

Part 6: The Cafe

With the rich smell of coffee in the air, soft, golden lighting warming the old, red brick walls, and smooth hardwood floors, the café would have been nice if it weren't for its clientele. They reminded Robert of why he avoided pet girl-related establishments. He was filled with contempt for men who had to buy a woman and annoyance that the losers didn't even know how to handle them. Watching from the table he'd picked mostly for the vantage point, he watched all kinds of mishandling. One puppy girl with dark brown hair and olive skin looked very dehydrated as she lay on her side, her eyes a little glassy and her tongue hanging out, while she panted weakly next to an empty water dish. Her owner ignored her while he idly stared at his phone. It was a clear case of neglect. Another owner carelessly allowed his black skinned, curly haired pup to sit at his feet without attaching her leash to one of the convenient hooks included on the sides of all the tables. With the leash end just sitting in his lap, she could have easily pulled away and tripped staff walking through the aisle between tables. It was all around annoying and there was nothing he could do about it without drawing attention to himself.

"Have you decided, sir?" A pretty waitress approached him for the third time. Not having a cent on him, Robert could sense his stalling wouldn't last much longer.

"Well, darling, how about a glass of water with lemon for me and a bowl full of cold water for my little mutt here?"

The waitress didn't look amused, but replied, "Yes, sir, coming right up."

"Oh, and I changed my mind, go ahead and bring me a food menu." He pointed at Sue. "Y'all got kibble for her, right?"

"Yes, sir, we have wet and dry in six different flavors. I can bring you a doggy menu too if you like."

"That'd be great!" Robert grinned.

Moments after the waitress walked away, Sue laid her chin on his knee, startling him. She motioned with her paw that he should lean closer.

When he did she whispered, "I am *not* eating dog food!"

"Hush."

Someone cleared their throat behind him. Robert looked up at a giant of a man who seemed to have stepped up on him from out of nowhere.

"Nice, pup, what's her name?" There was a bulge around the left pocket of his three quarter length coat. If the bulge wasn't a gun, it sure was gun-shaped.

Robert sat back. "Muffy," he replied.

"Ha, cute name! Listen..." the large man gestured with his pocket. "I've got some friends in the back of the store that would love to meet both of you. How does that sound?"

Robert looked at Sue to reassure her, but he wasn't so sure of the situation himself. At least, he reasoned, they were in the right place.

He tried to play unconcerned. "Sure, sounds fun."

With the man following close behind, Robert and Sue made their way into the back of the establishment through several heavy, metal doors and into a large, half-empty storage room. Next to stacks of boxes, there was a row of cots and a makeshift kitchen against the wall. Two young women sat on one of the cots talking quietly and a third one was microwaving something in the kitchenette.

"Well, if it isn't the big bad detective and his itty bitty little helper!"

Robert recognized the coldness and odd cadence of the voice that greeted them. Sue stopped dead in her tracks and looked up at him, her face full of worry. A tall woman dressed in black with auburn hair tied back in a tight ponytail stepped out of the adjoining room with a wicked grin on her face. It was Sapphire, the woman who'd tried to stomp Sue to death months before.

"I can't say I'm happy to see either of you, but...here you are." She bent down and gave Sue a mocking look. "You end up on all fours so often, if I didn't know any better I'd say you like dressing up as a puppy!" Sue looked away, but Sapphire grabbed her face and made the smaller woman look her in the eye. "You should know that it was your fake gear that tipped us off, right sweetie?" She yanked on Sue's ear. "No tag." Then she slapped Sue across the ass making her yelp. "No brand!"

Robert stiffened and Sapphire looked back at him. "Counterfeit puppy gear is a felony is it not, detective?"

"It is. Why don't you call a cop?" Robert quipped, only to get pistol whipped by the large man behind him. Robert grunted and dropped to his knees clutching the back of his head.

"You show the lady some respect, asshole!" The man thundered.

Robert slowly stood back up as he pulled his hand away from the back of his head. He narrowed his eyes at the red smear across his fingers.

"That's enough!" Sapphire held up a hand. "As much as I'd like to see you both get the long, drawn-out torture you deserve for supporting the system, we're on a tight schedule." She called to the three other women, "Ladies, we've got to move out soon, but come over here first."

Sapphire reached out to her partner and said, "Give me the gun." The gun passed hands quickly as the three other women came over to join them. "Since I already got to have my fun with that hu-vet, I think it's only fair that I should let one of you have the chance to feel the same thing by killing these two."

Robert felt his fists tighten. He didn't have an individual—a face—to hate for killing Ed until that moment. All of his anger from earlier returned, but he still had the good sense to realize that it wasn't yet his moment.

The three women all looked shocked at Sapphire's offer. The first one to speak was a particularly striking redhead. Having looked at the files of each puppy girl that had been "stolen" from Ed's clinic, he recognized her as Juliet Walsh, or "Lilly" as she'd been renamed in the service. Before she opened her mouth, Robert took note of her and Sue staring intensely back and forth at each other as if they recognized each other. He wondered if they had a history of some sort.

"Hey, I just wanted to go free, I—I think I speak for all of us when I say, we're not murderers."

Sapphire's eyes flashed with anger. "These are the people that help support the system that enslaved you, humiliated you, *and violated* you! Break out of the cage that they put around your body *and* your mind! You don't have to submit to them anymore!"

Juliette shook her head. "Can't we just go?"

Sapphire flipped the gun around and pushed the handle at Juliette. "Take it!"

Juliette shook her head. "No," she said firmly.

As they pushed the gun back and forth, Robert saw his opportunity, but so did Sue. Even before he could act, she leapt up and bit Sapphire's hand making her scream. The gun clattered to the floor. His moment had finally come. Robert wheeled around, grabbed the large man's lapels and flipped him in one smooth, powerful motion. The man slammed against the concrete and moaned in a deep daze.

Sapphire clutched her hand and ran back into the adjoining room. Robert scooped up the gun before anyone else could. He aimed in Sapphire's direction and was ready to pull the trigger, but she was already out of his line of sight. He heard the crash of a metal outer door opening and slamming shut. Wasting no time, he grabbed a knife from the kitchenette counter and cut Sue's restraints. He shoved the gun into her freed hands, "Here, keep this on them. Don't let them leave!" He ordered before taking off after Sapphire.

Sapphire was fast and had a head start, but he was faster and he had a purpose. He didn't feel the fatigue in his muscles or the burning in his lungs as he pursued his prey across the dying tall grass of an open field and up into the hills south of town.

When Sapphire reached the top of the hill, she stopped in front of a deep, rocky ravine. There was a rushing river at the bottom. It made for a natural and difficult-to-cross border. Breathing heavily, Sapphire turned around and glared fiercely at Robert. He returned her gaze with a stony expression that denied all the anger he felt inside.

"There's nowhere left to run, girly. You're going to pay for what you did."

"I don't need to run. She reached down and picked up a stick and swung it experimentally."

"I'm not going to fight a girl." Robert dismissed her, but she swung at him anyway.

Robert leapt back and avoided the swing. The branch whistled menacingly through the air.

"How about now?" She grinned and swung again, narrowly missing his head.

Still keeping his distance and circling with his hands protectively out in front of him he shook his head.

Clearly angry at his disregard, she lunged forward with another wild, overhead attack. Robert waited until she hit the ground and then stomped on the branch so hard that it was ripped from her white-knuckled grip. With her disarmed, Robert tackled her and then pinned her on the ground.

"Let go of me, you bastard!" She snarled.

Robert looked at her as she struggled violently, spitting and cursing the whole time. He thought that if there was justice in the world then Ed and she would have switched places. If there was justice then Sapphire wouldn't have gone through everything to make her so crazy. He didn't want to kill her anymore. He felt sorry for her, but that didn't mean he would let her go. He'd do what a police officer was supposed to do and let the law handle it.

"Calm down...Calm down, girl!" He used his trainer's voice. The tone seemed to speak to something deep inside Sapphire's mind as she stopped struggling for a moment.

"We're going to stand up..." Holding her wrist, he stood up and dragged her to her feet. He twisted her arm behind her and grabbed the back of her auburn hair making her grunt. "That's a good girl..." He praised. "I'm not going to hurt you. Now let's get back to your friends..."

At the mention of "get back" Sapphire suddenly stiffened. She put her foot between Robert's feet and kicked up into his crotch making him grunt and let go of her.

Sapphire's anger and intensity had been replaced by a look of pure fear and panic. "No, I won't go back! I won't go back!" She screamed and ran for the ravine.

Robert tried to stop her, but she ripped past him and jumped. Time seemed to slow down as he watched Sapphire spin in the air and fall down and down through the giant crack in the earth. The moment passed and she hit the water. Robert stared down at the raging river peppered with sharp rocks jutting out at odd and dangerous angles. One way or another, Sapphire was gone, maybe forever, or maybe just for a little while. Only time would tell.

Realizing that Sue would be waiting, Robert hurried back to the pet café. When he jogged through the door, he found Sue standing over the large man. He looked to be securely bound by her wraps. Everything was where it should be, except the gun and the three missing pups were conspicuously absent.

Before Robert could ask the only relevant question, Sue said flatly, "I let them go."

"What?" Robert exclaimed. "Why?"

"I couldn't send them back. I just..."

"Christ, Sue, do you know..." He stopped. Of course she knew. "You shouldn't have done that. They were legally the property of the program!"

"I don't care! How can you even talk about what's legal after what we did? How can you call them property? You called it 'cruel' but you want to send them back?"

"That's not what I meant..."

"What did you mean, *detective*?"

Epilogue

A few days after the incident at the Perk and Pup, Robert and Sue stood at attention in front of their chief, Mr. Cross. He'd talked for a while, but the short of it was that they were both in a lot of trouble. There was no sign of Sapphire, alive or dead. Though it was assumed she was the latter, the large man they took into custody in the back of the coffee shop insisted that a mere fall wouldn't have gotten her.

"So, there it is, you went against the orders of the Central City PD and the FBP, and *my* orders. You interfered with an important investigation, damaged a very expensive experiment blood hound by exposing it to deep water, and you didn't even catch the terrorist leader *or* return the three stolen pups!"

Robert took a deep breath. "Sir, it was all my fault..."

"Yes it is all your fault, but the department doesn't agree, and they've handed down disciplinary measures for both of you. Jericho, you're suspended without pay for two months, handover your badge and your gun."

Even though he'd just gotten replacements for both the gun and the badge the day before, having to formally return the bits of metal that made him a police officer made him feel a bit numb.

"Sue, during his suspension you'll be reassigned to work at headquarters—as a postal pet."

Sue looked like she might faint, but she quickly regained her composure.

"Sir, that's not fair!" Robert stepped protectively in front of her.

"I know it's not." Mr. Cross replied. "But we all have our orders and I don't have the luxury of being able to ignore them."

"Talk to the department again. I'll—" He didn't have anything to offer, but he had to try.

The chief just shook his head and dismissed them. Sue left first and had started down the long hallway. Robert walked faster to catch up with her.

Sue stopped. "Robert." She spoke quietly and wouldn't look at him. "Don't."

"But you..."

"I accepted the consequences for doing what's right."

"Sue, I won't let you do this!" He cursed himself. He should have been as firm with her when she insisted on coming along. He should have talked sense into her so that she wouldn't have done something so foolish.

"I made my choice and you made yours. What else is there to say?"

Robert watched her walk away. As low as he felt, something told him that there was a lot left to say.

The End