

Part 2: Victims

"Did you have this dry cleaned?" Robert took his plastic-wrapped suit jacket from Sue's outstretched arms.

She glanced away to hide her blush. "Uh, yes."

"Well, gosh, Sue, how uncharacteristically nice of you!" She could hear a smile in his voice and not a hint of sarcasm. "What happened anyway? Did you spill something on it?" He held up the coat and squinted at it.

"Yes—yes, I dumped some juice on it."

"What kind of juice?" He scrutinized it further.

Sue felt herself starting to sweat.

Oh, God, what if the cleaners didn't take care of the smell?

"What does it matter?"

He put the coat over his arm. "I guess it doesn't—hey, why are you being so defensive all of a sudden?"

The sound of a ringing bell made them both turn. Though she was thankful that the conversation was interrupted, Sue's lip curled up as she saw one of the new "postal-pets" scampering down the hall towards them. The large, silver bell attached to her shock collar jingled merrily with every movement she made, announcing her presence to anyone nearby. Ostensibly the idea was to alert anyone who needed to send a physical message that she was there, but Sue was certain that like most things in the ComPet program it was just there to add humiliation to the experience.

The postal-pet panted as she scurried as fast as she apparently could while stuck on all fours and with her hands and feet trapped in padded paw mittens and slippers. She was drenched with sweat and her blonde hair was plastered to her head, the pointy dog ears attached to the top of her head were slightly lopsided, and she had tears in her eyes. The pathetic mess scuttled to the front of Mr. Cross' office door. She took a moment to catch her breath and then started pawing at the door while whining loudly. Sue noticed that the pet's exposed backside was red and bruised just like her large breasts—probably from being grouped and swatted dozens of times each day, which wasn't supposed to be allowed by policy, but it was awfully difficult for pet girls to report harassment as they weren't allowed to talk. What made it worse was that like all postal-posts she wore a brightly colored tag which clearly read, "Please don't pet me! I'm working!"

Sue wasn't supposed to feel sorry for her or for the postal-pets in general. That was policy too. Each one of them had been convicted of various minor, pet-related crimes, so she

was supposed to think that they deserved everything that they got. Sue looked up at Robert who was also watching the pet. He had the same inscrutable expression that he'd had the night he looked at the discolored young woman in the pen. Was he amused, bemused, enticed? Sue couldn't tell and it annoyed her. It annoyed her more that he was spending so much time staring regardless of what he was thinking.

After several long moments, the door opened and Mr. Cross, the boss, popped his bald mustachioed head out into the hall. He glanced left, then right, and finally down.

"Well if it isn't my favorite little messenger, Tater Tots!" He smiled, ruffled her hair and then reached down and squeezed one of her breasts hard enough to make her squeak. "I can see these have been getting you a lot of attention! I can't say I'd blame all your adoring fans!" He laughed and pulled a small bone-shaped dog treat from his pocket.

The pet's eyes locked onto the treat. She sat up and begged while drool dripped down the corners of her mouth. She was clearly famished. Sue knew that the standard practice was to only feed puppy girls twice a day. She also knew that postal-pets were often punished for bad behavior or not making deliveries on time by having their meals reduced or even cut entirely. Mr. Cross watched her jiggle as she bounced for nearly a full minute with a smile on his face. Then he glanced at his watch.

"Oh, oopse, it looks like you were almost thirty seconds late on your delivery, Tater Tots! I'd love to give you a treat, but I can't! Maybe move that bubble butt of yours a little faster next time!" He shrugged and put the treat away.

The pet's face fell.

Mr. Cross glanced towards Sue and Robert. "Well, I think that's enough fun for now, present!"

"Woof..." the dejected postal-pet shuddered, then she quickly turned her backside toward Mr. Cross and lowered her face to the ground presenting not only her tail to him, but also the secure "mail slot" hollow cylinder that had been securely stuffed in her anus as part of her specialized pet gear.

Mr. Cross looked at the tag hanging from the pet's tail then popped the clamp on the lid of the slot. The pet whined quietly as Mr. Cross fumbled indelicately and pulled a smaller, reddish, metal cylinder—a mail knot—from the slot. He unscrewed the top and pulled several papers from the knot before returning it to the slot.

Mr. Cross gave Tater Tots a firm slap on the behind to punctuate his command. "Up, girl!"

The rose shakily as Mr. Cross reached for a length of chain hanging from the wall. "I'm going to need you to wait here, Tater Tots," he murmured and attached the chain to her collar leaving her barely enough slack to reach the stainless steel water dish by the door.

“Jericho! Sharp! Come on in!” He beckoned Sue and Robert.

There was a part of Sue that wished that the postal-pet hadn’t interrupted. After what she’d done on top of the coat a few nights before she could barely look Robert in the eye let alone hold a conversation with him. Yet, there was a part of her that desperately wanted to blurt it out to him and to whoever was in the hall at the time.

Robert! I played with myself like a dirty dog on top of your coat while I imagined you fucking me from behind! I did it three times because I have no self-control!

Of course she kept that part buried deep. More innocently, she wanted to tell Robert that she’d spent the previous three days practicing self-defense with one of the instructors at the department gym, working hard so that he wouldn’t have to save her again. Maybe she wanted him to know that she did take her job seriously, or maybe she just wanted a pat on the head. Either way she was sure that no matter how hard she tried, no matter how perfectly she imagined the conversation; somehow the interaction would turn sour because she just didn’t know how to talk to him.

Robert stopped abruptly in the doorway to Mr. Cross’ office, making Sue almost crash into his back. He sighed and knelt down next to the pet.

“What are you doing?” Sue asked.

Robert picked up the water dish and spun it around between his fingers to show that it was bone dry. He walked to the nearby water fountain, filled it up, and gently set it back down in front of the postal-pet. She barked happily then lapped at the water while wagging her tail in the air.

Sue opened her mouth to say something, but Mr. Cross spoke first. “You’re all heart, Jericho—a real pet hugger, you know that? Don’t spoil her too much though. She defaced three ComPet posters at a local shopping center, you know. As far as I’m concerned she got off easy with a six month sentence!”

Robert shrugged and went into the office. Sue followed. She was really impressed with his show of kindness, and a bit embarrassed that she hadn’t thought to refill the poor pet’s empty water dish herself.

As they took their seats, Mr. Cross pulled a folder from the side of his messy, paper strewn desk and added the documents he’d taken from the mail-knot.

“I wanted to congratulate you both again on that smuggler bust.” He paused and rubbed his forehead. “I only wish that were the end of it.” He opened the folder and set it in front of Sue and Robert. There was a portrait photo a young woman on top of stack of papers inside the folder. She looked to be in her early twenties, with long hair that couldn’t decide if it wanted to be light brown or dark blonde.

Sue did a double take at the picture. She imagined the face covered with an inch of dirt and grime, the hair tangled and frizzy, and the eyes one part empty and one part wild. She looked up at Mr. Cross.

"This is the woman we rescued?" It wasn't really a question as much as it was an expression of disbelief.

Mr. Cross nodded and read from his computer screen.

"Miss Chelsea Adams, sophomore at Thompson University, 3.98 grade point average, double major in chemistry and biology, captain of the university debate and lacrosse teams...the list of her accomplishments goes on, but the point is, you've seen what she looks like now."

He flipped to the next photo in the folder. It was time-stamped right after the smuggler bust and the contrast was night and day. Chelsea seemed to stare back at Sue; her once bright, intelligent eyes glazed over and empty while her tongue hung out with a long string of drool trailing from the tip and out of the boundaries of the photograph. The flash of the camera had highlighted the strange, unnatural purple discoloration across her nose, and the yellow evidence sticker stretched across her dirt-smudged forehead, was a mockery of her former self.

"Jesus..." Sue shook her head.

"Any ideas what happened to her?" Robert asked.

"We're working on that, but there's something you should both see." Mr. Cross flipped to another pair of photos. The first was of another smiling young woman, blonde and tan like a girl lucky enough to spend Spring break some place warm and expensive. The second picture showed her naked, dirty, drooling, empty-eyed, and discolored just like Chelsea.

"This was Miss Becky Garrison, freshman at Thompson University, 3.0 grade point average, majoring in marketing, and a cheerleader...not as accomplished as Miss Adams, but as you can see from the pictures and the report, she was found in basically the same state, but wandering the streets and trying to hump every leg she saw."

Sue looked up from the report. "This says you found Becky Garrison four weeks ago. Why haven't we heard about this until today?"

"The boys down in forensics thought it might have been an isolated case. You know, some dumb little college girl decides she's going to try some pills in the backroom at a party...but then she didn't recover, and after they compared her with Chelsea Adams it became pretty clear something bigger was happening." Mr. Cross cleared his throat. "That and they both disappeared on the intercity train system. In fact, there's been a rash of pretty, young things matching their profiles going missing from the train—six in fact, with the last having just been reported a week ago."

He shuffled the papers to a third report. The girl was pretty like all the rest, with light brown hair, striking, bright, green eyes and rosy cheeks. Her name was Valarie Cooper. According to her boyfriend, one Thomas Schmidt, they had been traveling to Central City for a little get away. Sue's heart ached when she read the last part of the report.

As if this wasn't depressing enough... "Schmidt stated that he was going to propose to 'Val' at dinner the night they arrived in the city."

Robert leaned back in his chair. "So, we've got a serial kidnapper grabbing college girls off trains and turning them into..."

"We're just calling them 'victims' for now. Yes, Jericho, that's what we suspect and what you're both going to confirm."

"Is this really in the Human Pet Protection Service's purview?" Robert glanced over at Sue. "Abductions really are a police matter, don't you think?"

Before Sue could fire back at Robert for trying to cut her out of the case, Mr. Cross nodded and replied, "You'd think that, but given the animal-like state of the victims and the fact that they've been easy prey for pet smugglers, it has been determined by the higher-ups that this falls under our organization's jurisdiction."

"Fair enough."

"Well, now that that is settled," Mr. Cross continued, "we're putting you both on a simple sting operation. Sharp, you'll be posing as a student from a local university to 'entice' our target."

Sue wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea, but dressing up like a college student from a local university was at least a hundred steps up from posing as a service animal! After all, she'd been a student just a little over a year prior, so it wasn't exactly a stretch.

"Detective Jericho will be posing as your tutor and will make the arrest if the suspect chooses to move on you."

Despite the seriousness of the situation, and her desire to see justice for the victims, Sue felt sudden warmth run through her at the thought of Robert *tutoring* her.

"Get down to the HPPS forensic lab and talk to them first. When you've finished there, return to your office to pick up your disguises. They've been prepared specially for both of you. When you're ready, head down to Main Street Station and board the south train. With any luck when you disembark it'll be with the suspect in custody."

Sue had been quiet on the walk down to the forensic lab. She couldn't get the images of Chelsea, Becky, and 'Val' out of her head. Just before they went inside, Robert put his hand on the door. "Hey, I know what it's like to be really invested in something, but don't get too personally involved in this case."

Sue put her hands on her hips. "What do you mean?"

"I saw the way you were looking at those pictures and I know what you're probably thinking. They're not you, Sue."

Sue was taken aback. She wasn't used to people paying close enough attention to attempt to guess her motivations, let alone get them right. She suddenly felt more vulnerable to Robert than she had when he was the one holding her leash while she pathetically crawled next to his heel. She had seen herself in the faces of the victims. All their potential—their identities, their hopes, their dreams, were all gone. That wasn't the worst part though, at least not for her. Their personhoods were stolen from them by some sick bastard, while she kept fantasizing about giving up her personhood voluntarily. It made her hate herself.

She felt herself about to lash out, but she took a deep breath and simply said, "I can handle it, Detective Jericho."

Even though the badge clipped to his lab coat read "Research and Development" Dr. Hampton *looked* like he belonged in the forensic lab. The drab colors he wore and his shockingly benign and un-offensive short haircut made him look as if he could sit on the supply shelves comfortably and blend in with beakers, slides and microscopes.

When Robert and Sue offered their hands to shake he held up his own hands as if in lazy surrender and smiled. "Oh, no, I never shake hands, thank you!" There was a moment of awkward silence before he spoke again. "You're here about our two little mystery doggos, no?"

They both nodded.

"Yes, well, I can fill you both in on what we know so far. There's a chemical compound in the systems of both specimens. We haven't identified it fully yet, but we've mapped some consistent symptoms between the two victims...say, you're the one I designed that special, Morse code tail for, right?" He pointed at Sue in sudden recognition. "How did that work out?"

Robert snickered behind her.

Blushing, Sue ground her teeth. "Oh, it worked just *great*. You should try it out for yourself sometime!"

"Why on Earth would I need to try it out?" Dr. Hampton seemed genuinely confused. "Er...where was I? Yes, consistent symptoms in both victims..."

He motioned the pair to a nearby observation window that looked over a sterile, brightly lit, white room with two small animal pens occupying the far corners. Inside the pens were the former students—the victims—Chelsea Adams and Becky Garrison. They were still as animal-like and vacant-eyed as before, but at least both were clean and groomed. Sue also noticed that they both sported official ComPet collars, brands, and ear tags.

“Doctor, why are they tagged—why are they here and not in a proper hospital?” Sue asked.

“They’re evidence, Miss Sharp. Evidence *needs* to be catalogued or it can easily become lost! Besides that, our facility can meet their new care requirements far better than a human hospital would!”

Sue shivered. There wasn’t a trace of irony in his response. She tried not to think about what would happen to them after the investigation had concluded.

“So, what are these symptoms?” Robert asked.

“Ah, yes, their sense of smell, specifically related to one thing has increased by almost forty times. Look at this.” Dr. Hampton pressed a few buttons on a nearby keyboard and a small silver tube extended from the ceiling between the pens. After a few moments, both Chelsea and Becky started barking and jumping frantically against the clear, plexiglass walls of their pens, both of them desperate to get to the pipe. Within moments both were visibly dripping down the inside of their thighs as they whined and pressed against the barriers keeping them from their desire.

“What’s coming out of that pipe?” Sue asked. She was transfixed with their behavior. Even though they were under bright lights and being watched by many people they were utterly shameless.

“Male pheromones,” Dr. Hampton proclaimed. “In his report, Detective Jericho described the second victim as being *very* interested in his genitals.”

“Well, I didn’t put it that way!” Robert quickly answered.

She smirked. Robert was blushing. He was so cool and in control most of the time. It was nice to see a little chink in his armor every once in awhile, though if she were to be completely honest with herself, she still preferred him when he *was* in control. Still, she snickered loudly enough to get a glare from him.

“We also noticed that the first victim seemed to get very excited whenever she was being examined or cared for by a male tech. They can’t get enough of it! Why just yesterday we did this throughout the day for various lengths of time with the longest duration being a full hour. We gave them both limited breaks in-between exposure and both of them *a/ways* acted this way with the same desperation and the same intensity. It’s quite amazing really. Even with the highest-grade petsitter managing her, and months of obedience training under a first-class

trainer, even a ComPet with an above average libido prior to being drafted doesn't have this kind of *eagerness*. Whoever made this chemical is truly an artist!"

We're supposed to be doing an investigation and this guy wants to admire the psychopaths who did this?

Dr. Hampton continued. He explained that whatever the chemical compound was it altered the brain, destroying many of the higher functions, and shorting out the nerves in the hands and disrupting the balance. He described the effects with clinical detachment that slowly morphed into what could only be described as fascination.

"What about the crime scenes?" Robert interrupted.

Clearly annoyed at losing his momentum, Dr. Hampton took a moment to change gears. "After the most recent kidnapping of that—Cooper girl, yes—the victim's clothes were found stuffed in a lavatory trash can along with some trace amounts of fluids. They're still in the process of being analyzed, but we hope to have the DNA of whoever might be responsible and possibly a clean sample of whatever drug is doing this."

"The victim's clothes?" Sue asked, feeling ill. "But how would he have gotten her out of the train in front of all those people...naked?"

Dr. Hampton shrugged. "I wouldn't know."

Robert and Sue exchanged looks and then agreed that it was time to go.