

The Life and Crimes of Detective Barker

Episode Three

Giftng

1.

It was a dirty city. It was loud and obnoxious. It was ridden with crime and hate. That was the city Barker called home. It was everything you could ask for in his line of work. Yet, there was one single time of the year that it was even worse.

People from all around the city would decorate their filthy homes with lights. That only seemed to accentuate the dirt building up along the walls. The city would decorate its trees with ornaments that were clearly as old as the tree itself. It was a horrid time filled with petty theft, family slayings, greed, and lots of work.

Here in Urgway, it was called “The Giving”, signaling the gift of life from whatever creator people believed in. For Barker, it meant horrible amounts of paperwork and job security.

Barker flipped another page in the large folder of documents before him. It was funny how this was supposed to be a time filled with joy because it seemed that crime only escalated as families got together for the end of the year.

It was as if families weren’t meant to stay in close proximity to one another. Barker could have easily told them that long ago.

Barker flipped another note over having glanced over the case facts, but before it hit the desk he grabbed it again with his paw.

‘Solved by Vulpecula’ it read down at the bottom. A case involving an Urgway sports team and a missing hand. Who was Vulpecula?

Before he could look further into that there was a knock at the headquarter doors. The headquarters was more of a small den. The space was so narrow that the filing cabinet had to be shut before opening the door.

Barker gave a sigh. It was really a shame that Lucky wasn’t here anymore because now he had no choice but to get up and answer the door himself.

“No need to hurry there, little furry boy,” said a purple rhino.

Even without the tight compartment, getting that woman into the office was going to be a chore. Instead, Barker pushed through and stepped out into the chilly morning air. How long had he been strewing over those papers? He thought it only a few hours, but it must have been quite a few more.

“What can I do for you, Miss?” Barker left the question open-ended.

The woman didn’t seem too interested in trading pleasantries.

“You are expected here,” she thrust a small business card into Barker’s chest.

Barker didn’t move for a moment. Instead, he stared into the eyes of the pushy rhino woman. Who was she? He felt her fingers digging into his breastbone. He reached down taking the card, if for nothing else but to get her hands off him.

“What’s it for?” Barker asked.

The card read: ‘Rescue Director Vivian Herms’, Barker had heard the name.

The rescue was a group out of Italina that liked to pretend they were elite detectives. Barker didn’t give two cents to their views or ideas.

“What does she want?” Barker said and threw the card into the trash receptacle near the door.

The rhino didn’t look pleased at all. Her voice came out even huffier, but Barker could easily see the outline of a rookie patrol cop. This woman hadn’t been a detective very long and she wasn’t a very good one either, hence why she was playing messenger.

“You will meet with Director Herms,” she started then paused. She was flustered, Barker could see the evidence in her purple cheeks that looked more red than purple by now. After a few deep

breaths, she started again, “You will respect the work she had accumulated. You will be at Rescue Headquarters in Italina in three days’ time.”

The rhino said nothing else and turned on her heel walking back to the waiting taxi cab. Barker stood there for a moment and waited for the cab to disappear down the road. He then turned and removed the business card from the bin. It would do well to know the animal he was to tame.

2.

Italina was only about three hundred miles west of Urgway; meaning that three days left Barker plenty of time to get to the city. However, Barker wasn’t one for showing up to a situation without some prior knowledge of the situation.

It turned out Rescue headquarters was gigantic and also completely hidden. The building he stood in front of on the first day in Italina was not called Rescue. Instead, the front store facings read things like ‘*Mike’s Dry Cleaners*’ and ‘*Franks Chili Wieners*’, which was surprisingly quite tasty.

Barker noticed right away it was a cover for their operation. He may not have noticed to be quite fair, but that purple rhino was a hard character to miss. Barker had avoided her pretend, stern gaze, but he had seen her just fine. She had walked in through the dry cleaners and not come back out for hours. It was safe to say that this is where he would be meeting this Herms character.

Herms, it turned out was a rather skinny woman with authoritative looks and fashion. She had been the handpicked director by a fox named Noel. She had been running with the title for quite some time, but she didn’t have any big cases behind her credentials. Sure, Rescue was well known throughout the world, but Herms was relatively quiet.

Maybe that was by design, or maybe she just didn’t strive for the attention, or more likely she was a second-rate detective, who just happened to wear a golden star above her name.

Italina aside from being one of the largest cities this side of the pond wasn’t very exciting to Barker. People pushed along in packs like drones looking to get from point A to point B. There was no interaction, not like Urgway.

Urgway was full of character, most of it horrible character, but character none-the-less. There were no evident pickpockets, no shady vendors, and no questionable women. Sure, Italina still had your random homeless bloke, but really even they looked listless and deprived.

It was a wonder detectives even survived in this place. Barker had only been here two days and already he was ready to die of boredom.

Barker pushed into a small café. It wasn’t anything special. Not like his rats hole back home, but they can’t all be winners.

“Excuse me, sir,” said a funny looking bird as he passed by. Barker watched him until he sat in a booth with a white-haired character, but Barker didn’t see his face before being guided to a side booth.

Barker had picked this café to keep an eye on the storefronts. To know who was a part of this operation and who was just a decoy. He still wasn’t sure what these people wanted, but he did know he wouldn’t be caught off guard by them.

As Barker watched he continued to jot down notes. Descriptions of people he thought noteworthy. Different routes in and out of the buildings. He would see a man go into one building and an hour later exit another. That meant there were several doors and that Rescue tried to be careful about their business.

“More coffee,” the waitress asked.

Barker had already made his notes on her. She was someone he would have to take care of before he left. Waitresses didn’t do sixteen-hour shifts, and waitresses didn’t wear thousand dollar earrings. She was materialistic or undercover, and Barker had been a detective long enough to know which it was.

“No more coffee. I will need a check,” he said looking down at his watch. Best to feign needing to be somewhere else, it was a guaranteed way to be tracked and followed. She would do the job herself. She had invested too much time to be sluggish and give her glory away. Anyone who wore thousand dollar earrings liked to be the center of attention.

Rounding the corner, Barker stopped to pretend to tie his shoe. It was an easy ploy to look down and stop. The woman was down the street, exactly as he thought, trailing him to his faked meeting. It was almost too easy.

Barker stood and looked around with an air of franticness, before darting down a side alley. It was safe to bet no one would come down this way, aside from his tail. When she came not a minute later, Barker moved out from behind the small dumpster.

“Umm,” was all she mumbled.

“Don’t worry,” was all the assurance Barker would give her.

He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her into a tight embrace. Her eyes were panicky and afraid. He wasn’t going to kill her though, that was far too messy. Instead, he inserted a small needle into her neck. Just enough to keep her asleep for a little while, long enough to store her away until this venture was over.

3.

The address on the card led him to the shop fronts. Barker could have gone in through the shops and patrolled the halls of Headquarters alone. He had evaluated and discovered much about the facilities. However, that would give his one advantage away.

This group of second-rate detectives wanted something from him. Barker reached up and adjusted his collar. He would wait for them to come to him. He would stand like a lost puppy and they would come to his rescue; just as their name implied.

“Detective Barker?”

Barker turned around and came face to face with a bright-eyed cat. She protruded her hand into his airspace, but instead of shaking it he used his own paws to straighten his collar. She seemed to get the point and dropped the pretense.

“You are to come with me,” she said.

Their trip led them through the entryway of the dry cleaners. Inside, the woman gave a nod to the man at the front of the desk. The man was clearly no detective, and maybe he really did do dry cleaning. It was certain he knew what was going on around him though.

Barker was led through a rear door and then down a set of stairs.

“Where are we going?” he asked.

He didn’t need the answer, but the illusion of confusion was needed.

The Cat woman did not answer. She just opened another door at the foot of the stairs and led Barker into a small elevator. Her claws tapped on the number six. It took a moment for the elevator to react. It seemed Rescue wasn’t as lucrative as they seemed in the papers.

Barker found a reflective panel inside the box and made sure everything was up to appearance. It was best to always look your best. The cat gave a scoff behind him.

When the elevator stopped, the woman started up like she had been fired from a cannon. Barker almost darted after her. It was instinct, but he caught himself and with a dignified manner walked behind her.

They passed several small cubicles with what seemed like interns. They passed a woolly mail carrier who barked something at the cat, but if she could understand the words she was more in tune than Barker.

Finally, she stopped walking and pointed towards a small leather couch.

“Sit and wait, when Director Herms is ready, she will fetch you, boy.”

It seemed that the handshake had really flustered that cat. Barker gave a smile and sat on the couch.

“Quite the impressive resume,” said Vivian Herms.

Barker looked up as if he was bored. She hadn’t made him wait as long as he would have suspected.

“I am sure it is,” Barker said with a hint of snide.

His paw gracefully drew to his neck and he adjusted his collar standing up off the couch.

“I assume we are meeting in an office and not this dingy hall?” Barker asked.

Herms, if she was perplexed, didn't show it. Her face was still as stone and she waved him to follow.

Her office was right around the corner. It was impressive, but Barker would never admit that out loud. Her desk was bigger than Barker, Lucky, and Psitticus's desks put together; also made of real wood, not particle board. Her chair was leather and so thick with cushion that Barker was afraid when she sat she would meld into it.

“Please have a seat,” she motioned towards an equally comfy looking chair. Barker noticed this chair sat lower and bore no armrest, however. It was a statement of power. Barker was not interested in it.

“I will stand,” he replied.

Keep his head above his competitors. A king never bows and Barker was king detective in this room. Vivian for her part shrugged and took a seat.

“Have you ever considered joining a detective unit?” she asked.

Barker feigned interest in her wall décor. It was rather expensive, not that he would decorate his own walls with the choice of paintings. Half of them he couldn't understand, the other half he was sure there was nothing to understand.

“Do you enjoy paintings, Mr. Barker?”

Barker turned his eyes to Mrs. Herms and adjusted his collar.

“I detest them. A frivolous waste of money, not to mention your taste is atrocious. A third point is that all but one of these paintings is a fake,” Barker let that sit in for a minute. It seemed that Mrs. Herms was aware of the forgeries. “Your child can finger paint very nicely though,” he said, pointing to a picture on her desk.

It probably wasn't her son. It wasn't good either. But Vivian did not correct him.

“You solved the case of the Water Lily quite astutely. You have solved many cases over the past few years just the same. In Uruguay, you are called the great detective. You have potential, but you need guidance.”

Vivian closed his file that had been open on her desk. She had studied him as he had her. The unfair part was that he was much better at it.

“You seem to have no records at all, Mrs. Herms. Retired before your prime? Director duties so piled that you do not participate in the activities of your firm anymore?”

Barker moved away from the desk. His back was turned to her. She could play her power card, but Barker refused to be cowered by it. Instead, he would frustrate her and let her make her grasp.

“It is my job to make sure this place runs to full efficiency, Mr. Barker. This is why you are here today. I see you are not interested in banter. You are not interested in Rescue, but Rescue is interested in you. You came to our offices under request, which can only mean that somewhere deep down you are at least curious.”

Barker straightened his collar. She played it well. He gave her kudos for that much. He turned and walked over to the chair, placing his paws on its back.

“What is it that Rescue needs Vivian?”

He wanted to throw her off. Break her cool, but the use of her first name did not break her mold. She played the banter well.

“There is a case that has us perplexed. It should be something simple and yet, it isn't.”

Vivian opened another folder that sat to the left of his own. She skimmed thru it and stopped somewhere in the middle.

“Read,” she said and flipped the folder towards Barker.

He hesitated a moment. Did he want to get trapped into something? What was her play? He paused a moment too long and felt the heat rising in him. He stepped forward. There on the table was a simple heading.

‘Someone stole The Giving and killed the Giver.’ Barker had no idea what it meant. But under the heading was a small checklist of clues. He scanned them. They were useless. It seemed that someone had killed the company Giver. But where Barker fit into the point of this charade he wasn’t sure.

‘I know you work in Urgway as a special case detective, Mr. Barker,’ she kept his title in the name, ‘I want you to do the same for Rescue. Someone in the facility is a murderer and I want you to find them.’

Barker wasn’t much for independent cases. Even in Urgway, he turned down hundreds of assignments. That, needless to say, really scoffed ole Psitticus. Something about this, though, seemed off already. Something about Rescue bringing in an independent contract seemed odd.

‘Why not one of your detectives?’ Barker asked.

‘Easy, one of them is the culprit,’ she said.

4.

Vivian Herms had expected an answer of yes from Barker. Sadly, Barker could not disappoint her. Not because the initial case interested him. That wasn’t it at all. He didn’t care who the man in the Giver suit was. He didn’t care about Rescue’s rogue detective. What he cared about was something deeper in this plot. The Rescue was trying to test him and he wanted to know why.

That is the only reason Barker accepted the small cubicle, of an office. The perks were that even with a small cubicle Herms had okayed his request for one of those comfy cushions. Barker wondered now how he had ever sat in a chair before this.

He finally leaned forward and touched his collar. What idiot in Rescue committed a crime in their own headquarters? It was up to him to find that out he assumed. The folder wasn’t very thick; it was only about twenty pages of notes.

Barker started at page one but soon got bored with the overview. Whoever wrote the reports was dryer than a dirt cake. He moved on to the crime scene report.

It turned out that the Giver had been found inside his dressing room. It turned out the dressing room was only actually a storage closet. Barker made a note to see the place. The next note said that the body was still in-house. Down in the morgue, he would have to see the body as well.

The next few pages were pictures of the body and room after the crime scene. He noted the blood pattern. If the Giver was killed there, he was killed by someone much shorter than he was. Barker made a note of the Giver's height. Only six foot, that only narrowed out the taller co-workers. Or it narrowed no one out, if the really tall folks understood blood splatter, then maybe they stabbed underhanded with the intention of deceit. Were Rescue detectives that clever? It was worth a jot in the ole notes.

The rest of the folder was suspects and motives. Someone had started the legwork before Herms got the bright idea to bring in private help. Barker would read those later. He would get his own facts first.

Barker shut the folder and put it in one of the desk drawers. Now, the hard part of the day, getting up out of this cushioned chair; no wonder Psitticus used the hardwood seats.

Barker pushed himself up with a sigh of displeasure. Working was his least favorite part of the job. Being a detective had its perks, but figuring out why people did things was not one of them.

People were complex creatures. They killed, stole, maimed, abused all for different reasons. These reasons rarely made sense to anyone but the actual culprit. To the outside world, it seemed like pointless violence or stupid decisions. Barker found it hard to argue with that logic, most criminals were stupid. That didn’t mean they had to be though.

Barker’s first stop was the storage room.

The storage area happened to be about as large as Barker's office back in Urgway. It wasn’t a normal mop and bucket type storage either, it was mostly filled with hordes of old boxes. Barker thumbed through a few of them, finding nothing but old solved cases and evidence. There were probably hundreds of these storage areas throughout the buildings. This didn’t seem like a particularly special room.

The murder had happened, according to the papers, two days prior to Barker arriving. Someone had already run through the room with cleaning supplies, ruining anything Barker would have gotten in terms of crime scene analyses. One thing was obvious though, these boxes were not splattered with blood at all. To have been so meticulous to change all the boxes in the room seemed odd. It also seemed like it would have taken longer to take each item from the boxes of previous and place them into these new ones. Barker made a mental note of it; just another thing to add to the odd case.

Finding nothing of note inside the storage area, Barker went to the break room. He had not had a chance to evaluate the suspects. He had only met a handful of employees for Rescue at all. He doubted Vivian Herms was a suspect; she had hired him after-all. The Rhino woman was too prude to wield a knife. Although, he wouldn't be surprised to learn she overzealously shot someone. However, he mentally marked them both off his list.

There was then, the cat who had guided him into the building. There was motive; they were sending her on errands. A gofer, when she probably longed to be an important detective. It was doubtful she would ever reach that pinnacle with her advancing age.

Barker had also passed a mail carrier, but he doubted that the fat beast of a man could have actually fit into the storage room, and he was much too tall, for the splatter pattern.

Barker poured himself a cup of coffee and stared at his reflection in the clean mug. He was the greatest detective in Uruguay; he had no doubt about that. He was the most handsome as well; there was no arguing that fact. However, this building was new. Were Rescue detectives better than he was? Barker almost let out a laugh but held it in.

He was glad he had as two detectives walked into the room.

"You must be the detective Herms announced," said an ugly, mangy looking goat. "Surprising really, Rescue isn't too keen on hounds," he finished.

Barker let the comment move passed him. He wasn't going to have a verbal dispute with such a creature. The other individual was taller and sheepish. She gave a poke to the goat's ribs.

"Sorry," he added.

But he wasn't sorry. Barker knew that Rescue had their disputes with his kind. He knew that from the history he had read. That just added to the oddness of bringing him in. He said nothing to the two employees and took his coffee with him out of the room.

He didn't need to talk to them to realize they didn't have the brains or courage to commit murder. It took a harder personality and the goat was rude, but not brave. The sheep was too quick to not offend.

Barker took a sip of his coffee and threw it in the trash. Rescue had a lot of disappointments racking up.

The morgue was less than accommodating. Two guards had been posted at the entrance to a long corridor. The arrow directed Barker towards the morgue, but the two bison of men wouldn't let him through.

"I have clearance from the director Vivian Herms," Barker said.

The two men traded glances. Barker thought that would be enough to get him through into the hallway, but he had been wrong.

"I do believe we have something for you," one of the bison's said. "I will retrieve it for you."

Barker didn't bother fighting with them. He couldn't take down two behemoths. Instead, he straightened his collar and tried to get a glimpse of anything through the pane of glass on the door. There was nothing to be seen. He wondered why Herms even had him on this case. Not a single other detective seemed to be alarmed that he was investigating the murder. Not a single one of them seemed to be out of the loop. The only confused detective in the building seemed to be Barker.

The bison returned a minute later holding a small folder.

"There is something in here that Mrs. Herms wished for you to browse over," he said and thrust the folder into Barker's chest.

Barker was tired of the Rescue employee's attitude. Not a single one of them had ever been outside this building it seemed. He made a mental note on the guards. If all else failed then he would just make sure that they committed the crime. It was a win, win situation that way.

Barker took the folder and returned back to his small cubicle. The item that had been important to Mrs. Herms turned out to be more photos. This time it was something that was useful to Barker.

The man in the pictures was the supposed victim. The victim that had died two days prior to Barker arriving and a day prior to Barker's investigation on Rescue from the diner. The man was without his costume in the photos. There were clear puncture wounds across his chest and arms.

But Barker wasn't interested in the pictures for their evidence to the supposed case. He was far more interested in the man's face. Barker closed the folder. There were a lot of weird things going on at Rescue headquarters.

One thing that was certain, however, Barker had just solved another case.

5.

Vivian Herms was dressed in a long grey skirt and matching button-up blouse. To Barker, it seemed she had stuffed herself into a too tight trash bag, but he knew enough about Italina to know this was supposed to emulate power.

"So, you said you had some important news to share with us?"

Vivian walked around to the corner of the desk and leaned back. Barker had indeed told Mrs. Herms to procure her important individuals and bring them into the conference room. He would enlighten them on his findings there.

Barker had solved the case last night. It had only taken a single piece of evidence. It was really quite sad that it had come to this. That Rescue would even bother with a charade on this level.

Barker fixed his collar.

"It has come to my attention," Barker stood to his feet, pushing the chair back into the table, "That this operation is run quite poorly." He let his eyes rove around to each of them in turn. He didn't know the others, but he didn't care to know them either. "This operation is left to amateur detectives, who find it amusing perhaps?" Barker let the question hang.

"What are you getting at, Detective?" Vivian Herms had stopped her lax posture. She now stood to her full height and puffed her chest in some attempt at grandeur.

"Do you assume, Mrs. Herms, that I am a simpleton?" Barker asked her.

Vivian's mask slipped for a moment, but she recovered quite nicely. "What are you getting at, Detective?" she asked again.

Barker walked around the table. Fixing his collar, he stopped at a painting on the conference walls.

"It seems that none of the art in this building is real," he said putting a claw to the canvas. "It follows that this council probably isn't real," he turned towards them. The men and women seated did not bother to proffer any evidence to the otherwise.

"I am not sure I like these accusations, Mr. Barker," Herms was getting perturbed, it was evident in her voice.

Barker turned and fixed his collar.

"I am not inclined to care what you think at all. You brought me here to solve a case. Do you want the conclusion or not?"

Vivian waved her hand in response. Barker concluded that she no longer trusted her own voice to give the message.

"Well, evidence led me to conclude several things upon inspection. One piece of evidence was that there was no murder at all here in this building." Barker tried to gauge the faces of those around the table, but they showed no emotion. It was all the response he needed, however.

Vivian Herms stayed unnaturally quiet.

“I witnessed your dead Giver, three days ago now, leaving the dry cleaners downstairs. It would be quite hard to walk with the unfortunate case of being dead he was supposedly suffering from,” Barker paused to fix his collar, “It was easy to see that the closet where this supposed murder occurred was retrofitted to seem like an evidence bay, but you forgot to dirty up the boxes. It would seem like the first thing you would have done, but nevertheless. It wasn’t the ultimate clue. The ultimate clue was the picture folder. The angle of the knife cuts did not match the blood splatter, and the face matched a man who I knew to be alive.”

Barker stopped pacing, which he had not even noticed he started. Now, he stood, staring right into the eyes of the Director of Rescue, Vivian Herms. She stood stoically still. The others at the table did not meet the gaze of his eyes.

“That isn’t the most damning thing about this whole charade though, is it, Mrs. Herms?”

Vivian Herms shook her head and put on a smile.

“They said you were good, Mr. Barker, but I had to assume they were just tooting horns. You have not disappointed, however. The board here is willing to offer you a place at Rescue due to your particular set of skills.”

Barker interrupted.

“You assume that after trying to play the world’s worst trick upon me that I would harbor any desire to attach myself to the name of Rescue?”

Vivian looked to start with her reply, but Barker held up his paw.

“That isn’t all. Vivian, I know that this isn’t Rescue headquarters. The place is a dump. I know that the detectives out there aren’t detectives they couldn’t act their way out of a wet paper bag. These board members may as well be cardboard cutouts. The only thing real here is you and that purple rhino who invited me.”

Vivian’s smile faded, “Well, you are good aren’t you?”

Barker nodded his head. “I am the best, I would brag further, but I am no longer interested in this acting. Instead, I will assume you had a point for all of this and allow you a moment to gather your thoughts, before letting me in on the whole story.”

Mrs. Herms gave a subtle clap, “Even I am impressed. I have worked with some of the world’s best detectives over my time as Director, I am not sure they would have had the wherewithal to figure this out so quickly, or maybe they would have just lacked the gall to call us out in such a manner. Either way, kudos to you, Mr. Barker, you are correct in the assessment on all fronts.” Vivian walked over to an empty chair and sat down. “You all can leave now, your checks will be deposited into the accounts as arranged prior.” The council of actors stood and left the room, leaving Barker and Herms alone.

“Please do sit, Mr. Barker,” Herms said and pulled a folder from under the table.

Barker yearned for that cushion on his backside, so he sat. He didn’t do it to please anyone but himself, or at least that was his own personal excuse for the act.

“Have you ever heard of the group The Shock?”