

I was sitting in my living room when I heard the news, reading an old copy of *Gulliver's Travels*. Brooke was lying on the couch, looking at her phone and petting the cat absently.

"Hey," my roommate said. "You know that Winter Wolf guy, right? The one with the big hearing today?"

I twitched one shoulder in a lazy shrug. "Sort of, yeah. Why?"

"Apparently it's on the news right now. It sounds like it's getting pretty crazy." She frowned. "I didn't think they showed those things on live broadcast."

"They don't," I said, sitting up straighter and grabbing the remote. I turned the television on, trying to remember the news channel—Brooke was the one who actually watched it, really. I saw enough news in my real life.

It turned out not to be a problem, though. It was being broadcast on *every* channel, and I didn't even *want* to know how they'd managed that. Brooke sat up, dislodging the cat, and we watched as the giant who'd interrupted the hearing killed two men and left a lot more scared out of their wits.

"Shit," I said once it was over, standing and turning off the television. "Something tells me they're going to want me at the office." This was supposed to be my day off, but after something like that it was going to be a while before anyone in the department got time off.

"I'm sorry," Brooke said sympathetically.

I sighed as I pulled on my coat. "Don't worry about it. Don't stay up, either. I don't know if I'll be back tonight or not."

"Yeah," she said, a little awkwardly. "About that, I've been meaning to tell you. I met a girl at the coffee shop the other day, and I sort of invited her here this Saturday."

"And it'd be simpler if I weren't here?" I asked, grabbing my gun and keys and dropping them into their respective pockets.

She grinned sheepishly. "Sort of, if it's not too much trouble."

I snorted. "Don't worry about," I said dryly. "If these fuckers get their way, I might not be home for a week or two. Have fun." I started to leave, but paused with my hand on the doorknob. "Just...be careful, okay, Brooke?" I called back to her.

"You think this is for real?" she asked me.

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe. Just play it safe for a little while, all right? If this is for real, it might be big."

"You know me," she said, with a mischievous smile. "I'll be careful." Thunder roared outside, underlining her words in a way I didn't entirely like. Sure, it *might* be coincidence, but I'd taken to laughing at that word in recent years, at least when I was out of character.

I wanted to emphasize the point, but I knew better than to try. Brooke was the sort of person who got more stubborn the more you tried to tell her something. I didn't exactly need to be a brilliant cop to know that, not when we'd been roommates since college.

When I got to my office, dripping wet and pissed off at life in general, I found that there were four different messages waiting for me. Two had been left with the front desk, and two had been left on a cellphone that the department Did Not Know about. So much so, in fact, that they were very clear on precisely what they Did Not Know about it, and knew exactly which questions not to ask so as to make sure that they didn't learn about it by accident.

I checked that phone first, naturally. The other messages might be important, but *any* call to that number was going to be at least a little bit of a big deal.

The first message was from a female who identified herself as Selene, and claimed to be acting as a proxy for Winter, trying to set up a meeting for discussion. That was a little odd, since he'd always contacted me himself in the past, but at the moment I supposed a lapse could be forgiven. The number she'd called from was one that he'd used before, too, which gave her claim some legitimacy.

The second was from Mad Dog Jonny, a caporegime in the local organized crime family, or whatever they called their equivalent of that position. I wouldn't know; Jonny was the only member of Pellegrini's gang that I'd ever met. He wanted basically the same thing as Winter's proxy, a meeting to discuss current events. I made a note of both of those and then checked the other messages.

The first message at the desk was from my mother, asking whether I was okay. I rolled my eyes and moved on; I got a similar message once a week or so, whether there was any reason for it or not. I could send her a text so she knew I was alive, and call her when I had a little more time. The other message was from the chief of police, telling me he wanted a report about who had interrupted the hearing and what it meant within a week.

I snorted. Of course he did. Never mind that, if it meant anything at all, we had less than a week before the shit hit the fan. That was police work for you, I supposed.

Which meant that, really, I knew exactly what I had to do. And it started with calling Jonny back.

When I first joined the force, I had about the same idea of the mafia as the rest of the recruits. We were the good guys, they were the bad guys; it was as simple as that, a literal game of Cops and Robbers played out on the grand scale.

Once I'd actually spent some time working, the situation seemed less clear. I started out in vice, and it didn't take too long to realize that our interests actually had a lot in common with theirs. It seemed like the vice squad, if anybody, should be working against organized crime, but if anything the opposite was true.

Pellegrini's organization—if it had been his; I wasn't sure whether he'd been running it that long, although commonalities in the way they operated made me think so—played the long game. And that meant, oddly enough, that they weren't really a problem for us. He didn't deal to the streets, he didn't push drugs to the youth, not out of any moral qualm but because it wasn't good business. The real money, as he saw it, was in selling to the wealthy. There was less violence, less risk, and they had more money to spend. Which meant that trying to shut him down was a waste of time and resources that could actually be *helping* people elsewhere.

And in every part of his business, the pattern was the same. His whores weren't mistreated, and his cut of their profits was lower than some of the legal brothels in Nevada; it was good business to make your employees glad to work for you. His protection rackets actually offered protection; it was good business to keep your customers happy, and that way they'd recommend it to others, so he didn't even have to coerce a business into paying. When he ran a gambling ring, the games weren't rigged; when he loansharked people, he was reasonable about collecting.

It seemed like no matter what the crime was, his was the most reasonable, least harmful way it could be carried out.

From that point, it was a short step to make to realize that it was a good idea for *us* to have a way to communicate with his people. We might not see eye-to-eye on much, but we could agree on some things. When there was an independent operator screwing things up, doing business on their turf and causing problems for everyone, they told us when and where and we got an easy arrest that actually did something to cut down on the violence. When we wanted things to be nice and quiet for a while, we told them and they knew to lay low for a while.

It was less work for everyone, and in the end the people of the city were safer and happier than if we'd taken a hardline stance against it. Once I'd gotten over my initial reluctance to tolerate gangsters, it was easy to see that.

But you had to have a certain attitude to deal with people like that. So before I went into the restaurant I took the time to make sure I had it right. Black suit, no cosmetics, hard expression. When I met with Jonny my persona was businesslike, pure self-interest from start to finish. I was polite and friendly, but I always, *always* made it clear that I was in it for myself.

It was, of course, nothing like the real me. Hell, I didn't even keep the bribes he paid me. Each and every payoff went, slowly but surely, straight to the Red Cross. A guy from the financial crimes unit had helped me set the donation system up to be functionally untraceable.

"Good morning, Sergeant," Jonny said when I sat down next to him. He was eating a salad, no dressing, and drinking water. Jonny had always been a bit of a health nut, although it hadn't been too noticeable until his brother had a heart attack two or three years ago. He'd told me about that himself; I didn't know his real identity, although I was sure that I could find out by asking around the department.

"Mad Dog," I said, giving him a hard look. "What do you want?"

"That was pretty crazy," he said, not reacting to my hostility. It was a familiar routine for the two of us. "Taking over all the television channels like that, that's impressive. I was wondering if you might know anything about how it happened."

"No," I said. "I was as surprised as anyone, believe me."

He sighed. "I understand," he said. "Thanks anyway. You want some lunch? On me, of course."

I hesitated, then shrugged. Hell with it. "Look," I said. "You remember the werewolf hoax? The one a few years ago?"

"Sure."

"It wasn't a hoax," I said. "And I'm the one who'd know. This is going to be like that. Except that this time they aren't going back in the closet when they're done."

He considered that for a moment, then nodded. "Thanks for the heads-up."

"No problem. But you didn't hear it from me."

Jonny looks almost offended at that. "Sergeant, what are you implying? Mad Dog Jonny doesn't rat out his friends. *Ever*."

I nodded apologetically. Then, before I could convince myself otherwise, I asked, "How'd you get that name, anyway? Mad Dog? It doesn't really seem to fit."

He looked at me curiously. "You've never asked me that before."

"I thought it might be a touchy subject."

"And now you don't?"

I paused before answering. "Jonny," I said, "the world just changed. Forever." I shrugged. "What's it matter anymore?"

He smiled at that. "I suppose it doesn't. I got the name when I was quite a bit younger—shortly after I joined the family, in fact. I got into a fight with another guy, over a girl or something, and he pinned me down. I bit him on the face, here and here." He touched his own face, on the cheek and just above his eye.

I looked at the salad, then back at him. "I have a hard time picturing you doing that," I admitted.

He shrugged. "I was a much angrier man, back then. I like to think I've learned a bit since those days. Are you sure you don't want some lunch, Sergeant?"

"Thanks anyway," I said. "But I've got more work to do."

My next stop was in a park, a ways to the south. It wasn't a part of town I saw often. Too expensive.

Winter often used one park or another when he wanted to meet, as Kyra Walker had before him, and I'd used that as a basis for the persona I presented to them. She was the sort of person who went to parks, athletic, but not the kind of athletic that went to the gym. Much like the Sergeant Frishberg that Jonny was used to talking to, she was greedy, but it was a very different kind of greed, a freelancer rather than a long-term investor. She tried to lie—I'd figured out early on that neither of them would take a crooked cop seriously if she was honest—but she just wasn't very *good* at it. She resented her job, and especially her coworkers, but she kept going for reasons that weren't entirely clear even to herself.

I took that identity on, reminding myself of what it felt like, how I should think, how I should talk. Then I glanced in the mirror, making sure it looked right. Different clothing from before, athletic rather than businesslike; carrying a pistol, just barely concealed from casual sight, but a paranoid observer would notice; hair tied back, and just a little bit of makeup, emphasizing the Mexican in my features that I'd gotten from my father.

Everything looked good, so I got out of the car and walked the rest of the way to the park, watching for anything odd. The storm was intense, not as bad as it had been closer to downtown, but still heavy. The wind almost blew me off my feet a couple of times, and the rain was coming down thick enough that I probably shouldn't even have bothered with the cosmetics.

Despite the weather, there were a couple of people walking dogs, some of which were big enough to make me think *werewolf*, but none of them had the attitude for it, the combination of intelligence and predatory *interest* in what they saw that set a werewolf apart. I didn't notice anyone carrying weapons, although considering some of what I'd seen from Winter that didn't mean a whole lot.

When I got to the park itself, it was almost totally empty. I couldn't blame people; the trees were swaying in the wind, hard enough that I wondered whether they were about to fall, and the sand in the playground was more like mud. It was nice for me, though, in that it made it easy for me to find the person I was there to meet.

And then I stopped. Because she was absolutely, drop-dead gorgeous.

I wasn't quite sure what gave me that impression. Her features were pretty, but not, like, supermodel pretty. She was wearing a heavy raincoat and galoshes—not exactly flattering at the best of times. But there was something about her attitude, her bearing, that just drove that impression home.

It was, I thought absently, a good thing it was me here for this meeting. I didn't like other women in that sense, not even a little bit, and I *still* had to take a couple seconds after I saw her to pick my jaw back up off the ground. I didn't even want to *think* about how some of the other people in the department might have reacted.

Once I'd gotten myself back together, I walked up to her. "Hi," I said. "I take it you're Selene?"

"That's right," she said, smiling. It was a charming, innocent sort of smile, and how she could pull *that* expression off while looking like that I didn't know. "You must be Sergeant Frishberg."

I nodded. "What did you want to talk about?"

"Mostly to apologize," she said. "I know this situation has to be stressful for you, and it's only going to get worse. We would have let you know in advance so that you could prepare, but we didn't actually know about it until this morning. They gave us *just* enough time to get ready ourselves, and it was made very clear that we weren't to tell anyone else."

That made sense, but there was something about this that was bothering me. I realized what it was a moment later, and gave her a hard look. "Who is this *we*?" I asked.

"Winter's staff," she explained. "I'm sort of the general manager when he's away." My expression must have slipped, because she laughed. "You didn't think he worked alone, did you?"

"I've met his girlfriend," I said slowly. "And I know he has a dog."

She laughed again, the sound low and delighted, making me think of warm honey. "He has quite a bit more than that," she said, still laughing a little. "Tell you what, why don't you come down to the house and I can introduce you around. I'm sure you want to get out of this weather, if nothing else. It should die down soon now that it's not needed."

I hesitated, then followed her out of the park. If nothing else, I thought, it might be a good idea to learn a little more about how he operated. It sounded like he was going to be a part of how things worked in this city for a little while longer, at least, since he wasn't going to prison today after all.

And, hell. If my own suspicions, and what Selene had said about this getting worse, were at all accurate, it might be a while before we could spare the resources to try and arrest him again. It might be a *long* while.