

Part 7: The Rescue

The following night, the Federal Bureau of Pettification Headquarters was packed on one side with all kinds of VIPs eager to come and gawk at the new poster pet, Trinket. The other was nearly deserted. Sue, Donna, and Juliette skulked through the latter. Donna had used her excellent makeup skills and access to certain uniforms, to make all three of them appear to be nothing more than three lovely lab techs. That's how they'd appear to anyone they met in the halls, and more importantly that's how they'd appear to the camera in front of the entrance to the experimental division.

Sue enjoyed walking on two legs through the halls again, but more than that she enjoyed the expensive and very convincing blonde wig Donna had put on her. She'd always wondered what she'd look like as a blonde.

But am I having more fun yet? I dunno...I really don't...

The three of them paused, but only for a moment, in front of the door to the experimental division. Like clockwork, Donna punched in the code and they walked through the open doorway into the antiseptic, maze-like halls. Like most of the areas they'd gone through, these were mostly empty save for the odd late night worker, which only made things easier. As they went towards the kennel room, Sue kept glancing at Juliette. Her face was like stone, but Sue noticed that her hands were balled up into white knuckled fists. Her anxiety must have been off the charts. Sue wished she could say something to try to calm her down, but it was better to keep moving.

It didn't take them long to reach Kennel Room #15. The three of them darted in through the door and closed it as quietly as they possibly could behind them. Sue flipped on the lights. The kennels lining the walls on either side shook with life. She could see movement behind the bars and hear whines and whimpers.

"We'd better do this fast before someone comes and checks on the noise!" Sue whispered.

The trio scurried down the line of kennels looking for the one labeled "Patches." It was Juliette who laid eyes on her sister first.

"April? April is that you?" She sank to her knees in front of the kennel as tears began to fall.

Donna rubbed her shoulders as Sue hastily unlatched the door. Patches bounded from the confines of her small, stainless steel prison. She barked once and licked Juliette across the face before jumping at Donna and trying to sniff at her crotch.

“Whoa, girl!” Donna laughed and pushed her gently away.

Juliette didn’t laugh. She said in a small, defeated voice, “She doesn’t even recognize me.”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get her some help. I promise!” Sue didn’t know what kind of help they could give her, or if help was even possible, but she wanted to believe that Patches could be April again as much as she wanted Juliette to believe it.

Sue clipped a leash on April’s collar while Donna prepared her disguise. To make sure no one recognized her, Donna would give her brands a quick touch up so that their serial numbers would look different. Then they would put a full dog face muzzle hood over April’s head so that they could walk her out of the experimental division without anyone recognizing her. The vacant eyed puppy girl began to whine loudly as the hood went on, Sue and Donna had to hold her still to buckle it on. Once it was in place, April whined louder and thrashed her head about as she pawed at the ridiculous looking hood.

“Take it off of her!” Juliette insisted. “Can’t you see she’s scared!”

“But she has to wear it...” Dona said as gently as she could.

“She’ll attract too much attention like this!” Sue shook her head.

Juliette got down to April’s eye level. “April! Calm down! It won’t be for very long...”

April only struggled more. There were tears in her eyes and panicked gasps for air through the holes in the fake snout.

“Oh, Fuck...” Juliette mumbled. She got down on her hands and knees, stared intensely into April’s fearful eyes and licked the tip of the muzzle.

April trembled, but her breath had slowed and she stopped trying to paw the muzzle off her face. Juliette licked the tip of the muzzle again and continued to stare.

Finally, she said slowly, “I think she’s ready.” As she stood up, April started shaking and whining again.

“Damn it...” Sue swore.

Juliette dropped back down again and April calmed down again moments later.

“What are we going to do?” Juliette said from all fours.

Sue looked around as she tried to think of what to do next. They couldn't very well leave the room with one lab tech crawling next to a pet. Then she spotted a set of pet gear laid out on a nearby table.

"What if..." Sue picked up one of the paw mittens. "What if one of us left here disguised as a ComPet to help keep April calm?"

Juliette sat back up with her arms crossed. "No!"

"I didn't say that *you* had to do it." She started to slide the brown paw mitten over her hand. Despite the seriousness of the situation, Sue felt a familiar pang in her belly as it slid over her fingers.

Yeah, you would volunteer for something like this. "Oh, no, I'm only doing it because I have to!" God, you're pathetic!

The mitten was roomy, too roomy. Sue looked down at the little size tag. It said "M." Her heart sank. She was an XXS.

"Well, I'm out. This gear is way too big for me. Uh, Donna?"

Donna looked at the label, "Sorry, medium is too small for me."

Juliette shook her head. "That's my size but...I—I can't."

Sue knelt down next to her. How was she supposed to ask a victim of a terrible trauma to relieve her trauma? "Juliette, we can't make you do it. If you can't, we'll think of something else."

Juliette stared at April for long moments. Sue wondered what Juliette was thinking. She thought about her own sister and how close they used to be. She wondered if she could have summoned the courage that Juliette needed to.

"No, I...I can do it."

Juliette rocked back onto her knees. April whimpered, but when she saw that Juliette wasn't going away, she calmed down again. Juliette began to undress.

She kept a stiff upper lip as she shed each garment starting with the white lab coat. It was like watching the evolutionary ladder in reverse. As her blouse slipped down, Juliette's freckled shoulders were covered in goosebumps, but she still looked resolute when she reached behind her to unclip her bra. It wasn't long before Juliette was naked and kneeling in front of her sister.

She glanced up to Donna and sighed deeply. "Okay, I'm ready."

Sue scooped up the clothes and started folding them to put away in Donna's backpack. Donna started with the collar and Juliette grabbed it out of her hands. "I can do it myself! At least this time I'm doing it for a reason..."

Sue had to admire her. It was always easier when someone else put you in chains. With the collar secured, with uncharacteristic seriousness, Donna set to putting the rest of the generic pet gear on Juliette. The only thing she said during the process were quiet reminders to breathe. Stuffing the last of the clothes into the pack, Sue had only looked away for what felt like a few moments, but when she looked up, Juliette was gone and Lilly was back—mostly. Her hair was still different, but she had the same tear eyes, red cheeks, and timid posture while trapped in the confining brown pet gear.

April seemed to have relaxed in the hood. She crawled around Juliette with a quizzical look in her eyes that seemed to say, "Where did the lady go? Who is this new puppy?" It might have been cute under different circumstances. Finally, April paused and sniffed at Juliette's backside.

Juliette cringed, but remained still. It might have been gross, but it meant that April had accepted her.

Sue looked at the clock on the wall. "We'd better go."

Out in the hallway, Sue held Juliette's leash and Donna held Aprils. The two sisters crawled between them. They were so close together their flanks rubbed. Every time April looked like she might act up, Juliette rubbed against her and gave her the eye. Sue wondered if it was having another puppy girl present that calmed her down, or if there was a part of April that still remembered her sister's face, voice or...smell.

They were one hallway over from the exit when Sue saw Dr. Wilkes coming from the opposite direction. There was nowhere to duck into, and even if there was, it was too late. He saw them. Sue shot Donna a warning glance and then looked back at Dr. Wilkes. She tried to look casual as she walked along. For all she knew he would just pass by them.

"Hey, girls." He half smiled at them. "Working late?"

Sue began to stop, but Donna started to walk faster. Sue opened her mouth, not certain what she was going to say, but Donna answered first.

"Yup, and *working* is all we're doing."

Dr. Wilkes laughed as they passed by him. Sue felt herself relax. Donna must have gotten hit on all the time, because she was really good at shutting it down.

“Hey, hold on a minute...” Dr. Wilkes called after them.

Sue felt her heart leap into her throat. She exchanged glances with Donna and turned around to face the doctor walking back down the hall towards them.

“I don’t think I’ve seen you around here before, what are your names? What project are you attached to?”

“We’re new!” Donna declared.

God, I hope you have something to follow that up with...

“Yeah, I know. I repeat my questions. Who are you with and what’s your project?”

Grasping for something—*anything* to say, Sue could see the horrible future with crystal clarity. Dr. Wilkes would call security, and all four of them would be taken into custody. April would be back in her little kennel within the hour. Her fate would be the quickest. For Juliette the process would take longer, but within a day she’d be trapped in her familiar pet gear, forced to answer to “Lilly” again, and returned to her pig of an owner. The media would cover the “heartwarming story” of a kidnapped puppy girl getting returned to her home—with service extended, no doubt. That would be nothing compared to the show trial that would be held for Sue and for Donna. Two FBP employees trying to “abduct” a puppy girl with special needs would be a sensational story that would earn the ire of all respectable citizens. It might be a full week before the predetermined verdict was handed down. Then both Sue and Donna would find themselves in permanent pet service—or worse. Sue would never see her family again. She’d never see Robert again.

“Dr. Wilkes.” Natalie Jones called from a doorway further down the hall. “I want to speak with you.”

Dr. Wilkes pointed at Donna and Sue and opened his mouth to protest.

“I want to speak with you about the proposal you made earlier today.”

The doctor walked away from Donna, Sue, Juliette and April without a backwards glance. Natalie allowed him to enter the room first. In the moment before she followed him, she looked down the hallway at the four of them and nodded.

In the backseat of the car, April gratefully licked Juliette's cheeks when the tight, dog muzzle mask was finally removed. They knew that they could have lots of time, or very little time depending on when April's kennel was checked. They all wondered why Natalie had intervened, but not one of them was willing to look a gift horse in the mouth. As Donna started the car and headed for the docks, they all silently prayed that Natalie was still talking to Dr. Wilkes and that he wasn't checking the kennel right then.

There was no visible sign of pursuit. It was snowing again. Traffic was sparse. Sue leaned her burning forehead against the cool window and watched the distorted neon lights bent and refracted through the melted snow on the glass. Had they done it? She looked back at Juliette and April curled up against each other and she hoped so.

Sue stepped out of the car and onto the dock. The snow swirled around her and she crossed her arms to brace against the cold. Juliette was struggling back into her clothes in the backseat and April, with her inquisitive nose and busy tongue wasn't making it any easier.

Sue poked her head back inside the car and said, "Wait here." She stood back up and looked at Donna. "Well, where's the boat?"

Donna pointed out to a white trawler slowly coming into view.

"How did you manage that with just a phone call?" Sue asked.

"She called me. I'm a rich boy, remember?"

Sue spun around to see Robert stepping out from behind a cargo container. He was wearing a fedora and a long, gray trench coat over one of his perfectly tailored suits. Even when he was a suspended detective, he still insisted on dressing like one, albeit from some bygone decade.

"Robert? I—" She looked back at Donna. "You called him? Without checking with me? He could have..."

Donna shrugged. "Yeah, but he didn't, did he?"

Sue looked back at Robert. "You didn't, did you?"

Robert shook his head. "The law is important to me Sue." He looked behind her at Juliette and April in the car. "But justice is more important, and what happened to them wasn't justice. It's as simple as that."

Juliette and April sat inside of a large wooden crate. With the panel to close it propped up against his side he handed Juliette a wad of cash. "Use it to start a new life across the sea, sweetheart."

Juliette nodded. "I don't know what to say...I don't know what to say to any of you..."

"You don't need to say anything to me. The guys on the boat will load you up. They've been told to put the crate down on the dock when you get into port. They're supposed to open it and then walk away. Then you'll be free to go. Understand?" He reached out and patted April on the head and she licked at his fingers.

Juliette nodded again and gulped back tears.

Sue knelt down to Juliette's level. "You take good care of your sister."

Juliette hugged her. "Thank you," she whispered.

With the crate closed and loaded. The trawler sailed off into the night. Sue, Robert, and Donna stood on the pier and watched the boat disappear into the falling snow. Donna nudged Sue and motioned towards Robert with her chin before heading back to the car.

"Robert, I'm...I'm sorry I yelled at you."

"I don't blame you. After everything you've been through. Are you okay?"

Sue shivered, and not from the cold. His concern surrounded her like a blanket, making her feel warm and safe when he wasn't even touching her.

"I'll live."

Robert took her arms and looked at her squarely. "Look, we ought to get out of here."

"Oh...yeah, we should."

"But before we do, there's something I wanted to say to you for weeks." He paused. "I think I might be falling in love with you too."

Sue stared up at him. He'd said it! He'd actually said it!

He bent down and kissed her the way he had in the cabin and she felt her knees melt. She kissed him back and for a moment the snow around them seemed to turn to steam.

Sue's cheeks were flushed and she was breathless when their lips finally parted.

He was breathless too when he said, “Catch up later? After your shift tomorrow?”

All Sue could do was nod.

The End

Epilogue

Juliette had done exactly what the detective had told her to do. She’d taken the money to start a new life. Wrapped in the crisp, new bills she’d found an address and phone number to a man who’d helped her get set up with new identification, which led to finding a modest place to live, a job, and something *resembling* a life.

She came home from a shift at the restaurant where she worked on the line. It wasn’t glamorous by any means, but every day she was there she felt like she was getting back a small amount of her humanity. Going where she pleased, eating human food at a table, paying bills, hell, even using a bathroom were all reaffirming to her, and she still took great pleasure in them months after she’d been freed.

Coming through the door and seeing April was always deflating. April greeted her with barks and licks, her behind wagging furiously. Though she was out of her pet gear, she still insisted on crawling. Even though there was no risk of a shock from the petsitter, she still refused to even attempt speech. No, it was worse than that. It wasn’t that she refused to stand or speak; it was as if she had never done either before. The clothes that Juliette had laid out for her had been ignored, save for one of the shoes that she’d used as a chew toy.

Juliette picked up the well-chewed shoe. It was still slick with April’s drool. “God damn it, April!” She yelled and threw the shoe across the room.

April cowered at Juliette’s sudden outburst.

Juliette took a deep breath and hugged her sister. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. I just...I just want you back.”

April looked at her with large, searching eyes. She couldn’t understand the words, but she responded to the tone. That was all the connection Juliette had left, and she didn’t want to lose that too.

Later that night, there was a light tap on the door. Juliette tensed out of habit. She’d never heard of any FBP agents going to other countries to re-capture “strays,” but she never discounted the possibility.

“Who is it?” She asked, not getting up from the couch.

There was a long pause. “It’s Natalie Jones—the veterinarian—and Cookie, her assistant.”

“Who?” Juliette went to the door and looked out the peephole. She recognized the young woman on the other side immediately.

“I just want to talk with you.”

“About what?”

“Your sister, I think I can help her.”

Juliette hesitated. She wanted to help her sister, but she didn’t know if she could trust anyone from the FBP.

“How did you find me?”

“Detective Robert Jericho helped me.”

Juliette took a deep breath and opened the door.

Serving tea at her own table in her own apartment was just one more little human pleasure for Juliette. Regardless of what Natalie had to say, she was already in a better mood. April and the dark haired puppy girl had become instant friends after sniffing each other’s backsides. They played tug of war with a well-chewed, knotted rope on the patio while Juliette and Natalie sipped their tea and talked. It was nice to see April having some fun outside for a change. April hadn’t been allowed on the patio by herself since she’d gotten loose and roamed the neighborhood, presenting her wagging, upturned backside to every dog she’d met. It was then that Juliette had realized how much damage those butchers at the FBP had done.

“So, you decided to run too?” Juliette asked. She was skeptical. “Why?”

“I tried to make things better. I really did, but...I couldn’t. I was already planning on it, but when I saw your little group, and I figured out what was going on, I made up my mind.”

“So, what are you doing here then? You said you could help my sister.”

“Your sister has PRINTS. It was artificially induced, but she has it, and I want to cure it.”

Cookie ripped the knotted rope from April’s mouth and flung it away. She barked triumphantly, looking very proud of herself.

“I know it doesn’t look like it, but I’ve already made some progress with Cookie. I can’t make any promises, but I think with time, maybe we can get them both back to their human selves.”

Juliette looked at her sister. She’d almost put away her dreams of truly reuniting with April, but Natalie had brought them back. Juliette didn’t know what the future held, but at least it looked bright from where she was sitting.