

Chapter 3:

"He wants *what?!?*" The captain bellows down at me.

I haven't felt this small in a very long time. The captain is already that much larger than I am, but when he isn't happy, he grows ten times his own size out of pure vitriol and anger. A lot of the investigatory boys have already packed their things and left. The only people who are left are the officers still going door-to-door to get input from neighbors, and the detectives hanging about.

"He wants a deal, sir," I reply to him sheepishly.

"Of course he wants a deal, don't they always?" Detective Ashe protests angrily.

The detective from before has returned after getting wind that his case's main suspect opened up to someone else. To describe him as furious would be an understatement. He's a beaver, a very large one in both girth and strength, and a veteran at the police force. The only thing larger than him, outside the larger species in blue, including myself as a white tail deer, is his distaste for me.

Right now he sucks on a cigarette and leans against the door barring off the impromptu interrogation room which holds our suspect. When he received the news, he barged back in to tighten the clamps on Quartz, who suddenly could only repeat the word 'lawyer' over and over again. For my own safety, I didn't stop him. Quartz seemed to find tormenting the detective to be enjoyable, and I didn't want to spoil his fun.

"I understand that part, Officer Brooks, but what I don't understand is how he thinks he can determine he's in any position to negotiate with the ZPD!" The captain booms. "We have enough evidence to fry him, or at least put him behind bars for the rest of his miserable life! What does he have that could possibly make a difference here?"

"He isn't in any position, godamnit, he's a fucking chomper!" Ashe booms. "We shouldn't trust a word coming out between those canine's canines."

"Evidence and proof absolving him, and indicating the real murderer," I say, a little more confident than before, trying to wholly ignore Ashe.

"What fucking evidence?" Ashe cries, flicking his cigarette.

"Indeed. What evidence?" Whitebuck demands ardently, though more calmly than his subordinate. "Even if he's an eyewitness, the DA's office will pick him apart! And, no doubt, the info coming back from forensics will damn him. Unless he has cold, hard, tangible, unalterable evidence, his hide is tanned."

Ashe goes to interject, but I don't give him the chance to.

"How about a roll of film?" I calmly ask, which shuts Ashe up.

The fire in the captain's eyes begins to dull. His fists unclench from his side and he leans back, away from looming over me like a toppling building. As his brow unfurrows, he runs a hand through the fur on top of his head. He then exhales a deep, cleansing sigh and turns away from me. Apparently that is good enough to at least consider the proposal.

Ashe seems to concur, shoving that thick Bucky Strike back into his mouth. He sucks on it until it's as red as the pits of hell. Then he blows smoke out through his nostrils and crosses his arm in what can only be described as his 'screw you' stance. The silence of the interlude of the eruptions of two volcanoes is measurable.

"A roll of film?" The captain inquires.

"Yes, sir," I explain, "he was tailing the victim for her boyfriend as a licensed private investigator. That job included taking photographic evidence which means he took a roll of film of the events leading up to the murder. It includes clear shots of the murderer himself."

The captain's eyes widen and what anger he has left dissipates. Ashe seems stunned into silence, either by surprise or disbelief. I highly suspect it's the latter. Wheels turn behind the captain's eyes and he turns away from me.

"Assuming he isn't lying," the captain begins, "and it reveals the real, or second, murderer – we must keep our possibilities open – that leaves me in a precarious situation."

"Yeah, no shit," Ashe interjects. "The media will fry us. If we're lucky, that's it. But we could avoid it all, send the coyote downtown. Let *them* decide if they wanna send him to the Zoo or somewhere upstate."

Then the both of them are quiet. Ashe seems to be cooking with his lid on, threatening to boil over. The captain, though, seems contemplative, sober, and very collected. Finally, he loudly sighs.

"There are four news crews outside right now, if you haven't noticed," The captain informs me, "not to mention the smaller rags. When I leave this building, I'm going to have to tell them something. If I don't and they let their imaginations run wild, at 6 o'clock tomorrow morning when this news breaks, I may be cleaning out my desk. If I tell them we don't have anyone in custody and that doesn't change, when the news breaks at 6 o'clock tomorrow morning, I may be cleaning out my desk. If I tell them we do, and we don't by 6 o'clock tomorrow morning, I *will* be cleaning out my desk. Understand my position."

"I do sir," I reply. "But if we arrest him, we are knowingly arresting the wrong person."

"If it turns out to be true, and the defense proves it. But, that's a horrible risk for me to take, Officer Brooks, the word of a private investigator backed up by a beat cop," the captain says plainly, walking towards the window at the front of the apartment. "With the mayoral election coming up, and possibly the appointment of a new commissioner, it will be high time to reorganize the administration in

the ZPD. I'm hoping I don't remain a captain for much longer. If Bellwether loses, it would be nice to receive a promotion and not a pink slip."

"He's a coyote, Brooks, a predator. Even if we *are* arresting him for a false crime, we'd only be arresting him for something we don't know about, or preventing something he'll do in the future," Ashe asserts, obviously frustrated with the situation.

"That may be, Ashe, but we have to try," I insist to Ashe, who brushes me off. "And, sir, please, this is a risk worth taking. If you do nothing, and someone else gets murdered, what then?"

"And what would you have me do, Officer?" The captain asks as he peers through the parted blinds. "No detective in my precinct would dare work with a predator, especially one like him. No sergeant or lieutenant would either. If we let him out, we could just be giving him a head start. I don't want to divert any resources chasing down a hostile informant, or a possible suspect."

"No shit," Ashe asserts miserably. "By letting one his kind into our folds, you're begging for every intricate detail of how our police system works to make its way into the wild, toothy, and claw-filled world-at-large. What next, Jane Doe, letting a fox into the precinct? Give me a fucking break!"

Ashe sucks his cigarette dry and then tosses the butt on the ground. His fingers crawl to procure a new one, but hold off when I give him an almost hate-filled glare. It wouldn't surprise me if the captain hears Ashe's protest as most likely representing the bulk of his officers. But, yet, he doesn't respond positively to that argument. Not even casually.

Instead, he closes the blinds and steps away from the window. He wipes his head again and pulls his peaked cap from under his cocked arm. After blowing the dust and debris out of it, he replaces it onto his head and turns towards me. The look in his eyes is wanting at best, distrustful at worst. I can almost see the wheels turning behind them, trying to figure out what I'll say next. I'm sure he knows.

"I will, sir," I say confidently, giving Ashe the stink-eye.

His lips tighten and then loosen after a moment, no doubt confirming that he already knew the next words out of mine. After giving Ashe a cursory glance to see the red spreading over his fur, he turns away. He looks down at where Savannah's body once laid, the blood still mostly soaked into old, white carpeting. I turn to follow as he steps forward. A pair of cops still ring the room, a bull and a hare, most likely intrigued by the developments.

"Cap, you can't be buying this shit," Ashe pleads, his anger disappeared, replaced by exasperation and unease. "He's a good half-foot on her, not to mention the weight. Taking into account her training, the moment they're outside of this building, he's gone like a fart in the wind and she's useless, dead weight. And knowing his kind, we'll never find him again. If we're lucky, we'd pin him after the next murder. At least I hope it's only after the next one."

"You can handcuff him to me," I continue to suggest, countering Ashe's critique. "Even if he wanted to run, he couldn't. He wouldn't ever leave my sight. All we would need to do is retrieve the

camera, get the roll developed, identify the perp, and make an arrest. It could be done in a matter of hours. You could be a hero."

"Come on, captain, give me an hour with him, out of sight, and I'll shake something loose from him," Ashe counter-offers. "Whether it's the confession that he's the real murderer; or, if his phantom camera turns out to be real, that camera's hiding place. I don't care which! You can't seriously be considering the insane, fever-dream suggestion from a yearling *woman*, can you? She's hardly a real cop!"

The captain seems neither interested nor disinterested in either of our proposals. He simply looks to the vaguely body-shaped blood splatter on the ground. His brow furrows and he leans forward with a deep sigh. To be honest, I'm surprised he's even interested in this. My previous experiences speaking with him have been, well, strained at best. It's not that he doesn't trust me, I just don't think he expects anything I do to succeed.

Captain Whitebuck is a good man, generally. He's as ambitious as every other captain in the ZPD, always maneuvering his political pieces to rise up the ranks. His sights are aimed on commissioner and nothing less. Well, maybe being mayor would suffice. I think it's why he dislikes me. Taking on a female beat cop, especially one that wants to be a detective, is dangerous, politically and professionally. But, despite that ambition, he has never shown the kind of malice and bigotry I've seen in others at this job.

Someone like Ashe. Ashe takes a large step forward, stumbling with the lighter in his hand, as if conjuring up something to say, anything. When it looks like he finally pulls something up from the depths of his empty head, I slide in front of him to keep his mouth shut.

"Sir, I understand your position," I quickly say. "You could be risking your job. But arresting Mr. Quartz now and calling it a day means risking the lives of someone in the future, and possibly media backlash after the real perpetrator strikes again, assuming he will. It's a risk, but, it's our job as police officers to protect the public, not ourselves. If we throw this predator behind bars, we're just letting the real culprit free reign of the city to murder again, and—and—and if this doesn't work out, I'll work the boat for the rest of my career."

Ashe seems stunned. I'm not even sure he knew that I knew about the marine detail. How could I not? It's the most dreaded detail in the entire ZPD. Cruising the harbor where the shipping barges and cruise ships come in, maybe even covering the rivers up in the Rainforest District. It's miserable. But, more importantly, what it means is that I'm out of Captain Whitebuck's precinct, forever. He seems to find this attractive.

"Hmm," the captain says after a second. "And what, pray tell, do you get if this little gamble pays off for you?"

"I want to be immediately made a detective," I tell him plainly, upping the ante.

The captain 'hums' once more and seems to smile. Ashe is furious, now glaring miserably at the both of us, though he doesn't say anything. While I doubt he's a religious man, considering he drinks like a fish, deep down I know he's praying that the captain won't buy this. That this deal I've offered him isn't good enough. I won't lie, my heart is beating through my vest like a drum.

"This is what I'm going to say, Officer," the captain says and turns to me with a vague smile on his muzzle. "I'm going to go downstairs, calmly, with the remainder of the force occupying this building in tow. That includes you, Detective Sergeant Ashe. We will lock up this apartment, cordon it off for the time being; leave it in case something new develops and we need to come back here. Once that is done, you will be handcuffed to Mr. Quartz."

"Captain, Jesus Capybara!" Ashe yells, exasperated.

The captain lifts a hand, clenched tightly into a fist. It seems he has finally come to a decision, one which calms my fluttering heart. When Ashe takes a step back, grumbling under his breath, the captain returns his arm to the small of his back whence it came.

He stoically continues, "You have eight hours, roughly, to fulfill your bargain with your predator. Find this camera, phantom or not. Find the real perp and deliver him to the precinct in cuffs before sunrise. Backup will be posted at the precinct at a moment's notice, as I won't send you into the line of fire without any protection. But, understand me, if you turn up empty-handed, that coyote of yours goes to Rams Island and maybe the chair. And you will ride the boat until your pension matures."

"Captain, you can't be serious," Ashe quietly states, defeated.

The detective takes a step forward with both of his arms stretched before him as if pleading. Whitebuck turns to face him and gives a sigh, as if resigned to his decision. Ashe takes this as the end of this argument, that there is no way forward from his position. He finally shoves that next Bucky into his mouth and lights it, while sucking on it with such force as to threaten to ash it in one go.

"Then I won't take any responsibility for the outcome, then," he says with renewed anger. "I'm turning over my case files to Lieutenant Longenecker outside. If you really want to commit to this folly, you can collect them from him! And you there, Doe, you watch yourself. From him, and from us. Dig?"

With that, he turns and storms off towards the door, the long of his coat trailing behind him while his tail threatens to tear up the rug like the drag bar on a funny car. When he's gone, the tension in the room is relieved and I look back to the captain. He has just watched, while not his best, but a good investigator leave. I wonder if he thinks he's just made an enemy. I wonder if I've made a friend.

I don't ask. I'm not sure if I would even have the right to. But, to be honest, I'm happy either way. Well, maybe not with the fact that I'm going to be handcuffed to a predator for possibly eight hours, but with the fact that I'm getting the opportunity to prove myself. Finally. I'm hoping by morning, I'll be a detective. Maybe soon I'll be a detective sergeant.

After about fifteen minutes, it's quite obvious the captain is very serious about honoring his bargain. Quartz is lead out of his 'cell' without being told of the situation. The room is then sealed off to both the public and anyone else that would be interested in getting back in. As the officers are ordered downstairs, the captain turns to the both of us and presents me with the file procured from the giraffe lieutenant.

As I open it up, he releases one of Quartz's handcuffs, causing him to brighten like a thousand watt light. It bursts a moment later when Whitebuck slams the now-free cuff onto my right arm. The captain nods, pinching the brim of his hat and wordlessly turns to leave. The coyote watches him go while grasping for the words to protest.

"What just happened?" He finally asks as the captain turns the corner.

"You got what you wanted," I tell him. "Now you have roughly eight hours to fulfill your promise and you walk free. Screw it up, and you spend the rest of your days at the Zoo and I hit the water. I'd suggest you get moving."

"While I'm handcuffed to you?" He says to me loudly. "Oh, Jesus."

I give him a curt smile and close the relatively thin file I've been presented with. Quartz looks to me in disbelief. I think he saw himself talking his way out of this bind, but I don't think he saw it going like this. No, I'm pretty sure he thought he'd squeeze between the cracks. But his face turns towards exasperation when he lifts up his arm and the handcuffs rattle.

"Well," I say as he lets his arm drop, "if you're quite done, I think we should get going. Tick tock, Mr. Quartz."

Tick tock, Jane.