

The Good Partner

"Hey, Buddy, what's in the bag?"

I shifted the wriggling duffel and looked up into the ruddy face of a uniformed policeman. Damn. I'd peeled off my blood-splashed boots and coveralls and exchanged them for jeans and a perfectly respectable chambray shirt. Stuffed the bloody garments into Tony Corelli's garbage chute. Surely they hadn't been found already. My mouth was dry. I pressed the tip of my tongue against the space behind my lower teeth to get the juices flowing and said, "Excuse me?"

"The bag." He gestured. "What's in it?"

It was early, the street just beginning to wake. Only a few scurrying passers-by, and not a single hero among them. The cop had sixty pounds on me, most of it flab. I could probably outrun him, but that would attract attention.

"You don't want to know, Officer . . ." I peered at his badge. "Dougherty."

"You're an expert on what I do and don't want to know?"

"There's nothing illegal in here."

"I'm sure. Being's how you're such an honest-looking fellow."

He meant it sarcastic, but it was true. I am an honest-looking fellow. It's a useful characteristic, in my line of work. We appraised each other. Then he said, "I wanna see what's in the bag."

"If you say so." I handed it over. The contents shifted, and the side of the bag bulged out as if something inside had punched it.

He yelped and fumbled the duffel. I lunged to catch it. He yanked it away and set it awkwardly on the ground.

"Don't move," he said. "And keep your hands where I can see them." He flipped up the safety strap and drew his weapon. Pointed it at my chest.

My heart thumped a smidgen faster. "No need for that."

"Let me decide that." He unzipped the bag.

I'm not sure what he expected. A kidnapped child. A small collection of severed heads. Whatever he expected, it wasn't Emily.

Corelli had kept her in too small a cage, and when Dougherty opened the bag, she uncoiled like a spring. Eleven feet of angry python, albino scales all smooth and shiny in the light. Dougherty snatched his hand away, and her jaws snapped on air. Another day, she would have had him, but she was betrayed by metabolism--the small but tell-tale bulge in her belly where the rat Corelli had given her was slowly digesting.

Dougherty cursed and kicked the bag, which riled her more. It ticked me off, too. Snakes have delicate spines. He might have hurt her, kicking her that way.

I scooped her up and draped her around my shoulders. "She's perfectly gentle. And perfectly legal."

His ruddy face flushed even ruddier. He ran a trembling hand across his jaw. Trying to regain his sense of machismo. "Where'd you get that thing?"

"Reptile Palace, down on Seventh. Check with them."

"Why's it in that bag?"

I decided on the truth—or at least, a portion of it. "I've been out of town. A friend of mine was keeping her. His Rottie destroyed her cage. Almost got Emily."

It wasn't hard to look upset because, in fact, I *was* upset. Corelli had promised to take good care of Emily, and he had shirked.

It took Dougherty mere minutes to verify my ownership of Emily and let me go with a stern warning.

I breathed a sigh of relief when he climbed into his patrol car. By the time they found Corelli's body, Emily and I would be basking on a beach in Mexico. In time, her marvelous stomach would digest the rat and expel a small amount of uric acid, rat hair, and the stolen diamonds Corelli had stuffed into the rat. It was one of the frozen specimens I'd left with him—sans diamonds, of course. He'd warmed it in the microwave and dipped it in hot chicken broth, per my instructions, then fed the thing to Emily.

I was a bit worried about the diamonds, but I knew a good vet in Mexico, a discreet vet, who would know what to do if the gems caused stomach ulcers or an impaction.

It wasn't the smuggling I minded, or even the fact that Corelli had cut me out of his diamond deal. That was a clear violation of our arrangement, but Tony was a good partner, and I could have forgiven all that.

But to risk my Emily's life for a fistful of sparkling stones... well, that was going too far .