dress.

I hurled her at the far wall of what I now realized was a completely empty room. Dragging her upward, I shook her hard, so much so, her bones literally rattled—music to my ears. “I’m gonna rip your witchy ass from limb to limb, you whacked bitch!”

Raising my fist high, the plan was to ram it into her face and introduce her nose to her

brain, but Robbie stopped me.

Her voice was loud and clear and very unlike the timid woman I'd met just months ago. "Vampire! You'll do no such thing! Put that fist away and put it away now, or I'll be forced to rip it off!"

Hands touched my shoulders...gentle, motherly, soothing hands. "Nina," Wanda whispered in my ear. "Stop. It's not worth the clan paying us a visit because we killed someone not our own. You'll start a war. Think of Charlie and Carl. Greg. Think of all of us. You're no good to us in jail. You're no good if in the future, there are other children who might need help."

As mentioned before, Wanda has a way. My anger evaporated on a dime. Instantly, I let my fist fall to my side as Robbie wrapped her free arm around me and gave me a hug. "It's all okay now, vampire. I've got you. I'll take care of her."

Wiping at my eyes, I looked at her with a hard expression. "She'll be punished?"

Robbie nodded. "In ways you can't even imagine. I promise. Now stop. Rest. Are you all right?"

My smile was wry. I didn't like admitting it, but this time, it had been really close. "I'm fine. I'll heal."

She touched a strand of my hair with a soft gasp. "She set your hair on fire? I thought that was our thing?" she teased.

I relented with a chuckle, letting my anger fade away, giving her a hug back. "How the hell did you find us?"

Wanda, who had Brenda up and moving, smiled at me as we made our way to the

door—a door I could now actually see. “Your phone tracker. I know you didn’t think it was a good idea to put them on our phones, but I guess they came in handy?”

Grabbing her hand, I nodded. “Yeah. I was wrong. Okay?”

She chuckled. “Mama knows best. Now, Robbie, come here and give me a kiss. You’re a godsend. I don’t know what we would have done without you.”

She winked, gripping a haggard Sonja/Lorelai hard by the arm as Wanda and Marty gave her a hug. “Always,” she said with a warm smile.

I hugged her again, too. “Thank you,” I whispered in her ear. “You saved my life.”

She tugged a length of my hair with a grin. “I remember you once doing the same thing for me. Now go home and help Brenda rest.” She turned to Sonja. “We have a date with the witch council, don’t we, naughty girl?”

Robbie snapped her fingers, and then she and Sonja were gone.

As I followed Marty and Wanda outside the room, I realized it was Sonja’s apartment. We were in Owen’s apartment complex.

Witch magic is a freaky thing.

Taking the steps one at a time, because my ankle was still mending, I had a question. “Guys...? Who the fuck is Lorelai Bettencourt?”

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All's well that ends well—for now...

A week later, once we'd recuperated from our ordeal, we invited Brenda over to meet some of Archibald and Tater Tot's bingo buddies.

There were all manner of paranormal people for her to get to know, and she seemed to fit in really well.

As I watched them all laugh and talk, while Doug and Brenda's dogs played with my dog, Waffles, I couldn't help but grin.

Shit had turned out okay, and it left me feeling good that we'd helped make that happen. We sure hadn't done it with much skill—we had a lot to learn—but I felt like we'd done a service to our community.

An older vampire by the name of Gaston had been flirting with Brenda from jump, pulling out chairs and holding doors open for her. He had Brenda giggling like a giddy schoolgirl, and if I was smelling the sitch right? She liked Gaston, too. They had chemistry, and it was fun to watch her smile so much.

Bertrand was being Bertrand. That godforsaken camera in everyone's face, filming the festivities in order to finish up his cinematography project. At least it wasn't in my face, but I did end up wearing a Jason mask to make up for how cranky I'd been with him. He'd told us just yesterday, he was moving on to greener pastures.

Instead of being behind the camera, he wanted to be in front of it.

Marty nudged me when she came to stand next to me in the doorway, where I'd propped myself up so I could watch Arch and his friends hang out.

"Hey, I heard from Robbie earlier today."

I grinned. "Oh yeah? What's up with her?"

"She said Lorelai's been stripped of her powers and dropped off to the human police. They forced her to confess to framing Brenda with the threat of death."

Lorelai Bettencourt was Sonja's real name. When we'd come down from the commotion, I'd looked her up. She was, in fact, a descendant of the defunct Bettencourt Railroad.

My jaw clenched. She'd almost killed me—took me from my husband and kids. I can't say I'd be upset if they took her out. "Good. It's nothing less than she fucking deserves. What about the clan? Have they quit breathing down our necks?"

She drove her arm through mine, leaning into me. "Wanda sweet-talked them, and all's well that ends well. They weren't happy we got involved, but we did keep the human police from arresting Brenda—which Wanda reminded them could have created a much bigger problem if they had. They'll get over it. For the moment, it's all water under the bridge. Though, I imagine they'll be keeping a close eye on us for a while. The same way they did when we started OOPS."

Nodding, I chuckled. "We're shoving' it up their asses again. I'm not surprised they're gonna keep an eye on us."

Wanda waved to us from across the room, taking long strides in her heels, her phone in hand. "Just heard from Astrid and her mom, Beth. They said the kids can't wait to see Miss Nina again, and they've begun therapy as a family. Beth said she thinks she's talked Astrid into moving back to Arizona with them."

That made me feel a shit ton better. “That’s awesome. She could use the support now, and there’s nothing like family when you need help.”

Wanda pinched my cheek with a soft smile. “You know it.” She pointed over her shoulder. “Did you see Brenda and Gaston? Romance is in the air,” she cooed.

Marty cooed right along with her. “I’m so glad Brenda’s found people she can relate to. I wasn’t sure she was going to make it there for a minute. She’s tougher than I thought.”

Brenda had taken a little longer to heal than I did. I don’t know if it had to do with her age, but she gave us a scare for a day or so.

“Speaking of making it,” Wanda said, her eyes watery as she gripped my hand. “We almost lost you, Tiger. I haven’t seen you look that bad off for a long time. I don’t know what immortality would look like if you weren’t here, swearing and yelling all the time. I love you, Nina Statleon.”

Marty snickered, tightening her grip on my arm. “It would be quiet. Very, very quiet.”

I snickered. “Screw you, Marty.”

But she whispered against my shoulder, “Don’t ever do that again, Mistress of the Night. I couldn’t survive life without you, because I love you, too.”

My throat got tight, but I meant what I said. “I love you back.”

Wanda threw her arms around us with a snuffle. “Group hug!”

Like I’ve said from the beginning, I’m not as emotional as these two Pollyannas are, but my encounter with Sonja, or Lorelai, or whatever we were calling her, had scared

me, reminded me how lucky I was to have these two in my corner.

So I let 'em hug me—but only for a second before I was wriggling my way out of their grasp. “Okay, okay, enough with the sappy. We have a party to deal with and a budding romance in the mix.”

As they let me go, Wanda held up her phone again. “I meant to tell you—all those emails we got, asking for help? I think I’ve picked our next case.”

She began to scurry off before I could stop her. “Hey! Wasn’t one enough? I mean, look at the shit we were in! You wanna do it all over again?”

Marty looked over her shoulder and said on a giggle, “But did you die?”

I flipped up my middle finger at them, but I knew I was all in. They knew I was all in, no matter how much I protested and made a stink.

I’d always be all in wherever they were concerned. We were family.

Forever.

Like, literally ...

The End

Thanks so much for reading! I hope you enjoyed the first edition of *The Accidental Detectives*! Come back next year for book 2: *Tell Me It’s Murder Without Telling Me It’s Murder*!