

Threads of Fat: Prologue

by Cerine Hero

Her first morning wake-up call was something itchy touching her leg. Stella tried to dig her face into her pillow and slide her legs around under the sheets, but then it *moved*. Her eyes popped open in surprise and she slung back the blankets to see a handful of disgusting roaches scurrying away under the sheets. The skunk shrieked and jumped headfirst out of bed, her long pajama top fluttering around her. She stumbled around in the dark, still half-asleep despite the adrenaline. Her claws grasped a can of insect spray and she generously hosed the entire bed with the spray, holding her other paw over her nose to protect herself from the acrid smell.

She never saw the roaches again, though. Either they found good hiding spots while the skunk tore through the blankets with the spray in one paw, or they limped away in defeat. Awake and frustrated, Stella crawled around on her paws and knees all around the room, spraying the edges once again in a futile attempt to keep the bugs out. She was tired of telling the management about the roaches. People in the other apartments left food everywhere, and no one reprimanded them. So there were bugs.

Stella tossed the empty spray can into the trash and blearily wiped her eyes with the bottom of her pajama shirt as the sun just started to rise outside. So much for sleeping in; she was awake and agitated now, no way to get back to sleep. The chestnut-furred skunk sat down on the edge of the bed, holding her head in her paws and wrapping her tail around her waist. White hair fell around her fingers and her shoulders.

Then came the second wake-up call. Dull, rhythmic buzzing came from inside her nightstand. She tried ignoring it for as long as she dared, but eventually she had to relent, and she leaned over to pull open the drawer. Her phone was wandering around the inside of the drawer on top of a celebrity gossip magazine. And it was a call from the public defender's office. Because of course it was.

Stella picked up the phone and answered the call. "Hello?"

"Ms. Mitchell?"

"This is she."

"They've got one in the tank for you at the Fifth Street Station. Public nuisance and resisting arrest. No identification, no lawyer. Head down there ASAP and get the preliminaries rolling so the officers can start questioning."

"This is my day off."

"I'm afraid you've got the short stick on this one. Everyone else is busy and they want to get this done with. So repeat back: Fifth Street Precinct."

"Fifth Street." She tried to paint a map in her head, but it came out fuzzy. Good thing she had GPS on her phone. "I've got it. I'll be down there soon."

"Have fun with that one."

Stella hung up the phone. "I won't." She tossed the phone onto the bed and headed into the shower, tossing clothes on the floor as she walked.

The shower was ice cold, even though she was probably one of the first to get to the hot water today. She finished up as quick as she could and then swept the fur dryer up and down her body. Her tail took extra time to dry, but once it was brushed, it fluffed back up nicely. The skunk slipped into a skirt, blouse, and slightly-too-big blazer, buttoning herself in. White-furred feet slipped into black heels and hair was twisted into a messy but acceptable bun.

Stella grabbed her messenger bag and filled it with folders containing all the information she might need to reference. She slung the bag over her shoulder and raided her pantry for something small and sugary to snack on for breakfast. There was one cream cake roll left over; she made sure to throw the wrapper in the trash on her way out of the door.

The skunk jiggled her keys in the doorknob and headed to work just as the rest of the world was

beginning to stir. However, she had yet to discover that a third, far more consequential, wake-up call was waiting for her at the police station.

It was busy even for the early morning down at the precinct. Officers on the trailing end of the night shifts were hauling in miscreants for processing. Stella squeezed her way to the front reception desk, smoothing down her blazer as she approached. The kindly old tiger was on duty. A steaming mug of coffee rest beside his stack of paperwork, and he looked up at Stella through his half-moon glasses.

"Hello again," Stella offered, adjusting the strap of her bag around her shoulder. "They said you had a misdemeanor in holding for me."

"Good morning, Ms. Mitchell," the elderly tiger said. The bead chains hanging from the arms of his glasses swung rhythmically back and forth. "They rang me up a little while ago and said you'd be coming. Well, it's all perfectly routine. Public nuisance, resisting arrest. Here's the file with the report."

He placed a folder on the top counter and Stella tucked it under her arm. "Pre-dawn misdemeanor call isn't exactly routine," she groaned. "So what's going on? Rich kid mess up and parents want to keep it quiet?"

"Not for me to know," the tiger replied, shrugging. "I guess you'll find out in a minute. I'll have Bernard walk you back."

Bernard was a heavysset bear, and he smiled down at the skunk. His uniform was snug around his huge figure, and his mass made Stella look tiny and fragile as he led her towards the security gate to lockup. "Great way to start the morning, isn't it?" He dropped by the break room on the way and picked up a couple of cream-slathered danishes. They were warm and fresh, and Bernard held one out to Stella's nose. "Want one?"

"Ah, no, thank you," the skunk answered, leaning away slightly. "I already had breakfast."

"No problem." Bernard stuffed one of them in his muzzle. Stella's face broke into a forced smile and she watched the bear's round gut bounce slightly as he ate.

They passed through the security gate to the rear of the station, stopping at a windowless door in the middle of a concrete brick wall. Just a little bit further down the hallway, Stella could see another gate, and beyond were the holding cells. Typical for a Saturday morning, there were more than a few furs pacing behind the bars as they waited to get processed. That was interesting. Maybe one or two of them back there had lawyers they could call, but many of them would be waiting on representation, if they were smart enough to want it and could afford it.

"Something stinks," Stella groaned.

Bernard looked back from unlocking the interrogation room door. "Well--"

"Don't you even."

The bear chuckled and pushed open the door. "Here you go. If you need anything, just knock."

Breathing deep, Stella gripped the shoulder strap of her bag. She hated this part – dealing with a complete stranger. Especially since it involved sitting in a small room, usually barely lit, across a table from what was either a very agitated or very despondent person. The skunk's stomach clenched with anxiety and the fur on the back of her neck stood straight up. She swallowed hard and told herself that this was an easy case; she'd be in-and-out and back in bed an a couple hours.

Stella crossed the threshold into the room and pulled the door shut behind her. Letting out a heavy breath, she immediately made herself busy, flipping open the file and scanning the report. "Okay, we'll get this done quick," she said, taking her seat and shrugging off the shoulder strap of her bag. She hadn't even looked up yet. "Misdemeanor charges, not a big deal. We can try to get them dismissed procedurally in front of the judge. Or community service at worst. So why don't you tell me--"

"Hello, Stella Mitchell. I have been waiting for you."

Her blood went cold. Stella threw down the file and slammed her back against the back of her chair. She finally looked at her client. Across the table from her was a fox. That was the best possible description that Stella could possibly give for this person. He sat with his paws clasped together on the

table, eyes locked on her with frightening intensity. Everything else about him, however, felt like a dream. Stella's mind struggled to focus on any one detail of his body, as if he was both completely solid and real yet made of shifting liquid. Facial features seemed to change every time she blinked, but she couldn't identify what changed, exactly, or into what.

Even colors seemed to slip over her thoughts without really sinking in. One second, she thought he had red fur; another, green and ocher, even though nothing actually changed! An aching pain formed between Stella's eyes as she tried to process the impossible. When she squinted, she could almost make things coalesce into some kind of order, but she couldn't meet his gaze anymore. His eyes were both a perfectly reasonable shade of every color she could picture and blinding white lanterns all at once.

"I apologize," the stranger said. His voice was calm, slow, and heavy, full of volume without being loud. It rattled the inside of Stella's ribcage but didn't feel horribly unpleasant. "It will become easier in a moment. Your mind is not accustomed to possibility."

Stella blinked tears out of her eyes. The room was spinning, and she rubbed the heels of her paws into her face. Soon things started to steady, and she dared to look up at the fox again. Like he said, it was easier this time. There was still something uncanny about his appearance, as if he was a million layers of images all stacked together.

"What the hell's going on? Who are you?"

The fox opened his paws and spread his fingers. "You can call me a stranger if you like, Stella. It is an appropriate appellation, I think. Please, get comfortable. Your bag looks quite heavy, and we have much to discuss."

The skunk massaged her paws over her face. "That cake I ate was expired. I'm hallucinating."

"No, you are here because I have a proposition for you."

"I am here because I got called in for counsel on a couple misdemeanors. Something is wrong." She shoved back her chair with a squeal of metal on concrete. "I'm leaving."

Stella bounded over to the door in two steps. She gripped the doorknob and twisted it, but the door wouldn't open. Something was holding it shut. The skunk couldn't even get the door to budge around the door frame. She slammed her open palm on the middle of the door, trying to get Bernard's attention, but no one came to the door – there weren't even sounds on the other side.

"It will not open for you yet." The fox was still seated at the table, his palms on the metal surface. Stella turned back and looked at him. He had no reflection in the metal.

"Why not? How the hell are you keeping it shut?"

"I am not." The fox motioned to her chair again. "Come and sit. We have something to discuss, and after we have done that, the door will open. I promise."

Stella breathed heavily. The weight of her messenger bag was digging on her shoulder, so she took it off. Apparently she didn't need it now, anyways. She didn't trust the fox at the table, but the way he spoke when he made the promise – the feeling of it sank deep into her and resonated inside her lungs. It felt like truth. Slowly, the skunk returned to the chair and sat down, but she remained away from the table, gripping the edges of the seat beneath her.

"What is happening right now? What were you talking about when you said I wasn't used to possibility?"

The fox tilted his head slightly, a overly slow and ponderous gesture to show that he was thinking. "Have you ever... attempted to fix something without the proper tools?"

"I don't understand what you're talking about," Stella replied, narrowing her eyes. The fox waited for a reply patiently. She shook her head and bunched her shoulders. "I... guess so?"

"That is what it is like to attempt to explain what I mean. I do not possess the tools of language to explain the concept adequately, so forgive my crude description. Your understanding of possibility is that of circumstance. Decisions with multiple outcomes but little consequence. You choose left or right. This or that. To stay or go."

"Well, apparently I can't go, so that's not much of a possibility."

"You are very clever, Stella. You cannot leave this room yet because you do not understand what choices lie before you. That is what I have come to offer. I am going to present to you true possibility on a scale you have never experienced before."

Stella swallowed hard, feeling her heart in her throat. She was still frightened, but the fox's resonant words were drawing her in with wonder. The skunk found herself leaning forward in her chair, hanging on his words. "Okay. What is it?"

"Are you happy, Stella?"

The skunk recoiled, shocked by the abruptness of the question. Was she happy? Well, right now she absolutely wasn't happy. She was confused, scared, and excited. But that probably wasn't what he was asking about.

"What do you mean?"

"Are you satisfied with your life?"

"What the fuck are you going to sell me?"

The fox smiled softly. "You are not where you thought you would be when you were a child, are you, Stella? Wealthy and famous? A social butterfly? A paramour? You wanted a home in the hills with a view over the ocean, correct? Just like in your favorite movie."

Her breathing shifted and she clenched her jaw. "How the hell do you know that?"

"Stella. Is this really so surprising, after everything you have seen and heard in this room?"

"So what? You want to give me a bunch of money? Make my dreams come true? Help me move out of my dump apartment? If you wanted to do all of that, you could've done it somewhere else. Why'd you trick me into coming here?"

"To eliminate distractions." He looked up and scanned his gaze slowly around the featureless cell of a room. "That was why these rooms were made, after all. And for privacy, for those in your line of work. But I am not offering to give you anything. I am offering you a new possibility. Not a change of direction in your life, but a new life in its entirety."

The fox reached down into his lap and lifted up an object, setting it on the table. It was a small case, maybe a few inches on each side. The lid was made of either glass or plastic and rest on top of a square panel. Under the clear lid, square in the center of the thick black panel, was a round red button. It almost looked like a game show buzzer.

"With a press of this button, you will enter a brand new life. Stella Mitchell will awaken in the world she always wanted. You will have money, fame, adoration... love."

Stella stared at the button. Though she was stock-still on the outside, her mind raced at the idea of having everything she dreamed of. "Okay, say I believe this. What's the catch? What do you want from me?"

"There is indeed a catch. A consequence, perhaps. In this other world, you will be extremely fat."

Stella's breath caught in her throat. "I'm sorry- what? What did you say?"

"You will be fat. Exceptionally so."

His tone was so flat and matter-of-fact that it made Stella laugh. That was good. He had her strung along for a minute, but that was completely ridiculous. As soon as the skunk started to giggle, she couldn't bring herself to stop. All of the stress and tension built up in her tummy bubbled out through her mouth, until she was doubled over in a cackling fit. The fox watched her patiently, knitting his fingers together behind the case.

"That is fucking nuts," Stella finally managed to croak out, wiping tears from her face. "This is all bullshit. God... thanks, though. That really had me sucked in for a while."

The stranger just stared. Stella met his eyes again, locked into his quantum gaze. They didn't budge. Not one bit.

"You're completely serious."

"There will be a further... complication, but that will wait until after you have made your

decision.” He leaned forward, pushing the covered button over to Stella's side of the table. The skunk looked down at it like it was covered in slugs. “This is yours now. Take it with you. You understand the two possibilities before you: to either continue with the life you have now, or accept this offer to create for yourself a brand new reality, so the door will no longer be closed to you. You have until midnight to make your decision, Stella, at which time the button will disappear, and your life will continue as if this meeting never happened.”

Stella pressed a paw to her flat stomach, feeling her oversized blazer shift around her body. She thought of Bernard offering her the pastry, and how she didn't even want *that*. The butterflies came back to her stomach in force, making her dizzy. She panted heavily as thoughts of both luxury and obesity filled her mind. “And what do you get out of this? If I do it?”

“Information. Or... perspective. Nothing you need to be concerned with.”

Stella reached out and took the case with the button in a trembling paw. She stuffed it into her messenger bag and stood up, almost losing her balance before she caught herself on the edge of the table. She opened her mouth to say something as a farewell, but none of the words she knew would come. Swallowing and clearing her throat, the skunk simply said, “I'm leaving.”

“I hope we will see one another again soon, Stella Mitchell. Or perhaps we will not, depending on your decision.”

“We won't,” she replied unsteadily. “I just want out of here.”

The fox gestured his paw towards the door. Stella turned and yanked on the knob. The door flew open roughly, revealing the hallway at the back of the police station. She let out a long, shuddering sigh and glanced back at the fox.

There was no one sitting at the table. Stella wanted to go home right now.

She pulled the interrogation room door shut behind her. Bernard was nowhere to be seen, so she headed back up the hallway to the security checkpoint where she had been let in. The gate, however, was closed and locked.

“Hello? Bernard?” Stella called.

She heard heavy footfalls. Bernard stepped out of the break room and came to the security gate, a half-eaten danish in his thick claws. He looked down at her with a distressingly worried expression.

“Hey, what are you doing back there?” he asked, furrowing his heavy brow. “Oh, wait, you're a public defender, aren't you? I've seen you before.”

“Yes, you saw me a few minutes ago when you let me in here. And you said you would be outside if I needed anything!”

“Uh, no,” the bear answered. “I don't know who let you in, but it wasn't me.”

Stella's stomach sank into her feet. She inhaled deeply, trying not to completely panic in public. “Could you... maybe... just let me out, then?”

“If you're all done in there, sure.” Bernard fetched the ID key from his front pocket and swiped it over the lock. The security gate unlocked and he slid it out of the way for Stella to squeeze her way out.

Without even another word, Stella brushed past him and made her way for the front doors. It was bright outside now, and she squinted against the sunlight as she walked as quick as she dared in her heels.

“Oh, Ms. Mitchell. I didn't know you were here.”

Stella looked back over her shoulder and saw the kindly old tiger sitting at the reception desk. She had no reply. How was she going to explain that she was, at best, going crazy? The most she could do was try to offer a strained smile over her shoulder and a tiny wave before she was out the door.

By the time she got home, Stella had convinced herself that she had dreamed the entire scenario by telling herself that she had over and over. It was a combination of lack of sleep, stress, hunger, and wishful thinking, she told herself. There was no other way to explain it.

She unlocked her door and stepped back inside. The skunk slammed the door and bent herself over the chair at her kitchen table. As she closed her eyes and exhaled long and hard, time seemed to slip away. Her messenger bag slipped down off her shoulder and hung in the crook of her elbow. Eventually Stella's arm began to ache, and she tossed the bag onto her table. The flap flopped open and spilled a bunch of documents onto the floor. She wasn't in the mood to pick them up. All she wanted to do was wash her face, jump in the bed, and wake up tomorrow. Tomorrow had to be a normal day, and by then everything would be fine.

Mail was still stacked up on her kitchen table. Stella hadn't looked through it yet. The top envelope read "URGENT – FINAL NOTICE" and she never got further than that. She flicked it onto the floor. Underneath the bill was a letter from her apartment complex. Lifting an eyebrow, she picked up the letter and opened it with a claw.

It was a notice of renovation. The owners were going to re-do the building next month. At first, Stella's hopes rose. Maybe they were finally going to fix the bug problem and the leaky roof. But then she read on, discovering that she had to pack and vacate within a week. Her jaw dropped open. She crumpled up the notice and threw it in the trash, feeling heat build up in her ears. In a fit of frustration, Stella slammed her paws down on the table in front of her. A solid *bang* filled the apartment.

And then the case tumbled out of her messenger bag, landing on its side between her paws. Stella clenched her toes as she looked down at it and her heart began to race. The little red button was starting to look very tantalizing. Her mind began to picture it being attached to an ejection seat, launching her far and away from the impending wreckage around her. Slowly, the skunk gripped the case and lifted it up, watching the light shine across the glass top and the glossy red button inside.

She carried the case with her back into the bedroom, setting herself down on the edge of the mattress. Thoughtfully turning the case around in her fingers, she thought back to what the stranger had told her. She could have everything she wanted, far away from here, if she just agreed to get... fat. The skunk chewed on her lip. She'd never really contemplated that as any kind of trade.

What if the stranger was just some kind of weirdo? Was he just stringing her along to see if she'd agree to something ludicrous? Playing on her fears and anxieties was pretty childish. But there was a chance that it really wasn't bullshit, wasn't there? She saw some impossible things at the police station – enough to make her think that maybe all of this actually was legitimate. And if it wasn't, what would pushing the button actually *cost*?

Stella gripped her claws on her stomach. Standing up, she unbuttoned her blazer and her blouse, tossing them behind her on the bed. She kicked off her shoes and slid off her skirt. White hair tumbled onto her shoulders when she pilled out the hair pin. Stella looked at herself in the mirror, rubbing her paws down chestnut fur on her sides. She was slender, and she had done a pretty good job of keeping herself that way. Was it worth giving that up?

On the other paw, was it worth keeping it?

The skunk threw herself onto the bed, bouncing twice on the mattress. Her nose wrinkled as she caught the acrid smell of bug spray caught in her sheets. Slowly, her fingers closed on the button case and lifted it up. She pried off the glass lid and set it inside. A sharp jolt rolled down her spine as she touched the edge of the button with her thumb. It was the thrill of possibility. Maybe she really was about to step into the unknown – and what she would look like on the other side was definitely one of those unknowns.

Stella rubbed her fingers into her stomach. She gave it one last, sharp smack, perched her tongue on the edge of her muzzle, and pressed the button.