

**ALIEN ABDUCTED**  
**By Carrie Harris**

Alien Abducted  
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## **PREFACE**

You should know a couple of things about this book.

It's a prequel. The events of this book happen a few years before the events of *Illegal Alien*, which makes it book 0 in the series, I guess? You can read this one first if you'd like to try out the series. And if you've already read the other books, *Alien Abducted* will give you a sneak peek into the backstory of Audrey, Hardwicke, and the rest of the gang.

It's a novella. If you've never read novellas, they're pretty short. This one is about a quarter of the length of the other books in the series. I was originally going to make it a short story, but Audrey is too long winded for that.

Yes, I did just talk about my character as if she was real. Yes, I am a little batty that way. I appreciate that you're willing to stick with me and Audrey anyway.

Also, I wanted to give a shout out to everyone who has reviewed the *Illegal Alien* books—you're the reason I keep working and learning and writing about potential extraterrestrials and the snarky detectives who chase them.

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## CHAPTER 1

Another slow morning in the Crimes Against Persons bureau at the Toledo Police Department. I was sipping my coffee and trying to look busy when my phone buzzed. The noise made me jump. Normally I wasn't so edgy, but it had been a long night full of too much drama and too little sleep. That double shot latte was the only thing keeping me from nodding off and drooling all over the swank new desk blotter I'd just gotten for Mother's Day.

So I decided to slug down the rest of it as I picked up the phone. This plan would have worked just great if not for the mystery object that came out along with the coffee and lodged itself in my throat. Instead of picking up the phone and giving the person on the other end a nice, professional greeting, I brought the receiver to my face and coughed caffeine all over it.

“Vorkink?”

My aged phone distorted the voice slightly, but I couldn't mistake the speaker. Captain Scorsone, my former partner and immediate superior, had a distinctive clipped speech pattern. His staccato delivery made him sound like every hard boiled noir detective I'd ever seen in the movies. It would take effort not to recognize his voice even if I hadn't listened to it on a daily

basis for the past few years. I would have greeted him readily if I hadn't been too busy trying to oxygenate.

I spat the offending object out into my palm and squinted at it. A blue Lego. One of the little two nub ones. My kid would be walking on two nubs once I was done grilling him on how his toy ended up at the bottom of my morning drink.

“Detective Vorkink?” repeated Scorsone, concern tinging his voice.

I coughed again, rubbing at my sore throat. “Sorry, sir,” I said. “I just nearly committed involuntary suicide by Lego. My kid ambushed me.”

“I’ve been Legoad once or twice,” he said. “Whoever invented those damned things should be sued. Or shot and then sued.”

“I think you’d have more luck getting money out of them if you sued them first. Shoot them after.”

“Good point. How is your boy, anyway?”

It was a good question, one that I couldn't quite decide how to answer. My son Greg was nine, and normally we got along like cops in a buddy movie. He'd inherited my sarcastic sense of humor, and the kid was wicked smart, not to mention a musical genius. But lately, I felt like offering him up for free to a good home. The Lego in the coffee would have been bad enough, but it came on the heels of two weeks of no sleep. Somehow, he'd gotten it into his head that one of the criminals I'd brought down was going to come after me. Now he had screaming nightmares every night, and he followed me everywhere. Last night, he'd picked the lock on the bathroom door while I was taking a shower, and I flung open the curtain to find him perched there on the toilet with a Nerf bat. I almost killed him, after I almost fell over. I loved the kid, but I was nearly at the limits of my admittedly slim patience.

But this wasn't the time to get into any of that. Scorsone had just gotten promoted a couple of months ago, and he'd been in hyper work mode since the transition. Captain Titus had been fired for taking bribes, and Scorsone's first job as his replacement had been to clean house. He'd had his work cut out for him, unraveling that mess. Somehow, I doubted he'd called because he wanted to hear all the gory details about my kid's latest ridiculousness.

So all I said was, "He's playing Prokofiev. I couldn't even pronounce Prokofiev until last week. His violin teacher had to sound it out for me."

"Damn." His voice sank in admiration. "You've got one talented kid."

"No kidding. How are the girls?"

"Sasha got a scholarship to Cornell, and Lucy's soccer team won the regional championship. We're having a celebratory dinner this weekend. You should come."

"Me?" I felt flattered but unsure. Maybe he was pulling my leg. It wouldn't have been the first time. "Why?"

"The girls think you're cool. As Lucy told Georgia the other day, 'Audrey doesn't take any shit.' Georgia wasn't a fan of the language involved, but even she had to agree with the overall meaning."

I snickered. Scorsone's wife Georgia didn't like my language either. About ten minutes after I met her, I'd called someone a dickstain, and she'd hated me ever since. But she was the politest hater I'd ever seen. As much as I liked Scorsone, I didn't go over to his house much because I worried she might literally kill me with kindness.

"Anyway," he continued, "I think the girls would be happy if you'd make an appearance, and I like the idea of them having you as a resource to talk to as they grow up. Bad things happen, you know. Georgia is so uptight, and I know my girls edit what they tell me so I

don't haul off and shoot someone. I think they might be more honest with Auntie Audrey, so I was hoping you'd come to the party. Give them more time to bond with you before they leave home. Would you mind?"

That nickname sealed the deal. I didn't have any family left except my Aunt Rose. Not any that would talk to me, anyway. Once I'd gotten pregnant, my parents had given me an ultimatum—abortion or disinheritance. I'd chosen the latter, and mostly I was happy with that choice. But it made me value what family I had left, and if Scorsone was going to call me family, even just in jest, I'd jump through hoops to help him. Hell, I'd even watch my language while I was there, and that said a lot.

"If it won't upset Georgia," I said, "I'll come."

"Good. I'll find out all the details and send them over. Of course Greg is invited too. But tell him to leave the Legos at home, will you?"

I laughed. "I will."

"Okay, then. Talk to you later."

It was rude, but I couldn't restrain myself. "That's it? You called to ask me to come for dinner? Are you finally dug out of that craphole that Titus left?"

He barked out a laugh. "I almost forgot. Come down to my office."

Then he hung up on me.

"Dum dum DUUUM."

I hummed ominously under my breath, even though I wasn't really scared. Scorsone had my back; he wouldn't have laughed if whatever he had to say was bad. So I took my time, putting the lid on my travel mug and setting it aside to refill later, even though the swill they served at the precinct tasted like caffeinated battery acid. Something told me I'd be desperate



enough later to drink it. The Lego, I tossed in the trash. Then I grabbed a notebook and pen and went down the hallway to Scorsone's office.

Now that he'd moved up in the world, he was no longer stuck in the stifling detective's bullpen with me and the other eight detectives in Crimes Against Persons. Instead, he'd scored himself a small office with an actual door. Unfortunately for him, when Captain Titus had gotten himself canned and escorted bodily off of the premises, he'd put up a fuss, kicking the door and bending the frame so badly that it no longer closed. Scorsone had taken this in stride, bringing in a spotless concrete brick to prop the door open and closed as necessary. Apparently, he'd gone to the garden store and bought it special. Someone had drawn a big bushy mustache and glasses on it and now we all called it Scorsone Jr.

I managed to trip on the brick on my way into the office, but that wasn't what brought me up short. Sitting in my usual spot opposite the desk was a very attractive male specimen. As a single mother of a Lego-tossing nine-year-old, I wasn't exactly on the market. My plate already overflowed with drama; I sure didn't need a romance on top of it. But I wasn't dead either, and this guy hit all the right buttons for me. Tall and dark, with just the right amount of stubble, and the kind of rugged appearance that suggested he wasn't too afraid of getting his hands dirty. Although I had no intention of making a move, I took a moment to savor the sight. Old maids like me had to take the kicks where we could get them.

He launched to his feet and thrust out a hand as I approached. I went for a shake, but instead of the usual polite exchange of pleasantries, he pumped my hand like he was hoping water might come flowing out my mouth. It was a vigorous pumping. As soon as I thought that, I had to clamp my mouth shut because although water didn't come out of it, smartass comments did, and I was having a tough time restraining them.

“That’ll be enough, Detective,” said Scorsone, chuckling.

For a moment, I thought he was talking to me. Then I caught sight of the ID pinned to the guy’s pocket. One look at that red border, and I knew what we were dealing with. Scorsone had gotten me a new trainee. If I hadn’t already firmly squashed my admiration, that fact would have done it. I loved to work with trainees, but I didn’t *love* them.

“Sorry,” said the guy, dropping my hand with a sheepish expression. He modulated his excitement with effort before he continued. “It’s nice to meet you, ma’am.”

“Call me Audrey. Or Vorkink. If you ma’am me again, I’ll shove your ID up your ass,” I replied.

“You could try,” he shot back.

Then he slapped his hands over his mouth like maybe the delayed reaction might call the words back in. The poor kid looked horrified. Not that he was a kid per se; I’d put him somewhere in his late twenties compared to my early thirties. But becoming a mother in college and joining the police department right out of it had made me jaded before my time. Anybody under the age of 50 looked like a baby to me. At least this one had spunk.

“What’s your name?” I asked, taking pity on him.

“Brad Hardwicke.”

“Sounds like a porn star,” I said, because I have the sense of humor of a teenage boy. Then I laughed at the scandalized look on his face. “I’m sorry. Did I shock you?”

“Maybe a bit,” he admitted. “But I can take it.”

I gave him a once over, and instead of shirking under my gaze, he met my eyes squarely. Sometimes, young male trainees tried intimidation tactics, assuming that since I was female, they could walk all over me. They came in full of piss and vinegar and themselves,

took one look at me, and tried to establish dominance. But this guy didn't loom or make smartass comments under his breath, knowing all the while that I could hear him, or any of that garbage. In fact, whatever he saw on my face made him straighten up. I think he might have ma'amed me again if I hadn't already forbidden it.

“You'll do,” I said, giving him an approving nod. “Move your stuff into the desk opposite mine, and we'll get to work.”

## CHAPTER 2

It didn't take the kid long to move into his new desk space. He hadn't been at the job long enough to accumulate all the assorted crap that makes switching work spots such a production. Still, I kept tabs on his belongings because those things said something about a person. Would he be the type to launch into long and detailed stories about what Little Billy did over the weekend, or would he eat tuna fish sandwiches at his desk? It appeared not, to my immense relief. No pictures of kids or wife to decorate the desk area, no Tupperware lunch collections or little bowls of candy. Most of the things he took out of his little cardboard box were of the practical sort. Office equipment neatly labeled with his last name on masking tape, since those things tended to get rehoused on someone else's desk if left unlabeled. A pack of mint chewing gum, a small plastic tube of disinfecting wipes, and a pair of headphones. The only concession he had to personalization was a small bobblehead that he set on the corner of his desk drawer.

I arched a brow and looked at it. Sheepish, he turned the figure so I could get a better look at it.

“It’s Dick Tracy,” he explained. “My brother got it for me when I made detective. I had a thing for the movie when I was a kid.”

“Ah,” I said, nodding. “That’s cute. You need more time to get settled, or shall we get started? I have a whole stack of delightfully exciting paperwork that you can help me complete. It’s in *triplicate*.”

I grinned widely, not because I liked paperwork, but because I got a kick out of seeing the dismay on trainee faces when they realized their coveted job wasn’t going to be all glamour and danger like they’d seen on TV. Of course, boys like Hardwicke should have known that before they came to me, since they’d worked with detectives while on the beat, but somehow, the myth still persisted. People still came to us expecting to spend their days hot on the chase of some violent so-and-so who’d beaten in his golf partner’s face with a five iron, but what they got were days of monotonous paperwork and electronic searching, followed by about an hour of nervous-stomach excitement, followed by more paperwork. Frankly, I felt like I was doing him a service by showing him the realities of the job early on. The day before, I’d caught the five iron assailant, and now I was squarely into the documentation phase. Everything had to be perfect before I handed my file off to the District Attorney’s office.

He shot a skeptical glance at the pile of papers sitting next to me and then tried to compose his face into an expression of dismay, pretending that what he was about to say really pained him. I could see through that one like plastic wrap; he’d have to work on his bluffing if he was going to last in this job. Neither the witnesses nor his coworkers would respect him if he so obviously lied to their faces.

“Man, I’m sorry, but I have to go through HR training in about...” He made a big show of checking his watch. “About ten minutes. But you could show me what you want me to do when I get back, if it won’t take long.”

The offer stapled to the tail end of that comment took me by surprise. Not like I expected every trainee to be a slacker, but...no, actually, I did expect it. If someone had asked me, I would have predicted that he’d go to HR and then dawdle his way back to my desk, hoping to waste enough time that he wouldn’t be subjected to any of the paperwork at all. I was so jaded it wasn’t even funny anymore. Compound that with complete exhaustion, and maybe it added up to me not really giving this kid a chance. I would have to make an effort at that. And probably stop calling him “kid.”

“Sure,” I said, recovering from my surprise quickly. “I’ve got some evidence logs that need completing when you get back. I wrote down all of the things that need to go on them, but there are a few blanks. See? You’ll need to contact evidence storage and get the correct ID numbers—or just go down there because evidence storage never answers their phones—and then you’ll need to type it all onto the forms, because although we keep asking for all of these stupid things to be computerized, someone in the chain of command is a sadist with stock in a typewriter company.”

He blinked. “Is that really true?”

“Nope. I made it up. But I wouldn’t be surprised. The monkeyfuckers in administration are either colossally incompetent, or they have ulterior motives. I choose to believe the latter.”

“Monkeyfuckers?”

“Honey, you haven’t even begun to hear me swear. Does that make you feel a little better about being paired up with the only chick in the department?”

He gave me a weird little smile as he pushed away from his desk and stood up. Embarrassment and satisfaction and defiance all rolled into one curve of the lips.

“Are you kidding?” he asked. “I hear you’re the toughest trainer in the place. I requested you special. I’ll see you after my training.”

Then he walked out, leaving me entirely bemused by the whole situation. I was beginning to think that I was going to like this trainee. But I didn’t dwell on that long, because I really did have a crapton of paperwork to complete. Eventually, I took one page to the elevator. I needed a signature from the coroner and interoffice mail moved at glacial speeds. I couldn’t afford to wait, so I’d walk it down myself and get the signature. One of my pals, Bug Murphy, was a deputy coroner, and I wanted to take the opportunity to set up a cookout with him and his new fiancée, Leah.

As I stood in front of the rickety elevator, waiting for it to open, Captain Scorsone came walking up. He whistled tunelessly as he approached, hands thrust into his pockets, his salt and pepper hair perfectly slicked into place. When he caught sight of me, his face brightened. I found myself grinning in response. It was nice to see him out of his office for once. When we’d been partners, I’d gotten used to talking to him every day, and although we still spoke daily, it wasn’t the same. Now it was all work, and I missed batting around the other stuff with him. The more I thought about it, the more I looked forward to dinner at his place.

“Hey, Audrey,” he said, ruffling my hair. My lack of response proved how much I liked him, because I would have hit anyone else who tried that with me. “Got a new case for you and the newbie to take on.”

I frowned in consideration. “What is it? I’ve got a mountain of paperwork on that golf club assault case. The assailant is a law student, so I want to make sure that this one is airtight before I hand it off to the prosecutor.”

“It’s a disappearance from a campground. I expect the girl just wandered off. High or drunk or maybe both. It should be a fairly easy one. You game?”

“Yeah, it sounds like a good one for the kid—I mean, Hardwicke—to cut his teeth on.”

He laughed at me. “You sound like such an old lady. The two of us can be crotchety together.”

I sniggered as the elevator opened. “You said crotch.”

The door closed on his mock scandalized expression, and I rode the elevator down into the basement.



## CHAPTER 3

By the time Trainee Hardwicke returned to his desk, I'd completed what paperwork I could on the golf club beater, requested the information necessary to finish the rest of it, gotten the file for our new case from Scorsone, read through it, drank three cups of coffee, and made two pit stops. It had only been about 45 minutes, but I was tired enough that if I didn't keep moving at light speed, I'd fall unconscious. I was so tired that I could have watched daytime television and been entertained.

When Hardwicke walked up behind me and said, "Want me to get started on that evidence list?" I jumped. Lost contact with my seat and everything. Although I was fairly sure I'd been awake, I still rubbed at my mouth, just in case I'd been drooling and hadn't realized it.

"No, no," I said, "We've got a new case. I'd like you to look it over before we take a witness statement. The evidence paperwork isn't due until tomorrow, so it can wait for a bit."

His face brightened at the thought of a new case. I stood up and walked the two steps to the coffee pot. The detective's room was cramped and noisy, so when Scorsone had vacated the corner spot near the caffeine, I'd pounced on it with possessive glee. At least the corner

provided some marginal level of privacy. I didn't think I would have been able to work in the middle of the room, with all that chaos and all those eyes on me. I stood out enough as it was, being the only woman in the bureau and all. Most of the guys were cool with it, but it was a deliberate kind of cool. Not the easiness that they tended to exhibit with each other. I didn't bother worrying about that much. I would have been an overachiever anyway, and the situation only served to make me even more determined to prove myself.

“What are we working on?” Hardwicke asked excitedly. “Murder? Assault with a deadly weapon?”

“Missing person,” I said and watched his face fall. “It's a good place to start.”

“Let me guess,” he said glumly. “Some teenager with behavior problems ran for the hills? Or met some weirdo online and decided it would be a good idea to meet him?”

He brightened again at that line of thinking. I'd always thought trainees were so cute at this age, when every case was still a fun academic exercise. One look at the victim of one of these crimes would change his tune, and it wasn't something I looked forward to watching him experience.

“No,” I said holding the folder out to him. “You can skim this on the way down to the car. We're going to interview the witness. Chanel Grandy and her boyfriend Vern Burne—man, his parents must have hated him—anyway, they were illegally camping in Wildwood Metropark last night. Vern woke up, and Chanel was gone. He called in to claim she'd been kidnapped, and she hasn't reported in at her home or job. It's our duty to figure out if there's sufficient evidence to open a case in Crimes Against Persons. You're going to read over the folder and think about how you'd approach this interview. I'm going to conduct it. After, we'll talk about all the whys and hows and figure out what our next steps are.”

I left my briefing there. Even though I had my own thoughts about the case—and whether or not there even was a case here to begin with—I kept them to myself to see how he did when left to his own devices. Hardwicke asked a few intelligent questions, but otherwise remained engrossed in the case file for the fifteen minute drive to Vern Burne’s house. At first, I wondered if he was going to be one of those guys who passively waits for things to happen rather than thinking forward and prepping for them as much as possible. But maybe he was just thinking, because he made some notes in a little notebook produced from a pocket. Then, as I pulled our police issue Chevy into Burne’s neighborhood, he lit right up, eyes darting about as if he realized that there was information to be gleaned here. Those were promising signs indeed.

Reassured that my trainee was making enough of an effort that I didn’t need to be actively teaching right at that moment, I turned my own attention to Burne’s street. It was one of the older sections in T-town, full of tiny one-story houses with miniscule yards. The neighborhood wasn’t rich by any stretch of the imagination, but the houses looked well kept. Most sported groomed flower beds, fresh paint, or both. Flags hung from brackets, and tricycles, hopscotch grids, and other kid detritus sprinkled more than a few sidewalks. People here might not have a lot of money, but they seemed to have plenty of class.

Burne’s house, when we pulled up outside, didn’t fit in at all. Weeds choked the overgrown yard. The house looked dingy and in need of a good power washing. Instead of curtains, Detroit Lions blankets were strung up over the windows to block the sun. It was by no means a ramshackle crack house—I’d been to plenty—but it didn’t stand up to the proud bearing of the rest of the neighborhood, that was for sure.

I spared a glance at Hardwicke, who looked up at the house with an appraising expression. He caught my look and said, "Is he expecting us?"

"Dunno."

I shrugged and mounted the steps. After spending the past ten years on the force and detective bureau, I thought I'd seen it all. I felt jaded, especially when set beside Hardwicke's bright eyed eagerness. But nothing had prepared me for what I was about to see inside this house. Nothing at all.

## CHAPTER 4

Hardwicke knocked on the door. He'd already mastered what I thought of as the "cop knock," the kind of swift rat-a-tat-tat that immediately signals business. It had taken me some time to get the hang of it myself. The first time Scorsone had had me knock on a door, I'd been so nervous about being out in the field that I'd done shave-and-a-haircut on reflex. He'd laughed at me for weeks.

We only stood there for a couple of seconds. Hardwicke was laser focused on the door, but experience had made me a bit more wary. I hung back on the steps where I had a better view of the yard. If Vern Burne had anything to do with the girl's disappearance, he might try and run for it. I made a mental note to talk to Hardwicke about proper home approaches when we debriefed. His situational awareness wasn't on the level it needed to be.

Ironically, I spent so much time worrying about *his* situational awareness that *mine* took a hit. By the time I registered the fact that the hairs were standing up on the back of my neck, it could have been too late. I could have gotten jumped or shot or knifed, or simply lost my man because I was too deep into my own head to pay attention to what my body tried to

tell me. As soon as I noticed it, my hand went to the sidearm at my waist. I didn't draw it or anything, because contrary to what television would like people to believe, waving guns around just because you're a little nervous is a bad thing. Cop shows always drove me nuts, with all the poor trigger discipline and lack of restraint. My gun never got pulled unless I had a concrete reason to draw it.

Instead, I just rested my hand on the grip and left the weapon in its holster. That motion chilled my jets, made me feel prepared for whatever would happen next. And if a threat did materialize, it would shave precious milliseconds off my response time.

The movement attracted Hardwicke's attention, and he looked at me with confusion on his face. I didn't have the time to explain, nor did I really know what had set me off. But I'd always trusted my instincts and wasn't about to stop now.

A rustling in the long grass drew my attention off to the left, but the foliage made it difficult to see what was causing the ruckus. The weeds had grown in thick and green on this side of the yard, with stalks reaching up to mid-chest on me. But I could see the stalks bending in the wake of something large, and I caught glimpses of brown or tan. Clothes, maybe? It was too big to be an animal, and it was making an unmistakable beeline toward me.

I raised a finger to get Hardwicke's attention and pointed toward the approaching mystery figure. His mouth opened as if to say something, and I gave my head a sharp shake. I didn't want him speaking, not while we still had a chance to take this figure unawares. My hand still on my sidearm, I motioned for Hardwicke to make a flanking motion. I'd draw out whoever this was, and he'd approach from the side, ready to offer aid if things went badly.

As Hardwicke began to move in the direction I'd indicated, I began to creep toward the figure, carefully placing my feet in an attempt to move as silently as possible. It wasn't far—

only about twenty feet or so—but it felt like it took ages to cross that space. The grass swayed in the breeze, affording me little chance to get a good look at whatever lurked within. All I could tell was that it was big.

It leapt out at me, silent and swift. My mind froze in shock, but I'd taken enough personal combat courses that my body knew what to do anyway. I instinctively rolled with my attacker, using their momentum rather than trying in vain to resist it. I snatched at the person—whoever it was—made contact, and sent them flying toward the steps. With an agile, almost catlike twist, the man who had attacked me turned to give me a quizzical look.

“Damn,” he said, breathing hard. “I’m sorry. I thought you were one of my cats.”

## CHAPTER 5

The man who'd mistaken me for an oversized feline had a mane. I'm not talking about the kind of long, luxurious locks that would suit a man for the cover of a romance novel. I'm talking about a god's honest lion's mane. Golden hair ringed his face, reaching halfway down his chest and falling down his back. It was just a smidge darker than the hair on his head. I had an intense urge to pull on it to see if it was real, but I wasn't entirely sure that would be safe.

“Who are you?” he demanded, his eyes narrowing in suspicion.

When I didn't know what to do, I took refuge in process and procedure, and this moment was exactly one of those times. My hand went to my pocket in a reflexive motion while the rest of me was still trying to figure out if he'd somehow managed to get his beard to grow like that, or if the whole getup was a wig, or what. If it was a wig, it had to be an expensive one, because the hair didn't have that ragged look that Halloween wigs got after a hard night of partying. I had plenty of experience with that too. Not the partying. The aftermath. Halloween brought out the craziest cases, but I was beginning to wonder if this one would put those to shame.



I whipped out my ID and flipped it open, holding it up for his inspection.

“Toledo Police, sir. Are you Vern Burne?”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“I’m Detective Audrey Vorkink, and this is Detective Trainee Hardwicke. I’d like to talk to you about Chanel Grandy.”

He squinted at the ID before nodding. Now he didn’t look bored. He looked angry. I wasn’t sure whether this should make me nervous, given his hirsute animalistic tendencies and all.

“Come in,” he said. “We don’t want to make a spectacle for the neighbors.”

Frankly, I felt it was a bit too late for that, but I wasn’t about to argue the point. Vern Burne walked climbed the stairs with nonchalance, like it was completely normal to mistake someone for a cat and try to pounce on them in your front yard. Then again, maybe that was normal for a guy with a mane. How was I supposed to know? Hardwicke held the door open for me with a quirk of his lips. I couldn’t decide if he was being gentlemanly or had decided to put me between himself and the maned one.

Inside, the décor was much more normal than I’d expected and much more neatly kept than the exterior of the house. I scanned over the small living room without seeing anything too weird except maybe for an overabundance of animal print pillows and the aforementioned Lions blankets. But maybe I’d just been sensitized to any cat references by the whole mane thing and the fact that I’d just been mistaken for one.

Vern gestured to the pillow-choked sofa.

“Please, have a seat,” he said, tossing his hair. “I’m very sorry about what happened in the yard. I play out there with my cats quite a bit. I heard you moving about and thought you were one of them. We try and sneak up on each other. It’s good for the agility.”

“That’s...fine,” I said weakly. “No harm done.”

“Can I get you something to drink?”

“No thank you,” said Hardwicke. I echoed the sentiment.

Vern settled down on an armchair opposite us. His fingers gripped the arms, harder than necessary. He was upset or afraid, and it was my job to figure out which one and why. It was time to get past my hair-related amusement and do my job.

“I’m the detective in charge of the case,” I explained. “Detective Hardwicke will be assisting me. I’ve read the reports, but I was hoping you’d tell me in your own words what happened last night.”

He nodded. “Sure. Now?”

I dug out my own pen, seeing that Hardwicke already had his at the ready. “Yes, please.”

“Well,” Vern stroked his mane, seeming to marshal his thoughts. “Last night was the monthly meeting of the Toledo Fursonas. That’s a club. You’re familiar with furies?”

“Pretend that we aren’t,” I said, because I sure as heck wasn’t an expert on the topic, and I wasn’t sure if what I knew was true or urban legend. Hardwicke was making a choking sound that suggested either he’d tried to aspirate his own saliva, or he knew something really funny about furies. I’d heard plenty of lewd jokes about them too, but you never knew how much truth was in those things.

“Well, we’re not all monkey fuckers,” said Vern shooting a sour look at Hardwicke. Then I nearly lost it, because I’d just been talking about monkey fuckers earlier, and what were the chances of him repeating that exact phrase? But I couldn’t laugh. Instead, I bit the inside of my cheek as hard as I could and focused on keeping my face smooth and relaxed. I wasn’t sure how successful I was, but he didn’t glare at me, so I couldn’t have done too badly. “I’m the king of the local chapter.”

“You’re...the lion king?” asked Hardwicke, in a kind of faint voice that suggested he was on the verge of losing it too.

“Exactly. We meet at Wildwood Park every month when the weather allows it. Some of those costumes are expensive and not very well suited for snow or wet.”

I nodded, reining in my amusement. “Sure. So you were there last night. Is Chanel a part of the group?”

“Yes.” But he seemed to reconsider this, because he backtracked quickly. “At least she wanted to be. Chanel is my girlfriend. She’s new in town, and this was her first meeting, but it didn’t go well.”

“Why not?” I asked, visions of furry kidnapping and murder dancing behind my eyes. It wasn’t funny, not really. But in my line of work, you had to find something to laugh at, or you’d go insane. At least this case came with a handy outlet for the stress.

“Chanel was a dragon.”

I blinked. “I’m sorry; I don’t understand.”

“A dragon. I’m a lion. That’s my fursona. When I wear my full costume, I’m not Vern Burne, computer science grad student. I’m King Leopold of Wildwood.”

My mind groped for something that would make sense out of what he'd just said, but Hardwicke got there first.

“Like the Renaissance Faire? People all dressing up and acting like nobility, only you've also got fur?” he asked, back to business.

Vern nodded. “Pretty much. It's fun, and I'm not really interested in getting drunk or going bowling. I read the other day that Toledo has more bowling alleys per capita than any other city in the US. It sounds pretty accurate to me; do you know if it's true?”

I shook my head.

“Well, there's not much else to do here, other than bowl and drink. So we dress up in costumes and network with other furies online. It's better than reality TV.”

I snorted. “You can say that again. Okay, so what's the significance of Chanel being a dragon?”

He sighed. “Dragons don't have fur, and we're *furies*. Fur kind of comes with the territory. But I argued that she should be allowed to join anyway, because she's dressing up as an animal, right? And as furies, we all know what it's like to be excluded, so I thought the group would accept her, but I was wrong. Winnie tried to have Chanel thrown out, because she didn't have fur and she wasn't a real animal. The big irony there is that Winnie dresses up like a Pooh Bear. A pooh bear isn't a real animal either, is it? *And* it has plush covering, not fur. So by the same logic, Winnie should be tossed too, right?”

I murmured something that could be taken for assent, because it seemed like he wanted a response.

“Well, Winnie wouldn't drop it. So Chanel and I took off. I had some sleeping bags in the back of my car, and we decided to camp out. We hid from the park rangers, and we set up a

little campsite once they cleared out for the night. I was trying to make it nice and romantic, trying to cheer her up. I thought it worked too.”

“When did you realize she was gone?” I asked.

He shifted uncomfortably.

“Vern?” I asked.

“Call me Leopold.”

“Okay, Leopold. You said in your statement that you woke up and found her missing from the campsite. What exactly makes you so sure that she didn’t just leave? She was upset, right? Maybe she took off.”

“No, she didn’t take off.”

He sounded so certain that I immediately wondered what he wasn’t telling us. After all the furry stuff—not to mention the monkey fucking references--hadn’t we already proven ourselves to be unshakable? How much weirder could this situation get? Did he honestly think his dragon girlfriend had been harmed by a jealous pooh bear?

“Why are you so sure?” I prodded.

He just shrugged.

I shook my head sadly as I stood up and closed my notebook, making a big production out of it. “That’s too bad. We’ll just have to close the case, then. If she doesn’t show up within 48 hours, you can file a missing persons report.”

Vern gaped at me from behind his mane. “That’s it?”

“She’s an adult. Frankly, I’m not sure how you managed to get a casefile opened in the first place. Since you have no evidence and all.”

“She’s the mayor’s niece,” he said with desperation. “Isn’t that enough to warrant an investigation?”

She was, and I’d known it from the files. The relationship was likely the only reason a casefile had been opened at all—to cover our asses in case something untoward had happened to the dragon girl—and why Scorsone had assumed it would be an easy one for my trainee to cut his teeth on. I glanced at Hardwicke and was pleased to see that he didn’t look shocked by this development. At least on some level, he’d picked up on it himself. I turned back to the distraught lion king.

“Even the mayor’s niece can run away,” I said gently.

“Wait!” He threw up both his hands. “I didn’t want to say this before. I thought you’d write me off as insane.”

I arched a brow. When a guy in a mane tells you he’s held back information that might seem crazy, it’s important to pay attention.

“We’re listening,” I said.

He took a deep breath and said, “I think Chanel was abducted by aliens.”

## CHAPTER 6

Neither Hardwicke nor I said anything as we walked down the sidewalk toward our car. Vern/Leopold had followed us out, and I heard him take a long, deep breath of satisfaction that struck me as being at odds with his situation. When one's dragon girlfriend is missing and potentially being probed at that very moment by curious extraterrestrials, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense for that person to be so obviously contented. Then again, a lot of the things here didn't really add up. I was beginning to suspect the involvement of adult beverages or illicit substances, despite Vern's claim that he didn't drink.

"We'll be in touch," I promised, turning to look at him.

But Vern's attention wasn't on me. It was on the small squadron of cats that clustered around his feet, purring. They'd been completely hidden by the savannah-like vegetation, and perhaps that was the point of it. Leopold kept his grass long so he could play in the jungle with his kitties.

"Yes, please," he said, dropping to his knees and cooing to the animals. "I really am upset. I hope Chanel is okay."

“Me too,” I said honestly, and then we got in the car.

Within moments, we were stuck in traffic on Monroe Street, which was backed up for no reason I could see. The interior of the vehicle was quiet as the two of us made some attempt to digest what we’d seen and heard. I struggled to put the pieces together given all of the weirdness. Scorsone would be dismayed to learn that his so-called easy case had gone completely sideways, but that was the way of this job, and I felt like so far Hardwicke had acquitted himself well. If he could hold it together through this furry craziness, he’d do well in the department overall.

Finally, I took a deep breath and said, “Okay, what do you think?”

Very solemnly, Hardwicke replied, “I have no fucking clue.”

I couldn’t help it. I laughed.

“Fair enough. Why don’t we start with your theories before we met the lion king? What did you think?”

He shrugged. “I didn’t think much of it, to be honest. I figured we were only looking into it because of the mayoral connection, and we’d end up dropping it after this interview. There isn’t much evidence there, right?”

“True, but I don’t think anyone searched, either. The campsite, I mean. The file says a couple of uniforms looked around the park, but they didn’t specifically work the site for clues.”

He snorted. “What kind of clues? Alien footprints? Do those have three toes or four?”

“See, here’s where you can’t take the witness statement at face value. Let’s say that you’re Vern, and I’m the dragon girl. We’re out for a romantic campout. Maybe we have a



little wine, smoke up a little. I know Vern says they didn't, but let's assume for a moment that he's lying. We go to bed. Now, tell me what Vern said he saw. You took notes, right?"

Not only did he take notes, but Hardwicke actually took a moment to consult them before he responded to me. Color me impressed.

"Well," he said, flipping through the pages of his notebook. "He said he woke up to see three tall, shadowy figures. Too tall to be human. They had deep, black eyes and long torsos, and he concluded that they were extraterrestrials. So you're saying he was drunk and hallucinated that?"

"Not exactly. You're missing one important point. These mysterious figures of his were standing between him and the fire. Let's say you're baked, and you're sleeping next to a campfire. You wake up out of a dead sleep and see these three dudes. You're not exactly in control of your faculties. What would make you see tall, gangly aliens?"

He thought for a long moment. "Shadows? They'd be cast toward him, right? The guys might be normal, but if he only saw the shadows, they'd be all stretched out. Maybe you could mistake that as an alien?"

"Exactly. His description of the eyes could be due to the same phenomenon. Deep shadows caused by the campfire might look like alien eyes, especially if you're baked."

"But that would still mean someone was there," said Hardwicke, his face pursed in thought. "Maybe some of his jealous furrries, maybe somebody else. Maybe the furry costume might look like an alien, in the right light?"

"True. Or he hallucinated the whole thing. Dreamt it. We'll have to take a look at the site to find out for sure. Someone could have showed up at the site to mess with the girl, and that possibility combined with her mayoral connections means I'd like to check it out."

“Cool. Are we going there now?”

“I want to stop by the office first. I took the camera out of the car to print off some pictures for my paperwork this morning, and I forgot to bring it with. I also want to run a search on Chanel’s cell phone and make sure GPS doesn’t turn her up at some Rally’s eating takeout. Let’s stop there and grab a quick lunch before we head out.”

“Sounds good,” he replied, flashing me a grin.

“Unless you’d rather stay at the office and wait for a murder case to show up,” I said, teasing. “I know you were bummed to get a missing person.”

“Are you kidding?” he exclaimed. “This is awesome! Do you deal with this level of weirdness often?”

I let out an exhausted sigh that was only half melodrama. “You’d be surprised,” I said.

## CHAPTER 7

The TPD parking lot overflowed with cars, so I ended up pulling into a spot in the back of the lot next to my beat up Nissan. It wasn't much to look at, and I'd had one hell of a time getting Greg, my son, into the backseat when he still had to use a booster, but I didn't intend to replace it until it died a slow and painful death. Greg might only be nine, but I was already starting to plan for college. I had to, if I wanted to save up enough dough to make a difference.

"Meet you back down here in fifteen?" asked Hardwicke. "I think I'm going to run over to Subway and grab something."

"Yeah, that sounds good."

He took off down the street in an easy, loping jog that made me jealous. I could run, but only because I'd trained myself up to it. It didn't come naturally. Without constant, excruciating workouts, I slowly dissolved into a couch potato.

I'd just begun to climb the steps that led into the building when I faintly heard someone shouting, "Mom! Mom!" I turned on instinct, even though I knew it couldn't possibly be my

son. Greg was in second grade and, if my memory served me correctly, he'd be currently in art watching the other kids eat paste.

That was where he should have been, anyway. But he wasn't. He was running across the parking lot toward me. All legs and elbows. His t-shirt didn't quite cover his belly, and my heart sank as I thought of having to replace his entire wardrobe *again*. After years of being a shrimp, he was doing all of his growing in about six months, and the constant clothes purchases were killing me. You know, along with the whole Leg-induced suffocation and lack of sleep.

"Mom, mom!" he exclaimed excitedly. "Aunt Rose got a dog. A big one, too! You won't believe what she called it. The lady at the pound turned all red."

"Oh, I believe it," I said dryly.

Then I heard the barking. Aunt Rose came around the row of cars closest to me, dragged by a monster of a dog. It looked like it was half wolf, half slobber. The thing practically came up to her waist, which wasn't all that tough considering that Aunt Rose had a giant personality and a small stature. She only came up to my shoulder, but when she scolded, I listened. Mostly because she made up some really funny swear words when she got angry. For a sixty-year-old, she sure had a mouth on her.

"Why isn't he in school?" I demanded once she was close enough to talk. "And stop slobbering on me!"

"Dumbass, get down!" she snapped, and surprisingly, the dog promptly sat down on her foot and started drooling on the ground instead of on me. She shot a grin of satisfaction my way. "See? He already answers to his name, and it's only been an hour."

“What made you get a dog? Why are you here? Isn’t Greg supposed to be at school?” I asked, suddenly exhausted again. Our encounter with Leopold had woken me up, but now I was fading again.

She stepped closer to me, her face growing serious. There wasn’t much that could make Aunt Rose look like that. I’d seen a similar expression on her face the day I turned up on her doorstep after my parents kicked me out and cut me loose. She’d been my only family ever since. I’d moved in with her. She helped me with Greg, and I helped her with her mortgage. It was a mutually beneficial relationship, except that we both knew I owed her more than she owed me. I would pay up, too. Some day. As soon as I could.

“Greg told the other kids at school about his plans for your funeral,” she said quietly. “The principal called me, and we had a long talk about it.”

It seemed like I ought to be angry that he hadn’t called me, but I was sure that he’d tried. I kept my cell phone off while I was at work. And honestly, I was happy that Aunt Rose had my back; I don’t know what would have happened to Greg and me if she hadn’t.

“So you decided to get a dog,” I observed.

“I took Greg to the pound and told him to pick out the biggest man-eater he could find, so that, if the bad guys do come to our house, the dog will gobble them up in one bite and only leave their lips and assholes behind.”

“You did not say that to my nine-year-old,” I said, only I knew for a fact that she had. Aunt Rose didn’t censor herself for anybody, even her great-nephew. And secretly? I was thankful for it. One look at my son, who had sprawled out on the sidewalk next to Dumbass the dog, and I was all in. Greg was smiling as he scratched the dog behind one ear, provoking

that involuntary leg jerk that dogs do when you've hit the right spot. I hadn't seen him look so happy in ages.

“Of course I did,” she said primly. “If he doesn't hear it at home, he'll hear it from the paste-eating dingleberries at school. The dog should help put his fears to rest so we can get some sleep for a change. Oh, and we brought you lunch. Greg, give your mama her soup.”

It took a moment to disentangle my kid from the dog long enough to produce the Tupperware container of chicken noodle from his backpack, but we finally managed it. I gave thanks all around and finally managed to make it into the building with a homemade lunch, a crotch full of dog slobber from Dumbass's farewell, and a much lighter heart.

## CHAPTER 8

The drive to Wildwood Metropark didn't take too long, but Hardwicke spent the entire time opening his mouth as if to say something, shaking his head minutely, and closing it again. If I'd been a nicer person, I probably would have asked him what was up. But it wasn't my job to be nice. As his mentor, I needed to teach him to speak up when necessary, to ask the uncomfortable questions and ferret out the truth. Some mentors coddled their trainees, but I'd been lucky. I got partnered with Scorsone, and he hadn't coddled me one bit. On the contrary, he'd thrown me in the deep end and jumped right in there with me. If I could do half as well with my trainees, I'd be content.

It seemed like I wasn't doing too bad a job as a mentor. Although I was middle of the pack when it came to experience, I'd had a hand in every single newbie that had come through the department in the past two years. Maybe that was Scorsone's doing, but I preferred to believe I got picked because I took the job seriously.

So, regardless of whether or not I liked Hardwicke, I wasn't going to help him with whatever crisis, concern, or question he had. Instead, I hummed along with the radio and pretended not to notice that he couldn't squeeze the words from his throat.

Wildwood was one of those long, rambling kinds of parks, ribboned by a single access road and dotted with parking lots. Leopold had said that he and the dragon girl had camped out deep into the park, so I steered the car toward the back, nearly t-boning a lady and her two dogs who decided to cross the road right after a blind curve blocked by intense foliage, about twenty feet from a marked crosswalk. She had the gall to look daggers at me, until I pulled out my badge and slapped it against the windshield. Then she went white and hurried across the street with the dogs in tow.

"Frankly, if it hadn't been for the dogs, I might have run her stupid ass over," I muttered, only half serious.

Hardwicke shot me a look but still didn't say anything. For a moment, I wondered what was on his mind, but that was a guessing game I didn't feel like playing. If I wanted that kind of thing, I would have gotten a boyfriend.

I pulled into a parking spot and would have gotten out of the car without a word if Hardwicke hadn't cut me off before I could open the door.

"I finally put it together. This is some kind of hazing thing, isn't it?" he spat. "This case, I mean. It's your twisted idea of a joke."

I gave him a long once-over. He'd managed to work himself up into a lather all right. His eyes had gone thin with suspicion, and deep furrows etched his brow. This wasn't the time for smartass answers or flippant responses, although I wasn't going to go overboard in calming him down, either. If the facts didn't do the job, then he wasn't suited to work here. And really,



I couldn't blame him for the question. This case was so strange that it might have seemed contrived to me if I'd been in his position, and some people thought hazing was hilarious. He didn't know me well enough to make a judgement call on whether or not I was one of those people, so I couldn't exactly take it personally, although a part of me wanted to.

"I would have come up with something better than a maybe-missing furry if I'd wanted to give you a hard time. Besides, this would have taken some time to set up, and I didn't know I was getting a trainee until Scorsone introduced me to you this morning."

"Yeah, right," he muttered. "You're messing with me. What's your problem?"

"Other than the fact that you've got your knickers in a bunch? I could use about three days of solid Z's. I'm tired."

I made a big show of yawning, trying to minimize the situation before it got out of hand, but his face darkened in response.

"I knew I shouldn't have asked for the only woman in the department," he muttered.

"Why? Because my tits might get in the way of any clues I might see? I'm sorry, sunshine, but they just aren't that big."

Of course the comment stung, but I'd heard variations of it over and over again through the years. I'd learned that the best way to deal with it was straight logic with a healthy soupcon of snark. That tended to knock the wind out of the other person's sails, because how do you argue with a statement like the tits-and-clues thing?

Once again, it worked. Hardwicke let out a startled laugh, and the wind went right out of his sails. His face went sheepish as he considered what he'd said.

"That was out of line," he said.

“Yes, it was.” I took a deep breath, trying to put my own temper back in check. “I imagine your ego got all riled up. You honestly thought I was pulling your leg?”

“Yeah. And I felt stupid. My pops told me not to work for a woman. He’s a man’s man, you know? My mother left his sorry ass because he...well, he just never respected women. And I got to thinking about what he’d say when I told him that you’d put together some bullshit case just to mess with me, and...it pulled my chain. I’m sorry. If you don’t want to work with me anymore, I’ll understand.”

“You might not get another mentor, depending on how generous Scorsone is feeling,” I cautioned.

I was fairly sure that Scorsone couldn’t kick him out on the strength of something this small, but I wanted to push this a bit. My ego had gotten a bit riled up too, but realizing it wasn’t the same as controlling it.

He just nodded. “If that’s what happens, I suppose I deserve it. I’m not going to follow in my pops’ footsteps.”

Just like that, the anger went out of my sails. I knew what it was like to hold a grudge against family. Sometimes mine pulled me in directions I didn’t like, although I worked hard to tamp that down.

“You’ll need to find some way to deal with that if you’re going to work this job,” I said after a few moments of thought. “Otherwise, you’re not going to be impartial when you’re called in on a domestic violence incident. That kind of thing can really break you; I speak from experience here.”

“Thanks,” he said softly. “I feel like an ass.”

“Yeah. I feel like that most of the time. Either you give up, or you do the job.”

He took a deep breath and let it out, but his shoulders didn't drop from their tense position up by his ears. This job meant something to him. The thought of losing it meant a lot, but he'd offered to do it voluntarily. So I decided to give him another chance.

"Let's go," I said. "I want to find that campsite."

I indicated the door, and he gave me a shocked look before rushing to open his before I could change my mind. Together, we took a brief detour to consult the large park map posted near the bathrooms, making a judgement call on the best places to look for the campsite. It would be easy to identify once we found it, thanks to the presence of a fire pit that Leopold had taken the time to ring with rocks. Since fires weren't allowed in Wildwood, there couldn't be many of those. Still, I didn't relish the idea of tromping through mile after mile of poison ivy looking for the thing, so I wanted to make the process as quick and painless as possible.

After a few moments of planning discussion, we took off down the agreed upon path. The park was relatively quiet at this time of day. The older kids were still in school, and the young ones mainly clustered around the playground area. Lunchtime joggers and hikers had already come and gone. Aside from a few people with their dogs and a small cluster of what looked like college aged Ultimate Frisbee players in the clearing near the mouth of the trails, we didn't see many people.

"So what are we looking for?" I asked, determined to turn this trip around to a more positive outcome.

He thought for a moment.

"Well, a campsite, obviously. It'll be relatively close to a walking path, but not one of the wide paths the rangers drive through. Too much of a chance of being spotted. A clear area big enough for the fire and a couple of sleeping bags."

“Good. I suggest looking for the fire pit itself. The rocks should be our best bet of spotting it, unless you’re secretly a Boy Scout tracker?”

“No, but I eat a lot of Girl Scout cookies.”

“I’m not sure that really helps us with our present situation, unless you have some in your pocket.” I answered his questioning look with a shrug. “Hey, I like those peanut butter ones.”

We fell into a surprisingly companionable silence as we took the E trail that looped around the park. The path was well maintained—at least as much as a beaten dirt path through the wood could be maintained—free of debris, thorny protrusions, or potholes. Sometimes bikers even rode on it, so the surface was nice and smooth. But still, we made slow progress, stopping to peer through the trees at likely spots, and on occasion stepping off the path to check out a likely possibility. Leopold had said that they “hadn’t gone far” from the path but hadn’t been able to provide much context for how that would translate to feet, inches, or anything else measurable. He’d been too busy trying to console the dragon on the way in and worrying about her whereabouts on the way out.

The slow going gave me a chance to think on what had happened with Hardwicke in the car. It seemed like I should have been angrier than I was. Was I wimping out by not storming back to Scorsone’s office and demanding that this sexist pig be assigned to somebody else? I didn’t think so. Maybe I was being too easy on him, but part of me identified with the fit of temper he’d displayed. Most trainees were so uptight and afraid of failure that I struggled to teach them anything. In the few hours I’d known him, Hardwicke had displayed a willingness to fail spectacularly and then get up and stubbornly try again. I identified with that mentality all too well.

With that in mind, it felt good to give him another chance. If he lashed out again, I'd talk it over with Scorsone as a potential problem. But I'd just threatened to run over some lady who walked in front of my car—something I hadn't really meant—so it seemed hypocritical to ding Hardwicke for words spoken in anger too.

“So what kinds of clues are we looking for once we find the site?” asked Hardwicke. “Signs of a struggle? Alien tracks? Animal tracks? What do dragon tracks look like, anyway? I'm not sure I could tell alien tracks from dragon ones.”

I shot him a look of exasperation and would have come up with some really cutting sarcastic remark if I hadn't been distracted. My eyes caught on a broken branch leading off to the left. A wide phalanx of footprints tore through the underbrush in that direction. Although the ground had been churned up pretty good, one print stood out clearly in the dirt at the edge of the path.

All thoughts of witty banter left my brain as I sunk to my knees beside the print. I'd ordered a pair of these same boots with their distinctive treads when I'd gone into the academy, and I'd never regretted the purchase. Military issue combat boots made a real difference when it came to training for PT. To this day, I ran better in boots than I did in actual running shoes. Perhaps a squad of military guys had come to the park to train, but it was just enough out of the ordinary to capture my attention.

Hardwicke touched me on the shoulder.

“Over there, Detective,” he said. “I think that's the campsite.”

## CHAPTER 9

There wasn't much to see at the campsite, but I hadn't expected to find a girl in a dragon suit just sitting there, waiting for us to find her. Although he'd been worried about her, Leopold had taken the time to kick dirt over the fire and pack everything up. We could see marks on the ground where something—likely a sleeping bag—had sat, and the outline of what was unmistakably a cooler in a bare patch where no grass grew. But otherwise, the campsite gave us no clues. Not a single dragon track to be found.

Strangely, the combat boots (and presumably their wearers) had bypassed the camp, skirting the edge to head further along into the woods. I was no tracker, but I figured there had to have been somewhere around 5-10 booted figures based on the amount of destruction left in their wake. And the marks had been made in the past day at the most. It had thunder stormed the night before last, a phenomenon which had only served to agitate my son even more than usual. Hopefully the addition of Dumbass to our little family would help solve that problem. The name didn't exactly inspire confidence, but then again, Greg hadn't flipped out once when I'd said I had to work, and that was a new and exciting phenomenon.

Hardwicke stood at the edge of the fire pit, poking at the charred remains with a long stick. I couldn't tell if he was just amusing himself or actually looking for evidence until he tossed the stick away with a frustrated sigh and muttered, "Nothing. Damn it." Then he looked at me as if for guidance.

I wasn't about to allow that. The frustrating grunt work part of a case had stymied many other detectives I'd known, and Hardwicke had the kind of personality that could barrel through that if only he got started off on the right foot. It was my responsibility to make sure that happened.

"Okay, so this is a dead end. What would you do next, if you were in charge of the investigation?" I asked him.

He let out an exasperated huff and seemed about to complain loudly about the whole stupid thing, but within seconds he'd visibly regained control of himself. He looked around carefully at our surroundings.

"Well, we could try and sweep the park just in case she's hiding in here. But I'm not sure it's worth the manpower. She'll have to come out sometime, right?"

"I agree. Or turn on her phone, in which case we'll be able to locate her. It's off now. I checked."

He nodded. "So that's a dead end too. We could look for a likely exit point and show her picture around. She doesn't have a car, so someone would have had to see her or pick her up on security footage." Here, he glanced at me as if for confirmation.

"That's not a bad idea. Let's hold onto that one for a minute and keep thinking," I suggested.

"Okay. Searching for UFOs is out." Here, he grinned. "Or dragon prints."

“You’re missing one key element from this equation. What do you see?”

I kept my voice even, wanting to encourage rather than offend. He seemed to take it in stride, stopped talking, and immediately looked around the area. It didn’t take long, since there wasn’t a whole lot to look at. Trees. Fire pit. Tracks.

“The footprints,” he said. “You think they had something to do with her disappearance?”

“Could be. Maybe she followed them. Maybe they saw something. The chances aren’t great, timing-wise, but my guess is that these tracks are relatively fresh or they would have been washed out by the rain. Leopold was hoping to avoid detection when he picked his camping spot. I doubt he would have chosen this one if he’d seen those tracks.”

“And they would have been tough to miss when it was light. Either he was really drunk, or they were made sometime after they made camp.”

I nodded. “It’s probably nothing. But we’re going to cross it off the list so that we *know* it’s nothing. And can prove it.”

He considered this for a moment and then made eye contact. “I get it,” he said, and I really thought he did. “Let’s see if we can find the rampaging horde of booted figures.”



## CHAPTER 10

Hardwicke and I had walked back to the path and were halfway to the car when he stopped cold. At first, I thought he'd spotted something—some kind of clue we'd missed on our way out. I'd been looking for just this kind of thing myself, and a word of praise leaped into my throat at his finding it first. Without being asked to look for anything, even.

But instead of pointing out dragon tracks or a spare alien probe half-hidden in the foliage, he whirled around with his brow furrowed. The praise died on my lips. He had something to say, presumably not related to any impressive clue identification. Hopefully this time it wouldn't piss me off, because here, it would be all too easy for me to kill him and hide the body.

*Kidding.* At least, I'd been kidding about the part where I'd want to do such a thing, even after his hot-headed comment from earlier. If I'd wanted to? I would have gotten away with it no problem.

“Wait a minute,” he said. “How are we supposed to find the guys in the boots? It's not like they live here in a commune with the furies.”

“Are you sure about that?” I asked.

His face flickered through a few emotions—shock, wonder, anger, and then bemusement. Then he said, “Pretty sure, although I’d believe just about anything at this point.”

“Then you’re learning,” I responded, not unkindly. “But you’re right. Wandering around the park isn’t going to get us to our potential witnesses. What will?”

He stepped off to one side of the trail, gesturing for me to follow as a bicyclist zoomed past. After the coast was clear, he continued down the path, shaking his head. “I have no fucking clue.”

“If you’ve got a group of runners in combat boots, do you think they’re going to be wearing your usual Under Armour type athletic gear?” I asked.

“Probably not. I imagine they’d be in fatigues or something.”

“So they’re going to stand out. And if they’re training for a PT test or something like that, they probably come here on a regular basis, meaning that witnesses are likely to remember them.”

His brow furrowed further. “So we’re going to go around and ask all the moms with toddlers on the playground if they’ve seen a group of guys in fatigues running around?”

I shook my head. “No. We’re going to the Manor House.”

I left it at that, hoping that he’d figure it out from there. The Manor House was an event space on the metropark grounds. The historic building housed weddings and gave tours and teas and things, or so I’d heard. I’d never been inside the place myself. It wasn’t exactly my scene these days. I couldn’t imagine taking Greg to tea at one of those places. He’d probably end up killing some society bigwig with a stealth Lego.

Although I hadn't ever been inside, I was willing to bet that the Manor House was either staffed by park rangers or had a way to get in touch with them. And something told me that my best chance of finding the combat boot brigade was to ask a ranger. If these guys ran here on a regular basis, they'd know.

It was a great theory, but I turned out not to need it.

## CHAPTER 11

The Manor House sat smack in the middle of the park, far enough to be an annoying walk but not quite far enough to make me feel like I could get the car without looking like a lazy ass. Hardwicke didn't comment on the distance; he seemed lost in thought. That was fine by me. I was beginning to feel the late nights again, and I muffled so many yawns en route that I lost count. I could have continued to teach if I'd had to, but I was quite content to walk along in silence.

My jaws split in yet another mega yawn that brought tears to my eyes, which is my excuse for what happened next. I wiped my vision clear with one impatient hand, turned a sharp corner choked with thick, overhanging foliage, and collided with a dude in camo. Between my blurry vision, the camouflage, and all the greenery, I just hadn't seen him until it was too late. The guy's sternum made hard contact with my nose, making my eyes water anew. He barely even grunted, while here I was seeing stars. I'd always been in pretty good physical shape, but maybe I needed to work out more if a mere collision could disable me like that.

“Ma’am!” he exclaimed. His hands hovered over me, blurry shapes that wanted to offer aid but didn’t quite dare touch me. “I’m so sorry!”

“It’s okay,” I said in a watery voice.

“You alright, Detective Vorkink?” asked Hardwicke.

For a moment, I wasn’t sure why he’d fallen back on formality, and I fully intended to give him crap about it as soon as my face quit leaking and my vision cleared. But when that happened, I noticed the look of concern on the face of the man I’d run into—or who had run into me, perhaps—and I understood.

“Ma’am,” repeated the man in camo, his voice a bit more respectful than before. He was youngish, with dark, close-cropped hair and a dusky complexion that could have been the result of one of a hundred different ethnicities or maybe just a lifetime membership to Beaches Tanning Salon. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” I said, waving away his concern. “But maybe you can help me.”

He went to instant, rigid attention. I pegged him as an active or former serviceman rather than a trainee. He already had the discipline drilled into him, unlike the boys and girls who just aspired to it. I’d seen it plenty of times in my line of work. Cops had the same thing going, only a bit less intense. It was the difference between Hardwicke and me. I’d talk smack, but I’d never lose my cool like he had earlier. Hopefully not, anyway.

“What do you need, ma’am? The name’s Fortunault. At your service.”

“We’re trying to track a missing person,” I said. “She was last seen in the park, late last night, and there were a bunch of booted prints running through the campsite. Combat boots, I think.”

His brow furrowed. “How do you know that?”

“The treads,” I said, pointing at his. “I’ve run in them too, when I was a rookie. Saved me a lot of blisters, those boots did.”

He gave me a thin smile. “Yes, ma’am. I know exactly what you mean. A missing girl, you say? I think you should come talk to my superior officer.”

I frowned at this, but he’d already turned away, gesturing for me to follow. Hardwicke fell into step behind him, not seeming to realize the implications of this statement. I’d come here expecting to find a group of soldiers or soldiers in training, running in the park for fun. If there was a superior officer on sight, something was going on in the park. Something the local police department didn’t know about, or at the least something that hadn’t trickled down to my level. Or Scorsone’s. I didn’t know what that meant, but it didn’t seem good.

## CHAPTER 12

Fortunault's superior officer was a short guy who reminded me of the Hulk. If Hulk was short, bald, and black, they could have been twinsies. Muscles corded the guy's neck, so thick that it had the same circumference as his head, just one long column down to his shoulders. It looked like even his veins had muscles. This guy was shorter than me, and I sure wouldn't have wanted him as a grappling partner. Frankly, I liked the tall, muscle-bound types. They always relied on brute strength, which was easy to counter when you knew what you were doing. But something told me this guy wouldn't be like that.

Fortunault had a few brief words with him, while I took the opportunity to look around. The superior officer had been sitting in one of the pavilions among the scattered remains of what looked like a picnic lunch. Open 2-liters, a plastic tray of subs, and some vegetable trays littered the area. It had all the appearance of a group of friends casually meeting in the park, but the rest of the picture didn't add up. As I watched, a pair of booted soldiers—a tall, gangly guy and a petite woman with a gymnast's build—ran into the area, completely bypassed the

food, and had a word with a woman sitting at the back of the pavilion with a clipboard full of papers.

Hardwicke seemed to have finally cued in to the fact that something wasn't right in the land of Oz, and he gave me a quizzical look. I shook my head, hoping that he'd get the message to chill out and see what happened. I'd call for backup if necessary, but first, I wanted to see what they had to say. I didn't feel like we were in any danger. Not yet.

Little Hulk marched over to us. He took tiny steps, limited by his height and the fact that his legs were tight with cantaloupe sized muscles. No way could this guy even touch his knees, let alone his toes. Maybe he would have been easier to fight after all. Lack of flexibility could really do you in when it came to grappling.

He looked up at me and said, "Your missing girl isn't here."

I blinked. Then I got a little angry, because he hadn't even asked me any questions. And apparently, he had tracking devices on everyone at the park, because he knew without a doubt that the woman we were looking for—who he knew nothing about—was not here.

I arched a brow. "Well, now I know you're trying to hide something." Then I folded my arms, hoping the movement would look tough. Really, I was just trying to hide the fact that my hands had started to shake from mingled nerves and adrenaline.

His jaw clenched. "I don't know what you mean."

"You've just tried to dismiss me without a single question. You want me out of here. What exactly are you doing here in the park, anyway?"

His jaw went even harder. If this went on much longer, he'd be able to cut glass with that thing.

"This interview is over. Get her out."



He jerked his chin off to one side in a wordless order to Fortunault. The younger soldier didn't look happy about it, but he launched into action regardless. He walked over and stood by my side, gesturing for Hardwicke and I to head down the path from whence we'd come. At least he didn't take me by the elbow and try to steer me. I hated that.

"I'll see you to your car," he offered politely.

I glanced back at Little Hulk, weighing my options. Clearly, I didn't have the political clout to stand against this dude on my own. I needed to enlist Scorsone for backup, but I didn't even know Little Hulk's name. His camo was free of insignia or a name tag, which made me wonder if maybe he was just playing at being a military guy. Either that, or he was the kind of military guy who moved incognito, which seemed like a dangerous thing indeed.

Undecided, I glanced at Fortunault. He also wore unmarked camo, but he'd given me his name voluntarily, and I thought I saw a hint of sympathy in his eyes. Perhaps he might talk to me, away from the malicious influence of Little Hulk. So I followed him, gesturing for Hardwicke to do the same. My trainee did as instructed, although I could tell he wasn't happy about it. His jaw was hard too, but not as hard as Little Hulk's.

Sure enough, once we were out of earshot of the pavilion, Fortunault said, "Sorry about that. He's a dick." Then he looked stricken. "But don't tell anyone that I said that."

I snickered. "No problem. I've had that kind of superior before too."

He relaxed visibly. "Yeah, they seem to be everywhere."

"Listen," I said. "I don't want to make trouble for you here, but if I don't get something I can use, I'm going to have to go back to my superior and tell him all about this, and then he's going to call his superiors, and the whole group of them is going to have an extended pissing

contest with your superiors. I don't really feel like getting caught in the crossfire, if you get my drift."

"Yeah, I sure do." He shuddered theatrically.

"Can you tell me anything useful? If I gave you the description of the girl, could you at least tell me if you saw her? She was in costume, so she'd really stand out."

He didn't even pause. "I didn't see anybody in costume. And I can tell you with certainty that she isn't in this part of the park. *Absolute* certainty."

"How can you be so sure?" broke in Hardwicke, unable to contain himself any longer.

Fortunault's eyes flicked from him to me and back again. He sighed, running a hand over his head. "Okay, I'll give you a little bit, but it didn't come from me, and you can't repeat it to anybody, okay? But if a girl's missing, I can't sit by and do nothing."

"Thank you," I murmured, not wanting to interrupt the flow of words now that we'd gotten him started.

"So the reason I know she's not in this part of the park is because *nobody* is in this part of the park. My whole squadron is running around here, telling people there's a bad sinkhole and diverting them off onto other paths. We got the park rangers to rope off the area just a bit deeper down the path from where we ran into each other, but people walk around those things all the time, so we're here to make sure they don't do that."

"Yeah, I know how that goes," I said.

Hardwicke nodded. "What's the real problem?" he asked.

The question was maybe too blunt, but Fortunault was used to plain speaking, and he showed only momentary discomfort. He'd decided to spill, and spill he would.

“A classified military craft went down. It shouldn’t even have been here in the first place, so the top brass is all up in arms trying to figure out what happened. They already extracted the bulk of the crash overnight, but we’re still combing the area to find any fragments that might help piece together what happened. We don’t want anybody to walk off with part of it. You get the need for secrecy.”

“Ah.” I nodded. “Yeah, I can see how that would be stressful.”

Fortunault scoffed. “You’re talking about Lieutenant No-Neck? He’s angry as a default.”

“You call him No-Neck? I nicknamed him Little Hulk the minute I saw him.”

Fortunault laughed out loud for a second, but it cut off abruptly. I whirled around to look, expecting to see Little Hulk storming down the path after us, angry at what he’d overheard, but there was no one there. When I followed his gaze, I saw what he was looking at. It was a 20-ish girl in iridescent clothing, scales painted on the side of her face and down her neck. They looked vaguely reptilian, maybe even dragon like. Her face was smudged with dirt, her eyes vague.

“Hey, is that your missing girl?” asked Fortunault.

I ran forward just as Chanel’s legs crumpled out from underneath her, but not quite in time to catch her before she hit the ground.

## CHAPTER 13

Chanel regained consciousness in the ambulance, her eyelids flickering as she struggled to wake up. It had been a relatively quiet ride so far. The EMTs had quickly diagnosed dehydration and low blood sugar, and sure enough, the IV seemed to have perked her right up again. Under more intense circumstances, I wouldn't have even asked to ride along, but since Chanel's situation didn't seem all that dire, I asked and the EMTs agreed. Hardwicke followed along to Flower Hospital in the car.

"I feel like crap," Chanel mumbled.

"You look it too," I said, not unkindly. "But you're safe now."

"Where's Leo? Is he here?"

"He's at home, but we can call him for you if you want. Have him meet you at the hospital while they check you out."

"Sure..." She laid there quiet for a moment. "What happened?"

"You don't know?" I frowned. "You've been missing for about 15 hours or so. We've been looking for you."

“Oh.” Her voice went small. “I don’t remember.”

“Did you take anything, Chanel? We’ll screen you for drugs, so you might as well tell the truth now.”

Her eyes, a watery blue, shifted to the wall. “I took some E. I thought maybe it would cheer me up. Leo and I could have some fun. But...I don’t think that was fun at all.”

“No, I don’t imagine that you do.” I patted her shoulder. “I’m just glad it didn’t turn out worse. I wouldn’t do that again if I were you.”

“Heavens no,” she said, her voice growing a bit stronger. “I will be a dragon of purity from now on.”

“Riiiiight,” I said, because what else do you say to a statement like that?

Once we got Chanel settled into the capable hands of the ER staff, Hardwicke met me in the waiting room with the keys in hand. He jingled them at me, looking more upbeat than I thought he had a right to.

“You ready?” he asked. Then my expression seemed to register, because he frowned. “What’s wrong?”

“I can buy that she wandered off, all whacked out on ecstasy, and got lost. I can buy that she lost consciousness and slept off most of the day. But I can’t buy the fact that she was in those woods while Fortunault and his men searched for fragments of their downed craft, and they didn’t see her. They had to be running a pretty tight search pattern.”

“Maybe she was abducted by aliens after all,” said Hardwicke, joking. But my expression killed his humor. “You don’t really think that, do you?”

“Of course not. But something fishy happened, and we’ll never know what it is.”

“Maybe the downed craft was a UFO.”

I shot a glance at him, and he smiled. Not like he was poking fun, but trying to cheer me up. I appreciated the effort, at the very least.

“Okay, that’s kind of funny. I’m not sure it makes me feel better, but it’s better than nothing.”

“Come on. You’re not going to get another case like this again, right? Furrries. Aliens. Dragon girls. Mysterious downed crafts in metroparks…”

“I don’t like it when things don’t wrap up nicely. I always feel like there’s a bigger picture that I’m missing.”

“Maybe there is, but if so, it’ll come to light eventually, right? I don’t know what you’re upset about. I consider this whole thing a win. The girl was lost, and now she’s found.”

“But somebody would have found her anyway, if we hadn’t investigated.”

“Maybe. Or maybe those military yahoos had something to do with it. Maybe they were the figures Leo saw.”

“See? That’s a good thing, right?”

“It is. And the girl’s back. She’ll go through some kind of court mandated drug program, and then she’ll go back to all of her furry friends, and it’ll be like this never happened. Except that I’ll always wonder.” I sighed. “It’s the one thing I don’t like about this job. Even when I think I know what happened, I’ll never be sure. There could always be something I’ve missed, and that bit of information could make all the difference.”

“Maybe so,” said Hardwicke, “but you helped find a girl and bring her back to her family, right? Isn’t that a win?”

I looked at him, so optimistic, so young. Then I nodded. “Yeah, yeah. I sound like an old lady, don’t I?”

“You are an old lady,” he joked.

“I will beat your ass,” I threatened. “Or make you do all the paperwork while I sit with my feet up on the desk and eat bonbons.”

“You wouldn’t,” he said.

“Try me,” I suggested, leading the way out the electric doors.

## CHAPTER 14

Hardwicke and I spent the entire day learning the ins and outs of TPD paperwork, including coverage of such exciting topics as, “Why do they want four copies of this form, but the packet only comes with three?” and “Only leprechauns could write in spaces this small—why won’t they make them bigger?!” By the end of the day, he looked harried but determined not to let the sheaf of paper get the best of him, so I figured I’d done my job in the instruction category. His eyes had started to go squinty with a combination of eye strain and stress when I finally blew the whistle to call it off. Literally. I blew a whistle at him. Made him jump, too.

The surprise drained from his face as he saw it dangling from my lips, and he looked like he was trying to decide whether or not to be pissed at me. But then one of the senior detectives walked past my desk and flipped me off with both hands, because one unturned finger alone wouldn’t convey the magnitude of his annoyance.

“Quit blowing that stupid thing, will you?” he snapped.

“That’s what he said,” I murmured.



Hardwicke burst out into laughter, and I was tired enough that I did too. The detective marched off with a look of disgust, which really made me feel bad about my life choices. Except not. Detective Rhazis and I had never gotten along particularly well anyway, because he was a lazy butt nugget who didn't like anyone making him look bad. As if he could look worse than he already made himself look. I was hoping he might transfer to vice, where he'd fit right in. With the criminals, not the detectives.

Hardwicke seemed about to comment, but I headed him off at the pass. We'd done enough chit-chatting and soul searching for the day, and it was about 5:40. I'd never been a person who lived by the clock, but my shift ended at 5:30, and I was eager to call it a day. It had been a doozy, after all.

"I think it's about time to knock off for the day," I suggested.

"Yeah?" He looked at the paperwork. "I'll stay to finish this if it's urgent."

"Someday I'll take you up on that offer, but today isn't that day."

"Okay." He went through the motions of tidying up his desk, putting things away, and so on. It didn't take long. He wasn't a messy worker. Finally, he shoved his hands in his pockets and gave me a look that was half proud and half hangdog.

"Aside from the one moment where I stuck my head up my behind, how'd I do? Honestly."

"I'm not going to blow sunshine up your skirt, Hardwicke." I softened the words with a smirk. "But I'm not going to request a transfer either. I think we'll get along just fine once we get to know each other. You're a quick study."

"Thanks." He flashed me a boyish grin. "See you tomorrow."

He took off toward the elevators without a second look back, which was the kind of skill you needed when you worked in this department. You wouldn't get a moment's peace if you didn't leave the work at the door. I didn't do so well at that one, and I found myself watching his retreating back with more than a hint of envy.

Then I went to Scorsone's office. I found him waiting with his flask out on his desk, full of not quite within regulation whiskey. We'd taken sips from that flask after we collared the guy who killed his partner. And a few other difficult cases too. We never had more than a mouthful, not even enough to count as half of a drink, because regulations did exist for a reason. But there was something about the ceremony of it that gave me some closure when collaring the criminal or finding the missing girl wasn't enough. This was definitely one of those times. I felt like I'd only scratched the surface, but there was no excuse to keep on digging now that the girl had come back.

I rapped my knuckles against the open door, and he tipped the flask in my direction.

"Come on in," he said. "I thought you might show up."

"Yeah."

We fell into a companionable silence as we exchanged the flask and each took a nip. The liquor warmed my throat on the way down.

"Hardwicke did pretty well," I observed. "Pissed me off good at one point, but I chalk it up to stress."

"Yeah, you came to me with a big chip on your shoulder too." He observed mildly. "I think it's par for the course when it comes to trainees."

"Can't argue with that."

"It says something about our profession, I'm sure, but I don't know what."

I snorted. “Yeah. So did you find out anything about those military guys?”

He let out a heavy sigh. “Audrey, there was no one there. No roped off areas. No sinkhole. No evidence of any crash. The park rangers didn’t know a damned thing. And that pavilion...7, I think it was? It wasn’t reserved today. No trash in the bins or signs of anybody being there at all today.”

“But they were there!” I began, but Scorsone cut me off with a chop of his hand through the air.

“I believe you. I’m telling you we have no way of hunting them down. I called around to the air force reserve—even tried the army base at Fort Perry. None of them knew what I was talking about. Supposedly.”

“So either they’re covering up, or...” I trailed off, frowning.

“Or those guys weren’t military at all.”

“I should go talk to Chanel again,” I said, half to my feet already.

“Sit down.” Scorsone sighed. “The mayor has made it clear that Chanel is not to be disturbed. He’s worried about a scandal. I think they already moved her to some kind of halfway house. We’re not going to get our paws on her again.”

I sat for a moment, letting this information sink in. It made me want to punch things, and I had never been a punchy person.

“So that’s it?” I finally said. “We just have to drop it and pretend nothing happened?”

“Hell no.” He put his elbows on the table and leaned toward me. His face was creased with age and wisdom and a deep seated anger. I couldn’t help it; I leaned back, retreating in the face of it. “But we’re in this for the long game, Aud, and I need you to zip up your temper and settle in for it. Because something isn’t fishy. About a half hour ago, I got a call from on

high—upper management—telling me to drop the case and move on to something else. Maybe it's political shenanigans. Maybe it's something else. But something about this situation has them rattled.”

“Maybe the aliens are real,” I joked, trying to break the tension. It had gotten too thick for my taste. “They don't want us to know that Toledo is the next Roswell.”

He barked out a short laugh. “Maybe. But whatever it is, we're going to find it. It might take a month; it might take years. But we're going to figure out what the hell is going on. You got my back?”

“All day, every day.”

We shook on it.

As Scorsone screwed the lid back onto his flask and put it back safely in his desk, he said, “Aliens in Toledo. How gullible do you have to be to believe that? If I had a spaceship, I could think of a billion places I'd go before I went to Toledo.”

“Maybe the aliens wanted chili dogs.” My stomach rumbled at the thought of one of Tony Packo's famous dogs.

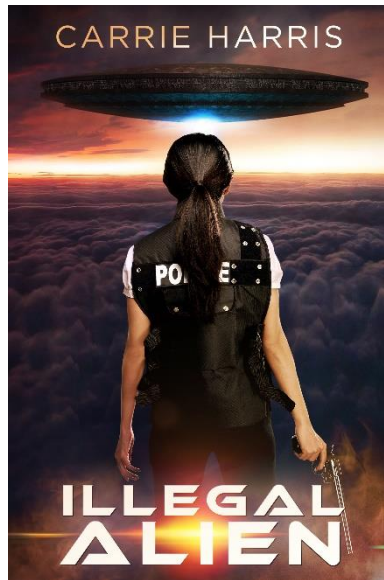
“Maybe that's you.” He said, and we both laughed. “Go home. Get some sleep.”

I yawned. “Gladly.”

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