

Chapter 1:

The radio at my hip chirps and barks its quiet chatter, informing any listeners to arrests and crimes in progress. My ears stand on end, listening to it, but, begin scanning again when nothing of interest comes through. It mostly consists of the usual suspects: public drunkenness, petty thefts, and personal emergencies. There's nothing like listening to a fire somewhere burning down an apartment building to keep you going at night.

I round a corner and trek up a smaller off-street near riverfront station on the Inner Loop Line. The short apartment buildings rise up on both sides of the street like uneven walls on a hallway. The businesses on the ground floor are all quiet, the windows dark, having closed several hours ago. Up above, on the second and third floors, windows illuminate the street.

Streetlamps here are more uneven, as this is an older neighborhood. I think this used to be part of a place called 'Happy Town', the segregated part of the city before it was undone about fifteen-twenty years ago, though most likely only the far edge. It's difficult to tell outside of the general ill-maintenance of the buildings and presence of more pred-themed advertisements.

My radio kicks up again and I slow to a stop to listen. The dispatcher gives out a few more instructions and requests, mostly far across town or for issues I can't respond to. A lot of the dispatches that go out are like that: ambulance calls and auto wrecks. I'm pretty close to Downtown, where the traffic is the heaviest, so hearing some old geezer wrecked his Coyote Roadrunner into a telephone pole isn't out of the ordinary.

"I wish something would happen," I mutter to myself.

And I do. I've been with the force for more than a year now. Having graduated near the top of my class, I had hoped to make it into the detective program within six months. But every time positions open, my name is unfortunately always left off of the list. And why? Because I'm a doe, that's why. I'm never sure if it's because they think I'm not physically apt enough for the position, or because they think my natural instinct to everything would be to run.

I guess it doesn't matter; my name is never on the list. My sergeant says it's just a matter of time, to wait for the next round of selections for promotions and classes, but that's in another month. I can only guess the outcome of that round, too: denied. Maybe they're just way too happy having one of the best new beat cops to grace their precinct in ten years to get rid of her. Yeah, that's it, I'm sure.

As I cross an alleyway, I glance back it and see nothing move. But I take a flashlight from my hip and point it back with a click. Bugbuga wrappers litter the concrete, bent trash cans line the sides. The only thing that really stands out is the old posters hung up on the brick. They're for some bands up at the Aries, a club I've never been to, but hear about all the time. Clicking it off again, I move on, stepping over somebody's dumped bag of food.

A car cruises by with the low hum of a new engine, and I glance up to see a wolf behind the wheel. If he notices me, he doesn't let on. He just continues up the block and out of sight. I stop underneath a streetlamp and lean against it. The night has been unusually quiet. Well, except for the usual suspects, I mean. Even now, I can hear bottles breaking in the distance, the squeal of tires, and the general unease of the city.

"Calling all units, we have a possible disturbance in the area of Water and Stripe, please respond," the voice says.

Water and Stripe, that's about a block from here! I pull the radio from my belt and press down the talk button on its side.

"This is Officer Brooks, responding to disturbance near Water and Stripe; please advise," I say into the transmitter and begin walking forward.

The radio clicks off and there is static for a moment. Moving briskly up the street, wondering if this night has finally delivered on something to do, I wait for the radio. It only takes a few moments before it delivers.

"Officer Brooks, be advised, reports of violent engagement at 5150 Stripe Avenue, possible domestic disturbance. Parties involved may be armed and dangerous."

The radio clicks off abruptly leaving me with just that picture. With a bit of a smile on my lips, I break into a sprint. That address is even closer, possibly only a few minutes away. In the late hours of the evening, I'm able to break across the road without looking and hop up onto the empty sidewalk. Making it to the end of the street is just a matter of moments.

After taking a quick glance in both directions, I cut cattycorner across the end of the street to the corner of Water and Stripe. When I'm able to see up the street, I slow down and begin to approach more cautiously. Even though my reactions are good and my senses even better, I have no idea what this is going to be like.

I've had domestic disturbances turn into all-out brawls. Similarly, there have been officers responding to a simple assault or petty theft call to find out they've escalated into a kidnapping or a murder. The last thing that I want to do is stumble into a murder or one in-progress and end up on the receiving end of something nasty.

The building to my right reads 5190 and I slow my job into a slow walk in order to mask my approach as well as to observe anything pertinent. The street is like the last, similar buildings in a similar neighborhood. But here they're all residences. Even though a lot of lights are turned out, the blinds are pulled in most of the windows.

But animals peer out here and there. Not sure if they're at me, or at the building in question. Across the street, somebody leans out of their window and stares at the building, but retreats back

inside when they see me. The window is slammed shut and then the blinds are pulled haphazardly. Whatever is going on here is definitely something more than a domestic dispute.

I stop near the stoop at 5170, an older concrete one that was more ornate before it fell into disrepair. There's an alleyway between the buildings into which a large ray of light pours. Quietly stepping forward, I look up and see a fire escape that climbs precariously up three and a half stories. At the top a set of bay windows is pulled wide open, curtains fluttering in the wind.

The escape creaks under its own weight and something crashes on the other side of the building, as if something hard hits the concrete and shatters. Gasping, my hand goes to my tranquilizer gun and I look around for any threats. But apart from myself, there's no one in sight. The alleyway is still empty, the street is dead, and no cars appear.

Creeping forward, towards the building's front door, I contemplate calling into the precinct. But as I approach and silence more-or-less takes over, I think better of it. The fight, assuming it was up there on the third floor, seems to be over. Or something else has occurred and I've yet to discover it. I hurriedly round the bottom of the stoop and push my way into the foyer on the first floor of the building.

Just inside, a zebra stands just outside of her apartment's door dressed only in her nighty. She turns towards me with a concerned look on her face and pulls her clothes tighter against her body. The foyer is cracked, old, discolored, and already decorated as if it's more than thirty years old. Because of this, the zebra's face communicates a look of surprise at seeing a cop in her neighborhood.

"What's going on, ma'am?" I ask of her authoritatively. "I'm here to help."

"Zee couple on de thurd floor," she begins certainly. "Dey are hahving deh most biolent fight I hahve evah hurd. I think she iz hurt; jew mahst hurry!"

I nod at her in appreciation and begin to sprint up the stairs. I pull my radio from my belt and hold down the broadcast button as I round the stairs to the second floor.

"This is Officer Brooks, reporting a possible assault at 5150 Stripe Avenue, please send backup," I say into the microphone. "Perpetrator may be armed, victim may be harmed. Please send ambulance."

There is no direct response, but the call comes out a few moments later requesting backup and an ambulance to respond to the scene. I'm just hoping that either the backup arrives quickly or that it isn't required at all. But as I reach the top of the stairs on the third floor, I'm thinking I may need that backup more than I first thought.

The hallway is drenched in light from inside an apartment to my right. It breaks every so often as something passes in front of it, but it's so quick and constant that it makes me think it's a broken fan. When there is light to see, it's obvious that something is coating the wall on the other side. But it's not nearly as obvious as the door, ripped nearly to ribbons, lying on the floor in the center of the hallway.

Not only is the wood completely destroyed, but as I approach, I can see that it's been ripped from its hinges. I swallow hard and pull my flashlight from my belt and click it on again. Aiming it towards the door, it highlights deep cuts, as if from the largest claws I've ever seen, are dug in on one side.

Lifting the light upwards, I shine it towards the floor where more claw marks are cut into the thick hardwood. They bound off of the door and onto the floor, slamming into the wall opposite of the doorframe and then continue up the hallway. At the very end is a single window that has been completely shattered outwards, as if by great force.

Somebody leapt from the window. As I'm pulling my light back, it catches something red. Turning it back, I see there's some blood where the claws dug into the flooring—and on the wall—and on the ceiling—and on the door. Oh, Jesus Capybara. I step back around the door and then turn my flashlight into the door. What I see I can hardly believe.

Blood coats the floor, getting heavier as it passes over an old rug in the center of some very old carpeting. It's torn up, as if there's been a massive fight. A coffee table has been thrown over, a couch has been utterly destroyed, and the ceiling fan above hangs precariously on its wire, swinging back and forth after being wrenched from its casement. Only one blade still sits on it, swinging around on its track surrounding the only bulb left in the room not broken.

Something happened here, something insane. Somebody lost their mind and started trashing everything, and obviously either turned on a sane friend, or two fought and one won. And the loser's prize, unfortunately, seems to have been death. Towards the back of the room, on top of another rug, is a gazelle. She's been torn to pieces, her fine dress ripped to tatters and strewn about.

Her blood leaks into every soft surface, glittering in the glow from my flashlight. It's hard to tell where the floor ends and her body starts, it's so damaged. It's even difficult to tell who or what she once was. As I enter the room, I try desperately to keep my hooves out of the blood splatter, but that's extremely difficult. It's everywhere. Oh, Jesus, it's everywhere!

"Dispatch, this is Officer Brooks," I say absently into the radio. "The domestic disturbance at 5150 Stripe has escalated into a 187. Perpetrator is on the loose; assume they are armed, dangerous, and un-collared, over."

Lifting my light just slightly upwards, I see a figure hunched on the other side of the scene. Down on his hands and knees is a coyote in a trench coat and suit. His hands are soaked with her blood, as is the front of that tan overcoat. Despite the darkness and shadows cast by my flashlight, I can see that his appearance is one of shock. He doesn't see me enter, doesn't see the light, and doesn't seem to see anything.

I pull my tranquilizer gun and aim it at him just over my flashlight. Approaching quickly and quiet, I train it on him center mass. The radio screeches at my hip, voices fighting over each other to

report their statuses, to report they're closing it, or just to get in on the feeding frenzy. And it is this that the coyote hears. Looking up, he makes eye contact with me.

"You! Yes, you! Don't move!" I yell at him. "You're under arrest!"