

NATASHA DEEN

A VIRUS UNLEASHED...

CAN UNDERCOVER FAIRY COP,
PEPPER POWDER
SAVE THE HUMAN RACE?

TRUE GRIME

True
Grime

By

Natasha Deen

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales, is entirely coincidental.

True Grime

Copyright © 2011 Natasha Deen

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission of the author except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews.

Contact Information: natasha@natashadeen.com

Cover format: Nicola Martinez

Blueberry Hill Press

Published in the United States of America

Print ISBN: 978-0-9867419-1-3

For Alicia, Cait, Elle, Lori, Mel, & Nic, thank you for giving me the courage to do this and for reading far too many drafts of this manuscript.

And for Bwunhilda & Sven. You're so wuvely.

Special thanks to my crew for being the best beta readers in the world: Arman Ahadi, Ashley Bacchus, Khail J. Bryks, Keanna Bou-Saleh, Aimee Ferguson, Cameron Gabert, Alyssa Gueco, Erica Lampert, Kaylee McMordie, Aleta Pappas, Tyler Saretzky, Laura Schink, and Iman Yussuf.

Chapter One

In The City, crime never slept. It didn't eat or exercise, either, but I wished it would shower. My name is Pepper Powder and I'm part of the Grime Patrol. I had just finished a sixteen-hour sting operation. We'd arrested the James Gang, a group of angry fairies who'd tried to wipe out Tokyo with a Violent Illness of Unusual Resistance and Strength, or a VIURS. Humans would call it a virus, but such is the case with the very young. Sometimes, they get their words mixed up.

The takedown of the James Gang, while it had resulted in the confiscation of the virus, had also resulted in the discharge of weapons and the release of a goo that had an unusually strong resistance to sliding off my body. I was covered—*covered*—in thick, green slime, and considering how much of my work revolves around being clean, I was seriously grossed out.

Seriously. Grossed out.

I took off my goggles and tried to increase my body temperature, hoping to burn the crap off, but it had insulating properties. Now I was hot and slimy.

Perfect.

"Hey, Lou," I called over to our Lieutenant, who conveniently enough was named Lou Louis—fairies have a thing for alliteration. "We about done, here?"

Lou was a short, stocky satyr-fairy mix. He had a gut you could use as a trampoline, but only a moron would judge him by his size. He could still run down a cocky

punk, slam her into a wall, and never lose the licorice he was always chomping on.

“Just a sec, Powder. Hey! Only three perps to a paddy wagon.”

Technically, we didn't have paddy wagons, but Lou, like many of us, was a sucker for human lingo. It's why we started using the word “virus,” because let's face it, saying “virus” is much faster than saying “Violent Illness of Unusual Resistance and Strength.” Lou turned from the hum-vee, a vehicle designed from a combination of a hummingbird and Venus flytrap: fast, streamlined, and with a tendency to eat any criminal stupid enough to try and escape through its doors. He walked over—most of us prefer to walk (another seductive element of watching over humanity).

“Good takedown.” He chewed on the ever present candy. Lou used to smoke. He'd given that up, but he never felt comfortable unless he was biting on something. After a few regrettable incidents involving his teeth and criminals, the division had chipped in and given him a lifetime supply of licorice. “No loss of neophyte life.”

I smiled. “Your cops know their job. The James Gang didn't even make it over the magical threshold into the human world.”

He grunted.

“Listen, Lou. You mind if I go home. Clean up a little?” I wriggled in the goo. “Clean up a lot?”

“There are showers at the precinct.”

I groaned. “C'mon. You know the water runs hot and cold, and never at the same time.” Many a cop had been burned or frozen by those showers. Once, I went in and found Kindly frozen from her hooves right up to her waist. Centaurs know how to move, but the tap water had

changed so suddenly, she'd been covered in ice before she'd even realized what was happening.

"Can't help it, Powder." He had a raspy, rough way of talking like he was grinding every word into dust. "There's a Code Red brewing. We need you on it." He stomped away. His heavy footfalls slapped the puddles left by the rain.

"Yo, Powder-Puff."

That's my partner, Harley Hands, and the only person—other than my grandmother—who can call me by my full last name without getting a fist sandwich for it. We'd been partners since we signed up for Grime training four years ago.

That's one of the big differences between the human and fairy world. Non-magical kids stay in school until they're eighteen, then they go on to college, university, or jobs. In the magical realm, things are mixed. We go to school until we're twelve (although one of our years is about ten human years, so you could say we're in school until we're one hundred and twenty). After that, we do a combination of schooling and job training. Harley and I would be in Grime training until we were eighteen, then we'd be full officers and able to move up the ranks.

"Help me get rid of this gunk," I said.

He grinned.

Fairies are gorgeous. We're the height of beauty, but Harley? He's so good-looking, it seems unnatural. Creepy, even. His hair's extra blond, his cheeks always have the perfect flush of pink, his frame is muscular and cut, without being stocky. He's too good-looking and every time he talks to me or smiles at me, my stomach does this weird flip-flop thing.

I don't like it.

My stomach should remain in its designated non-flipping, non-flopping position.

"I dunno, Peps. You look good in green."

My stomach flipped, then flopped, and it made me extra grouchy. "Shut up and burn it off me."

His eyebrows—his perfect eyebrows—rose to the widow's peak on his hairline. "Touchy." He reached into his vegan leather jacket and pulled out a small cylinder that looked like a silver pen. "You should be happy—giddy, even. The James Gang is a big score." He grinned.

My stomach did a double flip into a flop. Stupid stomach. "I'll be giddy when you get this stuff off. Hurry. It's starting to harden."

He clicked the pen and a forty-foot blue-white flame shot skyward. Harley adjusted it, twisting on the knob until it was a small tip-sized fire and set to work cutting me free. "You know why we're being called back to the station?"

"Surprise party for all the good work we've done?"

A smile flitted across his face, then disappeared as he resumed cutting into the goo. "Claude Von Beulow," he said quietly.

It was a good thing the goo held me steady because I jerked at the name. I whispered, "Claude? You sure?"

"I heard he escaped from prison."

"Escape? You can't escape from Menacers Asylum. They do that mind freeze to make sure you can't think properly."

"I'm just telling you what I heard." He frowned and straightened. "I can't cut through this."

"Turn the flame higher."

He gave me a look of disbelief. "And what? Torch you?"

I wriggled in my slimy, sticky prison. “I’m hot and uncomfortable. You’re my partner. Do something.”

“Echo will have to fix you.” He turned and gave a shrill whistle. Two burly troll police officers came over, their size and weight making each step seem like a roll of thunder. “Bag her, boys.”

One grabbed my head, the other my feet and they hauled me into a hum-vee.

Twenty minutes later, I was standing in the main science lab waiting for Echo, a bat-fairy. His flat face split into a grin as he came through the door and saw me. He flitted around the wires, lights, and circuit boards littering the floor. “It worked!”

“Too well. Unglue me.”

He frowned. “Why are you in this? It’s a less-lethal weapon for stopping criminals.”

“One of the cops aimed wrong.” I didn’t mention that said cop was probably in witness protection now, because if I ever got my hands on him, I’d do more than shoot him with a goo gun. “What is this stuff, anyway?”

He slipped into a white lab coat and a pair of goggles. Then he headed to a counter where beakers of liquids—blues, greens, pinks, and yellows—bubbled over burners. “I call it mucosia.”

“Muc—” I didn’t finish. The sinking, gunky feeling in the pit of my stomach told me everything I needed to know about the goo.

“Yes, yes,” he said excitedly and ran a hand through his purple buzz-cut. “It’s based on the human mucous system and—”

“It’s fine, Echo. I don’t need to know anything else.”

The expression on his pug-like face fell. “You should know how it works, if you’re going to use it.”

“I’m going to lose it, if you don’t get me out.”

His shoulders dropped.

Guilt twisted my gut.

He shuffled over to a white, pristine countertop.

“Maybe, tell me later. Right now, I have to get to the briefing room.”

“Only if you really want to know,” he said it like it didn’t really matter, but I saw the hope in his face.

“Yeah,” I said, making a mental note to down some antinauseaa meds before I saw him again, “I want to know. Later. Right now—” I did a little up and down jig in the goo (no way am I ever calling it by its proper name. I don’t need the reminder). “—I need out.”

“Sure.” He slipped on rubber gloves and took a fire extinguisher from a shelf.

“You’re going to hit me with fire-retardant?”

“No, it’s a special mix made of anti-histamine. It’ll dry the—”

“That’s...great. Just fantastic. Less talk. More extinguishing.”

“It’s not a—”

“Fine, fine. Gotta get to the briefing room.”

He shrugged and after adjusting the goggles, he aimed the nozzle and sprayed me with white foam. I heard a sizzling, fizzing sound, then felt the blessed relief as the stuff dried and evaporated off my body. Shouting “thanks,” I dashed for the girls’ washroom. A quick shower, which alternately burned and froze me, two seconds to whip a comb through my ’fro, and I was booking it to the briefing room.

Officers and politicians packed the room. Politics and policing don’t mix. Cops try hard not to do anything that forces them to work with anyone who has to get votes to

make a living. The mayor was here, which meant big, bad news for everyone who wore blue. My gaze caught the Commissioner's. His eyebrows went up and he gave me a smile—like he'd remembered our last meeting, and it had been a pleasant memory. My shoulders went back with pride. Knowing the Commissioner remembered me and it made him smile, made me smile. It said I was doing a good job, making the department proud.

I spotted Harley. He waved and pointed to an empty seat beside him. I stumbled into my seat and nodded at my partner, who nodded back and said, "You've got frozen soap bubbles in your afro."

"No, I don't. I brushed my hair and—"

He reached up.

I heard the brittle sound of ice breaking and he handed me a piece of frozen soap foam. I took it and looked at the Commissioner, who was grinning at me. Suddenly, I didn't feel so proud or competent. "Thanks," I muttered and slumped in my seat.

"People." The commissioner loved human lingo. "Let's settle and get to order."

The crowd quieted.

He sighed, and leaned against the glass podium.

Commissioner Paulus Puck had a precisely trimmed, black goatee. Tonight, however, both Paulus and the goatee looked disheveled.

"We have an issue, people. Claude Von Beulow. He's escaped from Menacers."

The group took a collective gasp.

"We've known Von Beulow was a loose cannon, from the moment he changed his name from Twilight Tinkle to the non-standard—" The Commissioner made a face. "—non-alliterating moniker."

I cringed. If that was my name, I'd have changed it too. In fact, I'd change my last name from Powder-Puff, to Powder—if doing so wouldn't get me disinherited and make my granny cry.

“Von Beulow has been responsible for some of the worst epidemics to hit humanity: small pox, polio—the unfortunate 80s fashion of pairing eye-blinding neon colors and spandex. After a long, arduous fairy-hunt, we tracked him down, brought him to justice. That cad should be serving the rest of his life in the Menacers Asylum for the Criminally Insane.” Puck shook his head. “No one's sure how he got out, but he's on the lam—”

“Lamb?” A politician in front of me frowned and turned to the elf beside her. “If he's out riding on an *ovis aries*, he shouldn't be that difficult to locate.”

I rolled my eyes and looked at Harley who hid his smile behind his hand. Leaning toward the chubby fairy, I tapped her on the shoulder. She turned toward me.

I said, “Not lamb, l-a-m-b, lam, l-a-m. A human term that means he's on the run from the law.”

“Oh.” She blushed. “Of course. Thank you.”

I turned my attention back to Puck, who was saying, “We'll be increasing police presence on the magical streets. If anyone asks, it's a new policy. No one can know of Claude's escape. Von Beulow is not only a crack chemist, but a renowned speaker and motivator. The longer he remains free, the more likely we're going to see fighting and protesting as the human debate catches fire.” He paused. “I don't need to tell you how dangerous this fairy is. He has the capability to wipe out humanity, to divide the magical community, and start a war between families.” Puck sighed. “I know not everyone here is a loyal, unquestioning fan of humanity. I understand.

They're violent, destructive, and selfish." A hard look came into his eyes. "No doubt, they display the same characteristics we did when we were a young species. They're babies, new to this planet and they need protection. We don't bully elephants or tigers. We won't allow one of our own to do so with the humans."

He stopped, shuffled the papers on the podium. "We have a dangerous situation, here, people. The politicians will work with the media to keep the public informed and calm. Cops, you'll do your job. Take care of the magical community, and the humans. Your mission starts now." He stepped away and after a moment, the quiet murmur of voices rose as everyone started talking about his announcement.

"My dad was one of the guys who tracked Von Beulow from the start," said Harley.

I already knew that, and I knew what my partner was saying, the meaning in his words. Like my father, his dad had died protecting a child from Von Beulow and his minions. Harley's dad had protected a human child. My dad had protected a fairy child. Everyone wanted Von Beulow captured, but for Harley and me, it was everything.

"We'll get him," I said. Easier to say it, than do it. Von Beulow was a tough pursuit. Lucky for me, and unlucky for him, I like tough. "Promise."

He gave me a tired smile. "You think so, huh, Peps?"

"Yeah." I stood. "If we get desperate, we'll wear shades and get you to turn that high watt smile of yours. While everyone's screaming, 'I'm blind! I'm blind!' we'll nab him."

He grinned, his fatigue gone. "You think I have a brilliant smile?"

“Don’t flatter yourself.” I started for the precinct room.

“I didn’t.” He trotted after me. “You did.”

“I was trying to make you feel better.” I kept my eyes ahead, dodging the crowded hallways and walking too fast, like I was trying to outrun Harley and my big mouth.

“By lying? You’re not a liar, are you, Peps?”

“No,” I growled.

His grin beamed at the corner of my peripheral vision. “So, you think my smile’s brilliant. Say it. You did once. What’s one more time?”

“Powder! Hands!”

We turned to Lou.

“Stop playing around. Get into the meeting room. We gotta send out squads.” He winced and ran his hand over his face. “The overtime is going to kill the budget, but we’ll let the bean counters in accounting handle it.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. I’d take a meeting over having to explain myself to Harley. Lou was quick and efficient, just the way I like it. He gave us the usual spiel about checking Claude’s old haunts, interviewing his friends and family. The Lieutenant glared at us, extra hard, and said, “Any lead you get—no matter how stupid—has to be looked into. We gotta find this guy, toss him back in prison.” He pushed the licorice from one side of his mouth to the other. “Dismissed!”

Harley and I went to Ticket on the Fly, a club that Claude and his buddies had used back in the day, when he was a big shot. Before he was caught and revealed as a human hater, Claude was the President of Chem-Corp, one of the biggest bio-chemical companies in The City. He even had divisions in other countries. Seeing how free humans were with tossing their garbage in any

convenient place, including the oceans, he'd cornered the water market. His cleaning agents were huge sellers in the mermaid world. Claude had diversified his money, investing in restaurants, amusement parks. He'd even bought a movie studio.

Everything was taken by the government when he went to prison. Everything but Ticket on the Fly. That place had been bought out by the amphibian mob, and rumor was that the new boss remained loyal to the old one. We parked a block away. I adjusted the stun gun on my hip belt.

Harley frowned. "What are you doing?"

"Making sure my equipment is in easy reach."

He shook his head, like he pitied my naiveté. "You can't go into this club wearing your uniform."

"I'm a Grime cop," I said, my teeth gritted. "I'm not playing any games. We got a perpetrator on the loose. Lives are in danger."

He sighed. "Peps, lives are always in danger, and perps are always on the loose." He took a holo-gun from his jacket and used it to project an image of trendy, hip clothing over our uniform. I found myself in a pair of fake leather pants, a cropped jacket in hot pink, and a ton of gold bracelets.

"I'm not impressed." I wasn't. I'd worked my butt off to be part of Grime patrol and not being able to wear my uniform felt like a punishment.

Harley reached into the console compartment of our police vehicle and pulled out a pair of reflective sunglasses. "Fighting crime calls for sacrifices."

"It's almost midnight," I said, "Why are you wearing those things?"

“That,” he said as he slid them up his nose, “is why I’m always the undercover guy. You’re too straight an arrow, Powder-Puff. Gotta learn how to think like a criminal, find out what turns their crank.”

“Apparently, it’s wearing dark shades in the dead of the night and smacking into random objects.” I swung out of the vehicle.

He did the same, then set the car to hover mode. It went skyward, silent except for the soft hiss of its hydraulics.

I started for the club, but he grabbed me after a few steps.

“You’re walking wrong.”

“I’ve been walking for a long while now. A hundred-sixty years at last count,” I said, trying not to be offended by his remark. “I think I know how to do it.”

“Peps. We’re going to a club where the owner is a suspected human hater. You’re walking wrong because you’re walking. If you want to get past the door, you have to act the part.”

My face heated with embarrassment. Of course, he was right. We unfurled our wings. Harley’s reached from the ground to three feet above his head, and were four times his body width. They turned iridescent and glistened as they reflected the lamp light.

My wings were forest based, and unfurled slower. They were mossy green and heavier than Harley’s. As a sky fairy, Harley had to be able to fly high, fast, and silent. Forests have too many trees for earth fairies to want to fly fast. We needed wings that beat slower, kept us near the trees and were smaller so we didn’t get caught in branches. We took to the air and flew the rest of the way. Harley kept his pace slow so I could keep up. I tried

not to notice how his wings caught the moonlight and glittered, but he looked too good to ignore.

He turned and caught me watching. “What?”

I shook my head and tried to sound casual. “I thought I saw something on your wings, but I was wrong.”

He nodded and I kept my gaze on the building in front of me. A line to get in the club stretched around the corner. The night pulsed with neon lights, velvet carpet, and lavishly dressed creatures. A wicked-huge jackal-fairy mix guarded the front door. His massive arms were crossed in front of his even more massive chest. The jackal’s black fur bristled when he saw us, his lips curled away from his snout in a snarl that showed sharp, white teeth.

“Come on,” said Harley. He headed for the bouncer.

I pulled on his hand. “Are you crazy? That guy looks like he’s never met a fight he didn’t like. We got to the front, we’re acting like cops. We should wait our turn.”

Despite the reflective lenses of his glasses, I could see the exasperation in his eyes.

“Straight arrow. Just follow me. Oh, and Peps—” He pulled me close to his side. “Keep your mouth shut. It’ll be easier.”

I was too focused on the bouncer to think of a retort.

Harley flew us right up to the bouncer’s snout. “Let us in.”

The jackal-fairy sniffed, then snorted.

His breath came at me, hot, moist, and smelling of bratwurst.

“You got the stink of copper on you,” he growled in a deep rumble. “You don’t get past these doors. Ever.”

Harley shrugged, subtly elbowing me when I made the instinctive reaction of reaching for my gun. “Your call.

Only I know Big Toady's got some trouble on the horizon, the kind of trouble that leaves a guy wearing silver bracelets. Those bracelets can leave a guy cold, wishing for comfort. If he had a blue blanket, I bet it might keep him warm. Bet he might not even have to get fitted for jewelry."

Harley knows how to talk to criminals in a way they understand and thank goodness for that, because I didn't understand a word he'd said.

The jackal stared at us for a moment. Then he stepped back and pushed up the glass door. "Have a good time."

We went through, the music so loud I could barely hear my voice as I yelled, "What just happened?"

"Tell you later."

I hate that kind of answer, but I knew we couldn't hover in the club, yelling about police tactics. "Now what?"

He grinned. "I'll buy you a lime-apple cider."

"Harley—"

"Bend the arrow, Powder-Puff. You're too quick on this and this club will shut tighter than a clam's shell."

Harley's got a weird way with words, but I took his meaning. We push and everyone shuts up, and we'd get no information. I had no intention of screwing up this operation. So I followed my partner's lead.

I perched on a stool by the bar, sipping a six-dollar glass of overrated apple juice, and pretending that having my eardrums blown out by thumping speakers was my idea of a great night out. After what felt like hours, but was probably only fifteen minutes, he nodded to me. He slid off his seat and I followed him to the back of the club, where a sign reading "Restricted" hung on closed, brocade

curtains. Another jackal-fairy, this one with thick, shiny white fur, a black snout, and beefy arms that were bigger than my entire body, blocked the entrance.

“Yeah?” Unlike the other bouncer, this one had a high, almost feminine voice, which meant two things. Either it was a male on Juice—a substance that helped athletes bulk up. It could make a guy big, but it came with wicked side effects, like a high voice, anger problems. I’d even heard it shrank their—uh—boy parts. On the other hand, it might be a female on Juice, which would explain the almost masculine appearance, the lack of girl bumps on her chest, and the weird voice.

Harley leaned toward her (or him), squinted at the gold name which peeked out from her (or his) blazer. “Ruth.” He grinned. “We want to talk to see Big Toady.”

The jackal-fairy sneered. “Don’t everybody.”

Harley smoothed his hair. “That’s not a sentence—that’s not even a fragment of a sentence.” He smiled. “Why don’t you try once more? Something with a subject and verb—be daring. Try an adjective or modifier.”

The jackal’s face contorted like she was trying to decide if she wanted to throw us out of the club and beat us up, or beat us up then throw us out of the club.

I’d had enough of playing to the criminal element.

“You let us in,” I said. I hit the button on my wristwatch and ignored Harley’s groan. My holograph outfit deactivated. “Or Big Toady’s going to be seriously pissed off.”

“He don’t know you and he don’t ever want to know coppers.”

“He wants to know us.”

Her sneer was back, bigger and badder than ever. “A bunch of thread wings?”

That's another name for fairy cops—thread wings. We were also called “thread-bares.” The joke was we do so much flying it wore out our wings, and made them thread-bare. I leaned close to her because she didn't scare me. Criminals never scare me. They just tick me off and she was real close to seeing what I do when I'm ticked. “Listen, girly, I'm your nightmare come true. You let us in.”

Her muzzle curled back into a snarl.

“You let me in or we do a spontaneous drug check. Let's see what kind of juice you're really drinking.” I whipped out a cotton swab. “Come on, big girl. Open up. Let's see what kind of prison time you get.”

Ruth growled, low and mean. She pushed the curtain back. “We'll talk later.” She shoved us into Big Toady's private room. “Wait here.” Ruth moved off, pushing the crowd aside and going to the center of the room.

“Peps, I appreciate your Go Get 'Em attitude,” Harley said, “but this wasn't how I was going to play it.”

“It's my game, now.” I went after the bouncer. “Come on.”

The walls of Big Toady's room were covered in red velvet. Candelabras stood on the tables. Gangsters and criminals, dressed in expensive suits and dripping with diamonds, littered the gold, faux-suede couches. I spotted some famous lawyers, business-creatures and ex-politicians in the room, too. I don't know what made me want to throw up more: the scum in the room or the butt-ugly décor.

“I can handle this, sister,” I said, and pushed between Ruth and her boss.

She turned, looking like she was going to say or do something, but my focus was already on Big Toady. Like

his name suggested, he was a large, squat toad with green skin, brown spots and a thing for wearing silk dinner jackets.

“Let’s do this right, Big Toady.” I jerked my head at Ruth. “Tell your dog to go chew on a bone.” I nodded at the scrawny, half-clothed models draping themselves over him. “Same with your eye candy.”

He grinned and nodded. “Scatter, ladies, while I hear the last words of these coppers.”

“No last words.” I sat beside him. Harley hovered nearby, his hand by his stun gun in case the conversation took a turn for the physical. “I have an offer for you.”

Big Toady laughed, though it sounded like a cross between a death wheeze and a bronchial cough. “I like a cop who stays brave in the light of certain death.”

“The only thing that’s going to die is your business.”

The lids of his bulging eyes opened and closed. Big Toady was a lot of things. He cheated on his taxes, dated more than one girl at a time, and liked to let fungus grow on the webbing between his toes. But Big Toady was the ultimate businessman, and if there was one way to cut through the threats and get down to business, it was hitting him right in the wallet.

“Your buddy Claude’s out and running free.”

“Doesn’t concern me.” He reached into a large glass vase and pulled out a lollipop.

“Sure it does. We’re here, aren’t we?”

He gave me a baleful look. “You don’t concern me.”

“I should. What do you think we’re doing here?”

“Wasting your time.”

“Checking on Claude’s old contacts. If we don’t find them tonight, I guess we’ll just have to come back.”

“By law—” His tongue flicked out and curled around the cherry lollipop. “I can refuse service to anyone.”

I shrugged, then sat beside him. I sank into the seat, like it was my new favorite spot, even though the velour and gold made me want to gag. “Police aren’t ‘anyone.’ You can’t refuse to let us in.”

“I can if I claim you’re harassing me.” He waved the lollipop around the room. “Look around. Twenty-five percent of my patrons are lawyers.” He gave me a lecherous grin. “How are your legal briefs, copper?” Big Toady laughed at his joke.

I ignored his jab and the deli-meat smell coming off him. “It’ll be your briefs the world sees. You can run to court and force the police from stepping into your club, but you can’t keep us off the roads. And we’re going to stand right by the entrance, question all your patrons, run their names. How many of your patrons have outstanding warrants, you think? Business will dry up, Big Toady, and after you’re done shelling out all that money for the lawyers, what will be left? Especially after we get the Tax Service on your accounts, and the Sanitation Department in your kitchen.” I looked around the room. “Heck. I might even call in the Fashion Police and have them check out this room.”

Anger scrunched his face. He cracked the candy between his jaws. “What do you want?”

“Information.”

“Claude doesn’t come near me. He knows better.” He sucked on the shards of lollipop. “We had a falling out.”

He was referring to the trial nine years ago, when he testified against Claude. In exchange, the courts gave him immunity—protection against being charged as an accessory in Claude’s crimes. “Yeah, but you were friends

in the day. You know the old hiding spots. I'll bet you know the new ones, too."

He gave me another baleful look. "What if I do?"

"Share them, and we leave you alone."

His face twisted. "I'm not a snitch."

I shook my head. "Nope. You're a guy who takes care of his business."

"Define it how you want, copper, but it's still the same thing you're asking. I won't snitch."

"Big Toady, you're a criminal."

"There's an honor among thieves."

"You have no honor. If you did, you wouldn't have testified against Claude at his trial."

He puffed up. "That was survival."

"So is this. Claude's hangout, or your business and your fortune. Where do you think those pretty girls are going to go when you have no money or prestige?" I knew that would get him. Big Toady was all about the ladies.

He turned, stared at Harley for a long moment. "Fifteen Pendleton Road. It used to be his mother's house."

I stood. "Wasn't that hard, was it? Thanks." I took to the air, and hovered beside Harley. We turned to leave.

"Coppers."

We turned.

"Don't ever come back." He lifted his hand. "Oh, one more thing—"

The sonic blast came from our left, a shot of cold, ice-blue light that smashed us against the wall. I hit the curtains hard, my head snapped back then forward, and I tumbled to the ground. Dazed, I was trying to collect my bearings when I heard him say, "Get 'em out of here, Ruth, and don't be gentle."

Chapter Two

“That went well,” Harley said as he picked wilted lettuce leaves out of his hair.

I closed my mind to the fact that he still looked good, even with rotted food covering him. Pushing aside a head of wilted lettuce, I brushed egg yolk and mashed banana from my uniform. “I detect a note of sarcasm in your voice.”

“That’s not sarcasm.” He hauled himself out of the dumpster. “That’s relief mixed with shock. You could have gotten us killed.”

Harley’s about five inches taller than me. He could jump out of the dumpster. I had to climb on some discarded boxes. Then I lifted myself on the edge and with his help, slid to the ground. “He wasn’t going to kill us.”

“Big Toady could make the entire city disappear and no one would be the wiser.”

“If anyone put us in danger—” I heated my body and raised my internal temperature. The albumin of the egg—the gooey white stuff—bubbled, cooked, and burned. Charred remains, caught by the wind, swirled into the night and disappeared into the darkness. “—it was you. If we’d been able to enter the club in our uniforms, all those creatures would have been witnesses and given us extra protection.”

Harley shook his head. “Big Toady doesn’t scare and you didn’t help anyone by threatening him.”

“I didn’t threaten.”

Harley whistled and called the vehicle to us. The metallic silver body came into view. It sank and hovered a foot above the road. The doors hissed open, spreading like the wings of a bird about to take flight. “You threatened him and it’s going to bite us on the butt.” He folded his frame into the bucket seat on the passenger’s side. “You have to learn how to unbend.”

“I approached him with honest information.” The starter pad glowed green. I pressed my thumb against the pulsating light. It read my fingerprint. The car came to life with a quiet hiss. “It was in his best interest to help us, and he knew it.”

Harley shook his head, his face creasing into a frown. “He gave up that information too easily.”

“He’s a stooge.” I looked over my shoulder, verifying it was safe to merge with traffic. “He’ll always give in.”

Harley’s frown deepened. “It’s not right. The house probably doesn’t even exist or it’s been bobby-trapped.”

“There’s only one way to find out.” I pulled the car into the road.

Fifteen Pendleton Road turned out to be a quaint-looking house in a middle-class neighborhood. It was a two-story—what the humans would call a Georgian Colonial—with white walls, black roof, and a red door. In other words, totally not Claude’s style.

“I knew it was a bust,” muttered Harley. “Claude’s a studio loft kind of guy. He’d never use a house in a suburban neighborhood—even if it was his mom’s. Geez, his neighbors even have a tricycle in the front yard. Claude can’t stand kids.”

I, who in all honesty should have been named “Miss Can’t Be Wrong” (even though there’s no alliteration),

said, "Maybe that's exactly why he bought it. No one would suspect."

Harley gave me a long-suffering look, like he was questioning why the department had assigned him a partner like me. "Let's get this over with. I want to go home and sleep."

We parked the car and walked up the stone path.

I knocked on the door. "Police! Grime Patrol! Open up!" Nothing happened—at least, at this house. Next door, the upstairs lights flared on.

A werewolf stuck his shaggy head out the window. "Do you mind? It's past midnight. I got a baby with colic, over here. We just got her to sleep."

"We apologize, sir," said Harley, "but we received a tip that a fugitive might be hiding out here."

The werewolf snorted. "Those bums? Fugitives from community spirit, perhaps. You know they put their garbage two feet from the curb? It should be less than a foot. Less!" He waved his hairy arms in the air, using his hand to simulate the length of one foot, versus two.

"Great," muttered Harley. "You woke the neighborhood bylaw enforcer. Maybe we'll get really lucky and he'll come help us."

"Hold on," the werewolf called down. "I'm coming to help."

Harley shot me a death look.

"Lou said to investigate every lead, no matter how stupid. It's our job."

"If investigating dumb tips is our job, then we're sure to get a raise after this one."

The werewolf emerged from his house, pulling a worn, flannel shirt over his wide chest. "You know what the real crime is? They never contribute to the block

party, but darn it all, if he doesn't inhale all the tofu chicken on the BBQ."

"Sir." I wanted him back in house, mainly for his safety, but also for mine—Harley was starting to look really ticked off. He's a lot of things, my partner. But he's a wicked-huge pouter and I didn't want a long, silent car ride home. "It's much better if you go back inside. We need to keep you safe."

He shrugged. "I got a key."

"You do?"

"They're on vacation."

"Wait." Harley held up his hand. "Exactly who is 'they?'"

The werewolf looked at us like we'd lost our minds. "The Molsons—Eileen and George Molson. Look, you folks sure you have the right house? The last thing we need is for the cops to break into the wrong house."

Harley heaved a long-suffering sigh and rubbed his eyes.

"We have the right house, sir," I said. "Please give us the key and go home."

He scratched his beard. "You really think Eileen and George are involved in some grime business? They never struck me as human haters, but I guess those types have learned to hide it, huh?"

"Yeah. They have." Harley held out his hand. "The key."

I sidled up to him. "We can't just take the key and enter."

"Sure you can," said the werewolf. "They're on vacation. I'm in charge of the house. I can give permission."

"Only if you're the landlord or owner," I said.

“Give me the key,” said Harley. “It’s extenuating circumstances and we’ll let the lawyers figure it out.”

The werewolf complied, reaching into his gray sweatpants and pulling out the key. “Now, just hold on a moment,” he said. “They have a security system. I have the code here, somewhere.”

“When did your neighbors leave?”

“A couple—three days ago, maybe.”

“Hickey timing,” I whispered to Harley.

He grinned. “Hinkey. It’s hinkey, not hickey timing.”

There was something in his smile that said there was more to my mistake than mixing up a couple of letters. I made a note to figure out what a “hickey” was. “Don’t you think it’s weird that they leave just as Claude’s breaking out.”

“Do you know how many folks in The City are on vacation? This could just be a coincidence.”

“Here it is.” The werewolf pulled out a piece of paper and a set of bifocals. He set the glasses on his snout, opened the paper and read, “4-6-8-2.”

“Herb!”

We turned at the sound of a slamming door and an irate female voice. A leprechaun lady, her hair in curlers and a pink, fluffy bathrobe wrapped around her, stalked to us.

“Oh, crap,” muttered the werewolf. He pasted a toothy smile on his face. “Hi, honey—”

“Don’t you ‘honey’ me, Herb. What are you doing out here? You’re supposed to be upstairs folding laundry.”

“Nothing—listen, these cops needed help.”

She gave him a look only an overtired, exasperated wife could give—the kind that didn’t kill, but maimed for life. “You? You’re helping the police? The wolf that can’t

even remember to replace the toilet paper, or pick up formula, is helping the cops?”

“With a Grime issue.”

She rolled her eyes. “Right. Not just helping the cops, but helping Grime cops. Let me guess. After this, you’re going to help the mayor, right?”

“No, sweetie, really.” He turned to us, pleading in his eyes. “Tell her.”

“Ma’am, we’re acting on a tip that a fugitive may be hiding out in your neighbor’s home.”

She snorted. “Have you seen their house? There are so many knickknacks in there, they could hide a submarine.” She turned to her husband. “Did you give them the key?”

“Yes.”

“And the code?”

“Yes.”

She stared at him. Full silence, as she vibed her displeasure.

Herb just stared back—not ’cause he was resisting her, but because he knew he was safer outside with us.

Finally, she said, “So why are you still standing here instead of folding the laundry?”

His giant shoulders slumped. “Yes, sweetie.” He trudged back to his house. His wife followed.

Harley shook his head. “Let’s get this over with.” He opened the door, punched in the code, and disarmed the system.

I turned on the lights.

We froze.

There, in the middle of the foyer, were two fairies, duct-taped to the chairs they sat in. One was a portly male, with gray hair and glasses. The other was a plump-

faced lady, with thin, curly, orange hair. I glanced at the photo on the side table, then back to the couple. Yep, it was Eileen and George Molson, all right. Both Harley and I reached for our guns.

“They still here?” Harley asked in a sharp whisper.

The couple shook their heads.

“I’m going to check the perimeter.” Harley went to stalking mode, quiet and stealthy and disappeared down the hallway, toward the kitchen.

I moved to the fairy couple, undid their bonds, and took the gags out of their mouths. “Are you okay?” I confirmed my virtual recorder—a small, circular disk that fit behind my ear—was on and running, as protocol dictated. A wire ran from it and ended in a video camera by my temple. Everything they said and did, was being recorded.

“No, I’m not,” huffed the female. She ripped away the ropes and tossed them to the floor. “Did you hear what that snob Celia said? Knickknacks.” She waved her hand in an expansive gesture. “These are priceless collectibles.” She glared at me as if daring me to disagree.

“Forget Celia. What about Herb?” George looked at me through heavy spectacles. “I assure you, young lady, I do not place my garbage that far from the curb. And eating all the chicken—” He lifted a knobby finger at me. “Do you think I’m a glutton?”

I was thinking I regretted taking off their mouth gags. “What I need to know is—”

“That statue.” Eileen grabbed and hauled me over to a horrifically ugly stature of a butterfly fairy.

It was like someone had sculpted the statue, then stomped all over it.

“It’s from the fire era, circa 642 BW.”

I nodded. What else could I do? “Ma’am, I need to ask you about what happened here.”

“I’ll tell you what happened,” said her husband in a tone that indicated I was in store for more griping about the garbage and chicken. “He’s jealous because my roses always win the blue ribbon. His don’t even place.”

Lou always told me to hold myself to a higher, non-idiot standard, but at this point, I felt like the biggest idiot for allowing them to rant. I held up my hand. “The next words out of your mouths better had be a recounting of how you ended up in those chairs or so help me, I’ll tell the entire neighborhood that I saw ‘Made in America’ stamps on your statues and that you use non-sanctioned fertilizers on your roses.”

That shut them up. Eileen gaped at me, and George was giving me a guilty look that made me suspect my jab about his fertilizer wasn’t so off the mark.

Harley came into the room. “Downstairs is clear. I’m going to check upstairs.”

“Oh!” Eileen put her hands to her mouth. “The Bonet. Make sure they didn’t ruin it.”

He shot me a look between “What is wrong with this woman?” and “Ha! I’m glad you’re stuck with them, and not me.” He went up the stairs, his flight quiet and smooth.

I let my hands fall to my sides. “Tell me what happened.” I would have been better off asking the walls. Now that they couldn’t bemoan their neighbors, they turned to complaining about each other. Their kidnapping was her fault because she insisted they use a cab to get to the airport. No, it was his fault because he didn’t check the peephole before opening their door.

I held up my hands, wishing I could use the stun gun on them. “Don’t make me tell your neighbors you were so jealous of their chicken recipe, you were planning to sabotage the next block party. Okay,” I said when blissful—if momentary—silence settled in the room. “Tell me what happened.” I glared at both of them, especially Eileen. “Just the facts, ma’am. No speculations, theories, or blame.”

“I was finishing packing when the doorbell rang,” said Eileen. “I sent George down to answer it.”

She looked like she was going to add a dig at her husband. I upped my stare, from a glare to a glower.

She gulped and continued. “There was a thud—”

“Jerk shoved me against the door,” said George. “Can you imagine? In my own house. Pointed a gun at me—”

“What kind?” I asked.

He looked at me like I was a total idiot. “The kind that kills. What do you think? He was pointing a water pistol?”

He and his wife looked at each other, a sense of connection established because they both thought I was the dumbest cop ever made. Since my question was being used as a tool of marriage solidarity, I chose not to take offense. “I meant, what type of gun—laser? Thorn?”

“Oh.” Comprehension cleared the exasperation from his face. “I don’t know.”

“Describe it.”

“Uh...” He squeezed his eyes shut and thought. “It was green, with a long barrel—”

“Bumpy and the green, it was different shades of the color?”

He nodded.

“Okay.”

“What does that mean?” asked Eileen.

“It was a dart gun.”

“So...not lethal,” George said, a sheepish expression crossed his face.

I guessed he hadn't put up much of a struggle when the barrel had been in his face.

His wife's eyes narrowed, her mouth screwed to one side, like she was getting ready to berate him for cowardice.

“Listen,” I said, “you were in a scary situation. Not many creatures have guns pointed at their face. You did what you needed to do, and—” I put my hand on his shoulder, “—you did the right thing because you kept yourself and your wife alive.”

His shoulders straightened, but Eileen didn't look convinced.

“Besides,” I added, wanting to give him a break, “dart guns can be very dangerous. They're usually tipped with toxic needles. Usually, those things just paralyze, but if they hit a nerve or if the creature has an allergic reaction, the gun is deadly.” I looked at his wife. “Can you imagine? He probably saved your life.”

His chest puffed out.

“About time my husband did something useful,” she grouched, but there was a small expression of gratitude on her face.

He gave her a smile, and I figured in this marriage, this was the closest he ever got to a compliment. “What happened after he pointed the gun?”

He shrugged. “They tied us up. Left us in the hallway.”

I nodded. “Did they say anything to you? Make you do anything?”

“No.” He drew out the word, like he wasn’t sure.

“They made you show them the books in the office,” said Eileen.

“Yeah—” The doubting tone in his voice remained, “but it wasn’t anything bad. They just wanted to know where I kept my books on humans.”

I frowned. “Books?”

His chest puffed out, again. “I’m quite the aficionado of humanity, study them for a living.”

“So you’re—”

“A humanologist. I’ve been studying those critters since they were still in caves.” He grinned. “Remarkable species. Highly adaptable, but slow to do so.” He shook his head. “I’ve never seen a species who resents having to change as much as they do.” He took a breath, the teacher’s light came into his eyes.

I had to interrupt. Not that I wouldn’t love a lecture on humanity from an expert, but now wasn’t the time. “Sir, I need you to stay on topic. What did they want you to show them—which books?”

“Their social rituals and customs. It’s quite extensive and varies depending on which culture of humanity you’re dealing with. They wanted North American. Specifically, Canadians.”

“Canadians?”

“I know. Surprised me, too.”

“Then what?”

“Then, nothing. I showed them the books, and they tied me up.” He shook his head. “I don’t think they were really interested in the humans, though.”

“Why do you say that?”

“They kept talking about shopping,” said Eileen. “One of them, he said he didn’t want to go because the

weather there was too volatile and it got too cold.” Her forehead wrinkled. “He could use the trip to a mall, though. His clothing was ripped and dirty.”

Her statement brought me to my next line of questioning. “What did they look like? How many were in your house?”

“Three,” said Eileen. “One was tiny, black hair—pretty.”

“Pretty?”

“He was a male, that’s certain, but he was pretty.”

I filed that away for later thought. “The next one?”

“Twins. Identical. Big, red hair, green eyes—they look like they had dragon’s blood in them.”

Great. Dragon-fairies were either really good or really bad. And I mean *really*. Dragons were smart, tenacious, and resourceful. Mix that with the fairy race and you either had a great ally or deadly enemy.

“They were in contact with a fourth one. No one ever mentioned his name, though,” said George. “Just called him ‘Chief.’”

Thank goodness. I knew who “Chief” was, but if word got out that it was Claude, chaos would break loose. I silently gave the gang credit for doing their part to keep their boss’s identity a secret. “What else?”

They couldn’t think of anything, and for the moment, neither could I.

I radioed for a unit to come by and pick them up. “Folks, Officer Hands cleared the kitchen. Why don’t you go in, and wait for the unit? Don’t answer the door.”

Eileen snorted. “Don’t worry.” She turned to her husband. “Come on, George, I’ll make you some coffee.”

“No!” The command came out sharper than I’d intended. “My partner cleared the space, not the food. Please, don’t eat or touch anything.”

For the first time since I’d stepped in their house, they looked scared.

She reached out, took his hand. Silently, they went down the hall.

I locked the door, set the alarm. Then I went to find Harley. He was in the office, standing among strewn piles of folders, old computer disks, and human books.

“These people love humanity. They even collect non-magical technology.” He frowned. “I can see why Claude would hate the Molsons, but taking out human-lovers, one at a time, doesn’t seem the most efficient plan.”

“No, he was here for another reason.”

“Yeah, what?”

“Information. The homeowner—George—is a humanologist.”

Harley whistled, low. “A veritable fountain of information.”

“They didn’t want him, though, just his books.”

“Which ones?”

“Canadian social customs.”

Harley pointed to a stack of five shelves. “That’s about two of those units.”

“Let’s collect them.” I lifted my wrist and pointed my One-All watch in the direction of the books. I hit a button and a red laser beamed from the watch face. Starting on the top of the shelf, it scanned the spines of the books, and highlighted fingerprints.

Unlike human technology, which could find fingerprints but not tell them how long the marks had been there, our technology could give us the time, down to

the second. Harley and I tagged the books with the most recent fingerprints—the ones most likely used by the criminals—for priority inspection.

We BAG'd the books, the computers, and headed back to the station. By "BAG'd," I mean we used the Atomic Refractascope and Crime Scene Replicator, or BAG, for short. Don't ask me why Echo wants us to call it BAG when there are no "Bs" or "Gs" in the term, and technically, it should be called the ARACSR. Echo is his own person, and eccentric. I stopped trying to figure out that bat-fairy, a long time ago.

I aimed the gun. A silver-green liquid shot out of the nozzle and coated the entire room—walls, couches, everything. Then, the liquid turned to a gel and started to glow. That was Echo's secret formula interacting with the molecules and shrinking the space between the atoms. The Molson's office was about a hundred square feet. Once everything was done, a small, glowing crumb the size of a grain of salt, was left in the middle of the room. Instead of a gaping hole where the walls and the floor used to be, were replicas of the floor and walls. Echo's technology can't be beaten. The evidence was preserved and we didn't have to worry about missing a fingerprint or a scrape of fabric, because we had it all.

Harley put the grain in a small cryogenic box, and we headed back to the station.

Chapter Three

Grime Headquarters—or HQ for short—was located just outside The City’s boundaries. With all the viruses and biological weapons, the brass—those higher up in the ranks—decided it was best for us to be as far from the population. That way, the citizens were safe from any calamity. Just in case something went horribly wrong, the facilities came with a self-destruct mechanism.

HQ was shaped like a capital “L” and covered three city blocks. The police station was in the middle, a firehouse stood to the east and the hospital lay north. At two in the morning, the precinct was usually quiet, but news of Von Beulow had changed all that. I walked through the doors and found the place buzzing with activity. Literally—bee-pixies could be really loud when they were working. But they weren’t the only ones at HQ. From desk sergeants and beat cops, all the way up to detectives and undercover guys, everyone was here, scouring their computers for information, questioning informants for clues.

I pushed past a throng of gargoyles and werewolves, and came around the front desk. I spotted one of the gurus of the technological applications department, Loca, by the coffee maker. Her full name was “Location” and she was Echo’s twin sister. Their mom and dad thought it would be great to introduce their children as “Echo, Location.”

Echolocation is something bats and certain birds use. It’s like organic sonar. While flying, the bat calls out and

depending on the time it takes for the sound to “echo” back, the bat knows where he is in relation to the ground. I got the novelty and serious coolness of echolocation, but naming your kids after a biological mechanism? Bats have weird senses of humor...but I guess you could say the same thing about fairies and their obsession with alliteration.

“Hey, Loca.” I called her over. “How about some coffee and an update?”

Loca had long, wavy, purple hair, streaked with black and violet highlights, and it floated around her as she flew to me. She handed me a cracked, white mug and in a voice that sounded like a gentle, warm breeze, asked, “Where is your partner?”

“Putting the hover-car down for the night.” Like horses, the vehicle needed to be brushed down, given food—a water-oat mixture filled its tank and kept its workings lubricated, and in general, made to feel like it mattered to those sitting behind the airbags. “Any news?”

She shook her head. “Nothing. Claude’s family’s divided. Those who rejected his philosophy of human eradication have had nothing to do with him since his trial. And those who support him, refuse to give information. Half the holding cells downstairs are full of his cousins, aunts, and uncles.”

I took a big swallow of my coffee, grimacing as the bitter, hot liquid slapped my taste buds. “We got a bit of information, but it’s just a small piece of the puzzle.”

She smiled. “Every little thing help, right?”

Harley came over. “Hey Loca.”

He met her eyes and it reminded me why I like my partner so much. Most males can’t get their gaze past Loca’s chest.

“We’d love to stay and chat,” he said, “but we’ve got a bunch of evidence to sift through.” He patted his jacket, where the small container of evidence was. He gave me a weighted look. “The sooner we catalog this stuff, the sooner we get to go home.”

Harley’s a good guy, but when he’s tired, he gets cranky. He needed sleep, and truthfully, so did I. The adrenaline was wearing off, and it made me aware of sore muscles and heavy eyes.

We trekked to one of the cataloging rooms, where we could download and record all the evidence. I swiped my identification card through the reader on the wall, then pressed my eye to the ocular identifier.

“State your name, rank, and number,” commanded a digitized voice.

I silently groaned. “Pepper Polly Pebble Petunia Powder-Puff, Grime Officer, second class, badge number 1-6-1-6-1-6-2-1-6-6.”

I swallowed the last of the coffee as the doors hissed open. A thin stream of sterilized air escaped in a cloud of vapor and steam. Affectionately known as Mason, a play on the French word for home, *maison*, the room was large, all white, with thin, silver grid lines that lined the floor and walls. Made of a combination of nanotechnology and artificial intelligence, this space worked as fast as a computer, thought like a magical creature, and because of its organic-biological components healed like a living thing. Truth was, even though it was creature-made, everyone loved it like it was a little brother.

“Ready?” asked Harley.

“Just a second.” I set my cup on the shelf by the card reader. No outside food or drink was allowed inside because it could contaminate the evidence.

As we stepped inside, a set of jet nozzles above the door sprayed us with a fine mist that sterilized our clothing, skin, and hair, and left a thin film covering us. No dirt or fibers would taint the evidence. When a case went to trial, this procedure of “filming” cops prevented defense attorneys from claiming something an officer had done had corrupted the evidence.

We moved to the middle of the room.

“Good evening Officers Powder and Hands.”

I grinned at the digital voice. “Hey, Mason. Got some evidence.”

“Freezing.”

I blinked and looked at Harley, who seemed equally confused. “Are you cold?” I asked.

His processors whirled. “I heard about Claude and I know everyone is trying to find him. It’s freezing that you found some evidence.”

Harley’s face cracked into a smile. “He means ‘cool.’ It’s cool that we found the office.”

Mason’s processors spun. “Is that not what I said?”

“You were close,” I told him as I came to stand by my partner. “But human jargon is specific. You can’t use synonyms.”

“Point noted.”

“When did you decide to learn human slang?” Harley asked.

“Last week,” said Mason. “I hypothesized it would help to know the subtleties and customs of humanity. I decided to start with North American culture.”

Harley nodded encouragingly. “Keep working at it, big boy. You’ll get it.”

“Cool.”

I grinned. “Hands, give the man some evidence to work with.”

Embedded in the floor, was a small, black box. Harley took the grain out of the container and placed it in the center of the box. A soft humming filled the air. The walls and floor shimmered and flickered. Then, the office of George and Eileen Molson sprang into the room, the furniture and accessories still covered by the protective goop.

“Begin cataloging,” I said to Mason. “Let’s start with the far left quadrant and work our way clockwise.”

Thin laser lights of blue shone from the very top of the room, and spread in a triangular fashion. They hit a corner, and began to sweep the desk, papers, and books. As they did, they recorded chemical composition, placement of the item in the room, fingerprints, oils, the type of bacteria or dirt—what we, and humans, called “trace evidence”—on the item.

Through light technology, the lasers would take a sample of every item in the room. Then Mason would run everything through the Universal Magical Creatures Database. It would find the chemical’s name, use, and if there was any connection to a known criminal. Last year, Mason found a molecule of cromagnimum, and linked it to a SOAP cell in the east Andes. Thanks to the room, we were able to shut down the terrorists before they could unleash the sickness on the human population.

Once Mason had catalogued a quadrant, we’d be allowed to investigate the materials in the section. I paced the room, waiting for the first square to be completed. Thanks to the Molsons, we were on the scent of a killer and I was ready to give chase. My partner, however, was not.

Harley lay on the floor and muttered, "Being a cop is hard work. This is going to take forever, and I'm tired."

"In the human world, they collect evidence by hand, catalog it by manually entering every bit of information. Here, you just direct the room."

"Humans," he said in a sleepy "what's your point" kind of voice, "still think mountains are just slabs of rock."

"My point is Lou will throw you in a cell if he finds you falling asleep while the room is recording the evidence."

He sat up. "Technically, we don't even have to be here."

"I like to supervise."

He groaned. "Peps, come on. I haven't slept in twenty hours."

I shook my head. Magical creatures run on a twenty-five-hour clock. Fairies and elves only need to sleep every three days. Most of us can go about five days without needing rest. Six months ago, Harley had done some undercover work in the non-magical world. He'd adopted the human ritual of sleeping every fourteen to seventeen hours, and was still trying to get himself back to a magical time cycle.

"Go home," I told him. "I'll watch over the evidence."

"No, I'll stay."

I dragged him to a sitting position. "Seriously, go home. You're right. Both of us don't need to be here, and we can split the shifts until the evidence is fully sorted."

He protested, but it was half-hearted. I shoved him out the door and went back to supervising the room. Once the lasers had finished with the desk, they started on the

priority books. They finished a stack and I moved to investigate.

I found a manuscript called, “Cultural Customs Among Pre-Pubescent and Adolescent Humans in the Continental Shelves of the Maritime, Central, and Atlantic Populations: Ritualized Social Behaviors and the Preponderance of Architecture and the Use of Tools.” I snorted. George was an academic, all right. A bunch of big, long-winded words to say something simple: Human Kids, and How They Play.

As Mason continued to record evidence, I flipped through George’s manuscript. I noticed a few things. First, he really liked to use big words, and find complicated ways to say simple things. Second—and something I’d never known—was how important shopping and malls were to North American teens. According to George, they liked to shop for the latest in clothing and gadgets. But they weren’t so much concerned with buying stuff, as much as they were concerned with being seen in malls. Shopping centers, apparently, were a big place for kids to hang out.

Magical creatures weren’t like that. We don’t have huge, central buildings full of shops. Our cities were set up with small, individual stores that lined the streets—more like human towns used to be. So creature children didn’t hang out in stores—the shops were too small, and the owners would never have allowed it. Instead, kids used parks, or their homes. I guess it’s easier when you can fly or swim underwater. You have more options on places to play.

I heard a clicking sound and looked up from the manuscript. The lights flickered, flared on, then flickered off.

Mason said, “Malfunction in Sector-2, Vector 1-A. Maintenance needed.”

I frowned. Mason never malfunctioned.

Never.

Loca had designed Mason. She took care of him better than most parents take care of their kids. He never got sick, never acted out, never had troubles. I moved to the section the lasers had been recording, the spot by the fireplace. The gel was still on the surface, but it felt warm and squished under my fingers. That wasn't good. It should have remained cool and firm.

I squinted up, toward the lights in the wall. A whirring noise was coming from it, like the device was trying to reset itself, and failing. I moved to the black box and tapped the side of it. The lights shut off, the lasers flared on. Then everything went haywire. Lights pulsed and flashed, and the gears of the equipment shrieked. A second later, it went dark, save for the red emergency lights that lit the room in a creepy, bloody glow.

Truth was, I wanted to beat it out of there. Malfunctioning equipment, dark, and red lights in the early morning don't inspire inner courage. I can handle a lot of things—virus, criminals, blood—but I don't like the dark. And I really don't like red-dark. The thought of succumbing to fear and bailing on Mason was worse than the gloom, so I took a breath and reminded myself that I was a grown-up fairy with big girl shoes and everything.

I bent close to the box. The smell of burning rubber and smoldering circuits said that whatever was going on with the room, I couldn't fix it. Still, I took the recording device out, pressed the “reset” button, then slid it back in. As I'd suspected, that didn't help. I rocked back on my

heels and tried to think like a techno-diva. Nothing came to me. I'm a gum-shoe, a beat walker, a thread bare.

"Mason, I'm going to get Loca."

"Artic—freezing—cold—cold—"

Fear grabbed my heart. "Just hold on, buddy. I'm going right now."

"Please—please—help—"

Wiping the goo off my fingers and onto my jacket, I walked to the door and hit the exit button. The door whirred but didn't open. Frowning, I hit the button again. Nothing.

The skin on the back of my neck prickled and my belly felt like an invisible fist had grabbed and squeezed it. Instinct said something was going to go horribly wrong with Mason.

I hit the button of my radio to call for help. Instead of Loca's voice, all I got was static. Whatever was going on was affecting all the technology in the vicinity. The smell of burning rubber became stronger and a new scent filled the room. I couldn't name it, but it was sharp, acrid, and tinged with sulfur.

Maybe it was all the stories Harley told me about human myths and legends, but smelling sulfur said my bad situation had just become worse. I scanned the room, trying to see if I could use anything to escape and get help. Nothing. Everything, I reminded myself, was evidence and I couldn't destroy any of it. My fear had gone from a creeping sensation to a gallop, but I didn't want to go all "girly."

I dug my fingers into the seam of the door, but it was designed to close and stay closed. After fruitless attempts that left me hot and my palms wet with sweat, I tried something else. I kicked at the exit button, again and

again, until the faceplate fell off. A flare of white-blue light shot up from the black box.

Bad things were coming, it seemed to say, hurry up, girl.

I yanked the wires out of the circuit board, then put my hands on the frayed wires. Bracing myself for the shock about to come, I heated my skin. Wet flesh, exposed wiring, and electrical heating of a body had the obvious effect. I shorted out the door and gave myself a zap hard enough to singe my hair and make my teeth buzz.

The doors opened a crack. It was better than nothing. I unstuck myself from the board and turning sideways, jimmied myself out. Half of my body was in the room, half out, my face turned to the black box and the laser lights.

The air in the room changed, got heavy and moist. The molecules of air turned from soft and circular, to sharp needles. I tripled my efforts, squishing my face through the opening, and pulling my arm out. All that was left in the room was my leg. I heard a sucking sound like the universe taking a deep breath. Then the air blew out in a hard detonation that lit the room in a purple-blue ball of fire and flame.

It blasted the doors off the walls. The furniture exploded. A cloud full of burning shards of glass and wood burst into the hallway. I flew through the air. Sharp pieces of debris sliced my skin. I slammed into the wall.

I smacked the ground, my teeth snapped together with the impact, and the mossy taste of blood filled my mouth. A hail of paint chips and drywall rained down. When I looked up, the hallway and the room were on fire. Water from the overhead sprinkler system cascaded down. Cops and creatures raced toward me, but to my shocked senses, it looked like they ran in slow motion.

Their mouths moved but I couldn't hear them. There was a sharp ringing in my ears.

Lou reached me. He turned, yelled at someone, then turned back. He was talking, but I couldn't hear a word, and I couldn't figure out why everyone was still moving in slow motion. I tried to talk to him, tell him what had happened. But he got a look on his face, like I was the one moving in slow motion. So I tried to speak faster. I tried to point to the room, but my fingers and hands didn't follow my orders. He wasn't paying attention to me, anyway. Lou's focus was on something to his left and he was screaming—I could tell because his face turned red and a vein at the side of his neck started to throb.

A werewolf paramedic slid to a stop beside me. He lifted my eyelids, shone a bright light into them. He was talking, too, not that I could hear him any better. He turned to Lou, said something. Then he reached into his navy-blue jacket and brought out a spray needle. He held it to my neck, pressed the lever. It was the last thing I remembered.

About the author

When she was little, there was only one thing Natasha wanted to be: a superhero. But there came a day when her dreams were broken, and that was the day she realized that being a klutz was not, in fact, a super power, and her super weakness for anything bright and shiny meant a magpie with self-control could easily defeat her in a battle of wills. She turned to writing as a way to sharpen her mental super-hero skills. Natasha doesn't get to orbit the earth in a space station (and thank God, because she gets sick on merry go round), but she does get to say things like: "Stand aside! This is a job for Writing Girl!!"

Visit her at www.natashadeen.com

Email her at natasha@natashadeen.com