

~ Memories and Mourners ~

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This is an original story. Any resemblance to any persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental and unintentional.

Grammar and Language Warnings: Parts of dialogue are in Russian and thus there are Cyrillic characters in this story. Also, some parts of dialogue are in non-standard English grammar.

Content warning: This is not a feel good story. There are scenes of violence and abuse, gang-related activities, racism, bad language, drugs, substance abuse and incarceration.

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Description: Barbie, Ace and Snow: a drug-dealer, a cop and a Russian mobster. Three women that should never have met and have nothing in common. Nothing but Canon: ruthless gang-leader, broken ex-con, brutal killer, kind lover and loyal friend. As Canon lies dying, the strands of her life collide in a cold hospital waiting room.

“Was it business?” ~Barbie

The thud of heavy boots on the laminated floor made every eye turn to the group coming down the corridor. The four men and the single woman standing around the seated figure in their midst immediately found the weapons under their jackets. The party coming down the corridor reacted instantly, hands disappearing under oversized jumpers and t-shirts.

“это хорошо.”

The low order from the woman seated on the hospital's sickly green chair made the nervous guards stand down immediately. Still their eyes did not leave the group coming

down the corridor, their hands hovering ready to dive under expensive jackets for the guns hidden underneath.

The oncoming group stopped a good ten feet away from the foremost guard. The others tensed immediately, the only woman going so far as to finger the handle of the gun under her jacket. The tension was palpable in the suffocating air of the hospital, smelling of disease and disinfectant.

This time the order was louder. "I said it's alright!"

Jaws clenched and eyes narrowed among the guards but none of them dared gainsay the seated woman's orders. With slow movements, they fanned out, leaving a narrow corridor leading to the woman they guarded.

Shuffling of feet betrayed a similar manoeuvre from the group opposite them. The guards did not allow themselves to be distracted by the wild beauty of the woman that stepped forward, their eyes constantly surveying the whole of the tense group eyeing them in return.

The woman's oversized t-shirt was black as were the jeans underneath. The black and red bandana on her neck was the only flash of colour on her but for the white of her eyes. Her steps were slow, deliberate as she moved toward the group of towering guards.

Her empty hands deliberately placed in front of her, in a gesture of reassurance. She entered the narrow corridor of bodies without even a flinch or second of hesitation. Her slow steps quickly brought her to stand in front of the woman sitting silently beyond the guards.

The silence stretched and with it the tension rose as both opposing groups waited for the signal that would mean either death or truce.

The low voice was cold. "это хорошо. они друзья."

The twin reactions were immediate as one group relaxed slightly and the other tensed even further.

The low clearing of the throat was loud in the ensuing terse silence. "I told them you are friends. друзья"

The standing woman nodded once when red-rimmed blue eyes rose to look at her.

"S alright," she said loudly enough for her voice to carry to her own people. The women that had come in with her relaxed immediately, their hands appearing once again to be greeted by slow nods from the group of Russians.

With a shrug and a soft sigh, the standing woman sat down too. Silence stretched for a few moments. "Friends, eh? How you say it? Droo-zi-ah?"

"Yeah..."

"How you doing, Snow?" the black woman asked after a slow nod.

"I'm waiting, Barbie. I'm waiting for these...these physicians to come out and tell me what they got to tell me," Snow grated through clenched teeth.

Barbie closed her eyes willing the tears down. Her voice was hoarse. "There's no hope then?"

Snow shook her head mutely.

A full minute passed before Barbie spoke again. "She got the guy though... She got the guy."

Snow's answer was slow. "Yeah... She did."

Long moments passed before Barbie asked in a low voice. "Was it business?"

Snow glanced at the woman sitting beside her. Her voice held tears in its depths.

“No. No. She just went out for some milk. He was... ублюдок изнасилование та девочка... He was raping her. That girl. She’s восточная девушка... oriental something. She’s here, too. Canon...”

Snow covered her eyes with her hands to hide the tears that threatened to spill. Her voice was so low that Barbie had to lean in to hear.

“Canon ran in to stop him. He had a gun. He shot her. Three times. She put a knife in his gut. ублюдок - здесь также. They’re saving his fucking life. They’re saving the bastard’s life.”

Barbie leaned in further. Her whisper was too low to be overheard by anybody. “We’ll get him. We’ll get him, Snow.”

Snow’s eyes burned as she turned to look fully upon Barbie. Her voice was cold. “No! I will. I will!”

Barbie leaned back her eyes searching Snow’s face. Her own face hardened imperceptibly. It was too easy sometimes to forget who Snow was. Barbie nodded slowly. “That your right.”

Snow nodded back curtly before turning away.

The minutes passed slowly with only the distant sounds of the ER intruding. Barbie cleared her throat. “Ah... Snow? Ah... There’s someone... Canon would have wanted...”

“I called her. She was in DC. She should be arriving quickly,” Snow cut in harshly.

Barbie nodded slowly. Her sigh was heavy as she leaned back against the hard hospital chair. Her eyes travelled listlessly from Snow to the group of Russians guarding her to her own girls standing in a tight group just beyond.

“Ya got your sights on big game” ~Raw

Slowly her gaze went to the doors to the ER, barely visible through the bodies standing tensely. Barbie closed her eyes, willing the tears that rose unbidden to subside. Her discipline was too great to allow tears to fall, to show such weakness.

She had to keep strong. For her image. And for the Kats. But most of all for the woman probably already dead behind the ER's swinging doors. Barbie bit her tongue to keep the bitter laugh from her lips.

She was who she was. No one would dare dispute her. People feared and respected her. But Barbie was no fool, nor was she one of those people who forgot. The past shaped the present.

She was who she was. She was who Canon had made.

Like a scene from some old movie, faint and grainy, the memory rose, as Barbie clenched her jaw to keep the sobs in.

Raw's voice was like honey laced with poison. "Listen, girl, you fucked up tonight. That all there is."

"But..." Barbie barely managed a word when Raw cut her off.

"Fucking listen! You run your mouth like that, girl, and you gonna get fucked up too."

"Yes, ma'am," Barbie replied stiffly.

Raw growled deep in her chest. "Don't be doing that 'yes ma'am' shit to me, girl. Fuck it! You ain't worth the spit of me talking."

The anger in Raw's words made Barbie stiffen. She had gone too far. Raw had no patience with fools. Everyone knew that. "No, Raw, please. I'll shut up. Word!"

A moment passed and then another as Raw sized up the girl in front of her. “You what girl? Fourteen?”

“Eighteen! I’m eighteen,” Barbie replied quickly.

“Girl...” Raw said warningly.

Barbie swallowed haltingly. “Sorry... six...ah...fifteen.”

“Hm...” Raw looked at her speculatively.

“For real, Raw. Swear!” Barbie protested immediately.

Raw barked a laugh. She shook her head once before taking a deep breath. Her voice mellowed as she looked at Barbie. “Alright. Alright. I ain’t saying this again. Hear me, girl?”

Barbie was nodding even before Raw’s last word had left her mouth. “Yeah...most def...”

Raw waited a moment, making certain that she had the girl’s attention. Her voice was conversational but her eyes betrayed the seriousness of her words. “Now...Canon’s muscle. There two type of muscle. Dogs and rocks. Dogs yap. Rocks ain’t. Feel me?”

“Yeah...” Barbie replied, even though her eyes betrayed her puzzlement.

Raw sighed. Her eyes moved away from her girl standing contritely in front of her, roaming lazily along the quiet street. Finally she spoke. “Hm... Now you came up this ‘ere day to yap, girl.”

Raw put her hand up, stopping the denial that was on Barbie’s lips. “Nah... don’t be saying nothing. You yap like a little dyke doggie. Fuck! Now, girl, you yap on the corner, fuck it. Who give a shit? But here? You show some real disrespect this night, Barbie doll.”

Raw paused, her eyes returning to Barbie. Slowly she searched the girl's face. The shame there told her she was being heard.

Slowly Raw spoke on. "That girl you were all big about, that girl one o' yours. Feel me? You stick it to her, so the fuck what. But you fuck her like that to anyone who listens. That disrespect, girl. Plain an' simple."

"But..." Barbie managed to utter only the single word before a burning glare from Raw silenced her.

Anger was once more clear in Raw's voice. "Shut up, girl! Ya got your sights on big game, big fucking game!"

Barbie blushed, her eyes falling to the concrete between her feet.

Raw grunted once before continuing. "That kinda game don't be falling for yer yapping."

Barbie looked up, the hurt clear in her eyes. Raw's stern countenance brought a choking tightness to her throat. Tears sprung unbidden in her eyes but she blinked them back valiantly.

Raw's voice was soft, even as her words seemed made of steel. "Ya don't get respect, girl. You fucking earn respect. You yap around. You fuck your own. You ain't gonna get no respect 'ere. Feel me?"

"Yeah, Raw. Yeah..." Barbie looked down once more to hide her tears.

Raw grunted before punching Barbie lightly on the shoulder. "Well, I said ma piece. See ya when I see ya, Barbs."

The sound of heavy steps moving away from her made Barbie look up. "Yo, Raw!" She called out panicky.

Raw turned back slowly. "What?" she asked testily.

Barbie's voice was small, for once devoid of her usual cockiness. "I fucked up. How do I be going making it right?"

Raw sighed. She looked at the girl. Maybe there was some potential there after all. "Work your corner, girl. Work it right. And when Canon come round again..."

"Yeah?" Desperate hope was clear in Barbie's voice.

"We'll see, Barbie-doll. We'll see..." Raw replied as she turned once more to leave.

"This be real for me" ~Canon

Snow looked at Barbie before her eyes returned listlessly to the ER door. She could feel Barbie's agitation, her worry.

Snow could understand. She was feeling much the same. It was that tiny flame of hope that could not let her rest, could not let her simply mourn. If the doctors managed a miracle...

Snow did not believe in miracles. She had never seen one. And belief in something unseen was not something that Snow had in herself.

But still that tiny flame of hope flared deep in her chest. It was not a grand hope, nothing extraordinary, although most people would not believe it.

Snow hoped to come back from another day and night in the streets to a warm home. And her lover's never-quite-tasting-right Bolognese sauce. Not a grand hope, nothing grand about it at all.

"Hey... That smells good," Snow said with a smile as she entered the spacious kitchen.

Canon smiled back as she glanced at Snow before returning to stirring the sauce on the stove.

Snow went to fridge and took out the vodka and two cold glasses. "Want one?" she asked as she poured a shot.

"Sure," was Canon's answer as she carefully put the lid on the saucepan.

"Your head ok?" Snow asked, glancing quickly at Canon, the shot-glass cradled in her hand.

"It a good day today," Canon answered, a sad smile on her lips.

Snow drank up her shot quickly before pouring another one for herself and one for Canon. "Here," she said with a tired sigh as she handed one glass to Canon.

"Rough night?" Canon asked quietly before sipping from her glass.

Snow nodded wordlessly before drinking the second shot with a gulp.

"Whassup?" Canon asked as she put the glass down and turned back to the stove.

Snow sighed once more and poured another shot. Canon looked at her once but did not press. Snow was grateful for it. That was something she had learnt early on about Canon. Canon never pressed, not about anything that had to do with the game.

Snow watched, drinking her vodka slowly, as Canon drained the pasta carefully and took the sauce off the stove. It was not until Canon had taken two plates down from the cupboard that Snow sighed once again and spoke in a low voice. "She killed herself."

Canon stilled for a moment before turning slowly. "Who?"

Snow shook her head. "One of the girls. The...ah... the whores."

“Killed ‘erself?” Canon asked, her eyes narrowing in question.

Snow nodded affirmatively before knocking the remainder of her vodka back. Her voice was toneless. “It’s a regular thing. Or so they tell me.”

Canon cocked her head to the side. “Regular? Like common?”

Snow nodded again. “Yeah. It has been...ah...the third one since the beginning of the year.”

Canon whistled through her teeth. “Three earners dead in what? Four month? That bad, man. That real bad.”

Snow smiled bitterly. “It’s not a problem. There are many girls...back home. Just a few more to get in.”

“Nah, girl. That ain’t the way. Them imports. They be costing ya. That ain’t good,” Canon said with a shake of her head.

“Yeah? Well what do you want me to do?” Snow asked testily. The words had barely left her mouth when she bit her lips. It was not Canon’s fault and the last thing Snow wanted was to get into a fight over business.

Snow’s birth caught as she saw the flash of anger in Canon’s eyes. And as it had happened more than once, she watched the flash fade as Canon closed her eyes and took a breath. When she opened them again, the green depths were calm once more.

Canon’s voice was low. “I used to run girls. Back in the day, ya know?”

Snow nodded silently waiting for Canon to continue. It was not common that Canon spoke about her years in the game and Snow would not chance her clamming up again over an ill-received comment.

Canon smiled and shook her head, more to herself than to Snow. “Part o’ the game. Dope and pussy. Money makers.”

Snow waited patiently for Canon to go on. Canon shook her head once again. “Old shit. Let’s get some grub into ya, huh?”

Snow bit her lip. She did not want to waste this opportunity. Getting Canon to open up was not easy and she wanted that. She wanted to know everything about Canon.

Snow’s hand gripped Canon’s before she turned back to the plates. “Talk to me. Please,” Snow said quietly.

Canon looked at Snow for long moments before sighing once. A quick gesture asked for more vodka, which Snow expertly provided.

Canon leaned on the counter, the vodka warming in her hand. “Twas back in the day. Raw ya know... she got a thing for faggots. There was this boy, real beautiful. His pimp fuck ‘im up though. Regular like.”

Canon paused and sipped from the glass as Snow waited. She had never heard of the Kats being involved with that part of the game.

“Raw...she got tired of it all. Gave me the nod, ya know,” Canon continued, looking at Snow questioningly.

Snow nodded immediately. She understood.

“That pimp, he ain’t nothing. Twas a bitch after though. Him gone ‘n I got a stable. What the fuck do I do with a fucking stable?” Canon stopped laughing quietly to herself.

Canon looked at Snow, smiling full of remembered mirth. “Raw... she tole me go on. Ain’t none of ma business. What the fuck do I do, ya know?”

Snow smiled back and nodded. She could understand. Canon was muscle, she had always been. Pimping needed another kind of person. She knew that well. After all she found herself in a very similar circumstance.

Canon sighed, a smile still playing on her lips. “Walked ‘em boys ‘n a dozen girls. Ever see colours on fishnet? Even the popo rolling was laughing their lily white asses off. Almost a year I walked ‘em. Till I found Snot. Snot’s good. Still walk with ‘em. Different boys, different bitches, same old Snot though.”

Snow laughed quietly. She could just imagine it. A young Canon decking out whores and go-go boys in gang colours.

Her mirth left quickly as her mind flashed the image of a girl, her wrists slashed almost to the bone, cockroaches walking unmindful over her dead body.

“I don’t have a Snot, Canon,” Snow said heavily.

Canon looked at Snow seriously for a moment before taking the two steps that brought her in front of Snow. Her voice was low. “You taking care o’ ‘em?”

Snow shook her head. “Sort of. It was Grigory’s business,” she said heavily, her accent showing through immediately at mentioning her cousin.

Canon grunted at her to continue and Snow could see the coldness in her eyes at the mention of Grigory.

“Grigory, huh?” Canon asked slowly.

“Yeah...” Snow nodded, her eyes leaving Canon to land on the floor.

Canon sighed. Snorting she took a cigarette pack out of her pocket, lighting up quickly. “He fuck up?” she said finally.

Snow shook her head, still refusing to look at Canon. “I don’t know. I don’t know,” she said slowly.

Canon puffed on the cigarette, her irritation clear. "It be five years, Snow. Ya just getting this shit now?"

Snow passed a weary hand through her hair. "Nah... It's more... complicated."

"Huh?" Canon looked at Snow questioningly as she was blew smoke toward the ceiling.

Snow sighed. She spoke slowly, carefully, trying to get the words right. "Back when I was a kid, still new at this, my uncle, he... well, he didn't want me to work that side of the business..."

"What? Working the girls make ya a dyke?" Canon's disbelief was clear in the tone of her voice.

Snow shook her head, glancing at Canon dejectedly. "I don't know. He is old fashioned and..."

Canon took a deep puff of her cigarette. Her words slowed. "What? He got a problem?"

"Well..." Snow shrugged, her lips pursed into a frown.

Canon shook her head as she put out the half-smoked cigarette. "What you telling me, Snow? Your boys gonna holler at 'im. Come 'ere whoop my ass?"

Snow was quick to deny that accusation. "No! Canon, no. He knows. It's fine. He doesn't like it but it's fine. It's just that... I didn't want to get involved. I keep...how do you say it? Discreet."

Canon guffawed immediately. "Lemme get this straight. You been letting your earners kill thesselves cause ya wanna be discreet?"

"It's not that simple," Snow said, glaring at Canon.

Canon snorted contemptuously. “Simple, yo? How ‘bout plain stupid? Wake up, girl. Them that care, know. And them that don’t, they don’t. Business is business. Green talks, man. Who gives a fuck about you eating pussy?”

“So? What do you... fuck it.” Irritation made Snow’s words seem like a razor’s edge.

“Nah, girl. Talk to me,” Canon was quick to reply, her voice no longer irritated. Her movement was slow and gentle as she took Snow’s hand in her own.

Snow shrugged off Canon’s hand, turning to pour another shot of vodka.

“Yo, Snow,” Canon said quietly.

“Yeah,” Snow answered after downing another shot of vodka.

“Talk to me, girl,” Canon said gently, her hands carefully kneading Snow’s shoulders.

Snow shook her head. Slowly she turned until she faced Canon, feeling the strong hands around her waist. “I don’t know what to do, Can. I don’t know about this part of the business.”

Canon smiled gently before planting a quick kiss on Snow’s vodka-painted lips. “Your boy, Grigory, how he set it up?”

The agitation was clear in Snow’s movement away from Canon. “He fucked it up, Canon. Just like he fucked up everything.”

Canon was not dissuaded by the apparent rejection. Her voice was quite, her words gentle. “Yo... he your cuz. What’s done is done. Let it go.”

That brought a swift flash of anger to Snow, colouring her face in a light shade of pink. “Let it go? He landed you in jail for four years! And for what? Because he was jealous? Hell, Vladimir thinks he was the one that set up the whole thing,” she growled, spitting the words out.

“What?” Canon asked immediately.

“You know. That he tipped the police,” Snow explained without delay.

Canon’s eyes narrowed, as she took a step backwards. “Your boy snitching?”

Snow shook her head quickly. “No. He just tipped them about the meet. He knew I’d be there.”

“Fuck...” Canon hissed.

Snow nodded, her eyes closing for a moment. “Yeah...”

“Snow...” Canon started after a moment.

“Hm...” Snow looked at Canon, bracing inside for the explosion that was sure to come. She had taken great pains, even begging Vladimir for it, to keep that part of the story from Canon.

Canon’s voice was hard. It was the same voice, Snow imagined Canon used on the streets back when she was running with the Kats. “Fuck ‘im. He ain’t worth it. He ain’t no more either.”

Snow shook her head in immediate denial. It was not that easy. “Four years, Canon. Four fucking years. He didn’t know about... your insurance. You understand? He thought I’d be on the cell next to you.”

Canon’s gesture was quick and final, as were her words. “Yo. Enough! That ain’t what went down. Ya alright. Sure it be four years on but it alright. Ya know? I feel...”

“What?” Snow asked quickly, hearing the change in Canon’s voice at the last words.

Canon looked away for a long moment before her eyes returned to meet Snow's gaze. "This be real for me, ya know. It be worth four years. Fuck... it be worth more than that," she said finally, her eyes never leaving Snow's.

The doors of the ER remained stubbornly closed and Snow could only close her eyes to keep the tears in, as the hope in her chest lowered with each second that passed with no news.

In their job, one thing was only certain. Reality always had a bad end.

"We're all here for Canon" ~Barbie

A sixth sense developed in a lifetime in the streets jolted Barbie out of her thoughts. Without thought she climbed to her feet, eyes darting around to discover the source of her sudden feeling. The Russians were tense and she could see her girls angrily looking toward the end of the corridor.

Barbie felt a wave of anger accompanied with a sorrow that could not be contained rise in her chest. Slowly she looked down at Snow. "I think Ace's come."

Blue eyes, red from tension and barely leashed anger, looked up to her. Snow nodded wordlessly.

Barbie nodded back after a moment's hesitation. Without a word, she moved away from Snow, carefully passing through the tense Russians. A terse gesture was enough to make the Kats stand down, although they still looked at the approaching woman with hatred in their eyes.

Barbie took a deep breath as the tall detective reached her. Her voice was low, neutral. "Detective Lewis."

“Barbara,” Lewis greeted coldly.

Barbie took a moment to look at the Detective carefully. Ace was as tall as she remembered, as beautiful too, even if age had brought slight slivers of silver to her temples.

She could not help but notice the caution in the detective’s stance, the covert coiling of muscles ready to jump into action. The sound of footsteps behind her made Barbie tense instinctively.

Snow’s voice was as cold as her name implied. “Amanda Lewis, I assume?” Her accent was heavier than usual, the consonants sounding almost leaden.

Lewis nodded curtly as she looked at Snow. “You called me,” she said icily.

Snow’s sigh was clearly audible in the heavy silence. “I did. She would want you here.”

“Why?” Lewis asked immediately, suspicion warring with worry in her voice.

“She’s dying or dead already,” Snow answered quickly.

Barbie watched carefully as Lewis took a step backwards as if someone had punched her. Silence reigned for long moments broken only by Lewis’ harsh breathing.

“What happened? How do you know she’s gone?” The questions came fast and angry.

“She’s gone.” Snow’s words held the finality of the grave.

Barbie stepped quickly forward when Lewis tried to grab the Russian. “Don’t, Ace.”

Lewis turned eyes that seemed sunken and haunted to her. “What happened, Barbs?” She asked in a voice filled with despair.

Barbie turned slightly until her gaze connected with Snow's. A moment passed and then another before Snow's eyes slid away. Without a word the Russian turned on her heel and walked away. Barbie watched her for a second as she passed through her bodyguards back to the chair she had been sitting before.

Only when Snow had sat down to continue her angry wait did Barbie turn back to Amanda Lewis.

"She was shot, Ace," she said quietly to the tall detective.

As their eyes connected, Barbie almost laughed. It was shock and grief and anger, she knew that. Still the laughter babbled and Barbie had to bit her lip to contain it. It had been a joke on the corners back in the day, how Canon had a soft spot for tall women. It was not common for Barbie to look another woman in the eyes without having to look down.

Amanda's harsh voice brought her out of her errant thoughts. "Who did it? Was it them?"

It took a split second for Barbie to interpret the angry glare levelled at the Russians from the detective. Her denial was quick. This was something that had to be nipped in the bud or the hospital would become a morgue this night.

"No! It was... an accident. Not business. Just some random guy."

"What the fuck you talking about?" Amanda asked angrily.

Barbie sighed as she kept a tight rein on her temper. "Canon saw some guy raping a girl. She tried to stop him. He had a gun," she said slowly, each word ringing with conviction.

Amanda exhaled loudly, her eyes scrunching tight.

For a moment Barbie feared that the detective would have a heart attack right there in front of her. She kept her voice low and as even as she could manage. "They got 'im. The cops. He's here too. He's gonna live it looks like."

“Fuck!” The exclamation was a barely heard whisper even in the hospital’s quiet. Barbie could only nod.

Barbie waited patiently as Amanda Lewis pulled herself together. When Amanda opened her eyes again, the anguish and pain of before had been replaced with a cool veneer of professionalism.

“Have they given you any news?”

“Nothing,” Barbie replied simply.

Amanda nodded once before looking around the corridor. Barbie watched as the detective noted her own girls and the Russians, both groups looking at her, observing her every move.

“I will be over there,” Amanda said quietly, gesturing toward an empty bank of chairs away from everybody else.

As she turned to walk toward the chair, Barbie’s hand shot out gripping Amanda’s shoulder. Blue eyes, the only legacy of Amanda’s father, turned to look at her, prideful and angry. “What?”

Barbie cleared her throat. The words did not want to come out but they had to. She owed to Canon. No matter who or what Amanda was, no matter what she’d done.

“We’re all here for Canon, Ace. You belong here!”

Amanda nodded without saying a word. With a last look at Kats and Russians both, she turned and walked to the empty chair. Barbie watched as the tall detective sat down, her hands covering her face.

Barbie turned away. Her steps were quick as she walked to the Kats standing in a group.

Every woman turned to her as she neared, quietly waiting for instructions. Barbie kept her voice low. “Cuddles?”

Immediately a short heavy-set woman stepped forward.

“Get some coffee for everyone. Them too,” Barbie ordered quickly, gesturing toward the Russians.

Cuddles nodded once before leaving, her heavy steps echoing in the corridor.

Barbie turned back to the group. “Rain?”

Rain looked at her for a split second before her eyes returned to roaming the corridor. Barbie almost smiled. No matter what, no matter where, she could trust Rain to keep an eye on things, making sure that everyone was safe.

Her voice was low. “Keep an eye on the popo, will ya? No one goes near ‘er. Hear me?”

Rain nodded once again.

Barbie did not expect anything more. Rain was not much of a talker. Her eyes moved from person to person, making certain that she made eye-contact with every single one of her girls. “Keep it quiet, eh?”

Nods and murmured affirmatives greeted her order.

Barbie looked at them one final time before turning back toward the Russians and the woman they were guarding. Her steps were slow, her hands showing as she walked toward them.

Slowly the Russians shuffled away letting Barbie pass between them until she reached Snow’s side. Red-rimmed blue eyes rose to look at her when she neared.

“Thanks,” Snow said quietly.

“Ain’t nothing,” Barbie replied equally quietly as she sat next to Snow.

Snow nodded before she looked back down to the floor, her eyes lost.

Barbie shook her head. She did not know Snow well. But the hurt was obvious even through the Russian’s icy demeanour. Barbie understood. It was the same hurt she felt after all.

“Mine for a year” ~Canon

It was a fact of life. Their life. On the streets life was a heady ride with an abrupt end. A short ride. Whether it was a bullet or an orange jumpsuit it made little difference. An abrupt end, a bloody one.

Barbie had no illusions that she would escape that fate. She knew that Canon had no such illusions either. Even if she had managed to weather more waves and almost-ends than anyone else.

Still, it was difficult to believe. Impossible to accept. Canon gone.

Barbie took a deep shuddering breath. In the back of her mind, she could almost hear Canon’s deep even tones on the night Barbie’s life changed forever.

“Yo... Canon...” Barbie said quietly, as she entered the small living room.

“Barbie-doll,” Canon’s even tones guided her to the couch. Barbie wished she could turn on the lights, but Canon didn’t like the lights.

“There something I gotta talk you about,” Barbie said slowly, as she sat on the recliner.

“Hm...” Canon’s reply was a wordless grunt.

Barbie nervously passed her finger through her hair. “I... nah...”

Silence reigned for long moments. The words just wouldn’t come to her and Barbie shook her head. With a grunt she got up, turning away. She had taken only two steps toward the door, when Canon spoke.

“What, Barbs? You ain’t telling me you fucked that girl last night. Fucked her up too...”

Barbie whirled around, her mouth hanging open. She had hoped Canon would not have found out yet.

“Fuck... Canon, I...” she stammered finally.

“What? You were high? Hm?” Canon’s question was laden with contempt.

Barbie felt it like a fist in the gut. “Fuck...”

Canon’s voice was low but it carried, cold and hard. “Fuck... and fuck again. You high now too.”

Barbie shook her head in denial. She wasn’t high. Not really. Just a little to take the edge off. “Canon... I...”

Whatever Barbie wanted to say was cut off by words full of ice. “You outta game, Barbs.”

It took a moment for the meaning to penetrate. “No! You can’t do that!” Barbie cried out.

“Hm... Who’s gonna stop me?” Canon said contemptuously.

“I’ll go to Raw, man. Fuck you!” Barbie could hear the whine in her own voice but she did not care. This was not fair.

Canon barked a laugh. “Yeah, Barbs. Go to Raw. Tell ‘er I given you a choice. Outta the game, the fuck off my corners or...”

Barbie could hear the chance given to her. Her hopes surged. Maybe she would get out of this mess after all. “Or what?”

“Or mine for a year,” Cannon said coldly.

“Fuck you!” Barbie shouted.

Canon laughed without humour. “Fuck you, son. Go to Raw.”

“You can’t do this,” Barbie shouted again.

“Sure I can,” Canon said, her voice devoid of inflection.

Barbie shook her head in denial. “That about that bitch?” The question was out of her lips before she had finished thinking about it.

Barbie could see Canon’s shrug even in the dark room. “Maybe... who know?”

“Fuck you, Canon,” Barbie said, anger making her voice almost shrill.

Another short laugh was her answer. “Yeah... sure...”

Barbie could not believe what she was hearing. “You can’t do this. You can’t fucking do this! Raw!” she shouted in disbelief.

Raw’s anger was clear in her shout. “Shut up, Barbie!”

“But...” Barbie started to protest only to be cut off abruptly.

“You using, Barbs. I ain’t holding with that. Not now. Not ever. Feel me?”

Barbie exploded. “I ain’t fucking using! It... was fun alright? That all it be. Fun!”

Raw’s bulk moving at her quickly made Barbie step back in fear. Raw was in her face as she shouted. “You shitting me? What? You think I ain’t know? I got no eyes, no ears on them corners? That what you think, Barbs?”

Barbie shook her head. “Naw! Fuck man! I ain’t using! For real, Raw. Word, man. Word!”

Her denials fell on deaf ears, as Raw turned away, her lip curling in disgust. “Listen to me you fucked-up little shit. You’re using. You’ve fucked up two girls that I know ‘bout already.”

“No! Raw... it aint’...” Barbie tried to deny it once again.

“Shut up! Shut the fuck up! You been short on the money for months. You been leaking the package left and fucking right,” Raw’s eyes flashed in anger.

“I ain’t...” Barbie started once more, only for the heavy slap to stop her. “Aw!”

Raw stood over her as Barbie cowered. “Now! Shut the fuck up! Don’t shit me, you fucking slut. The rules be clear. Ya know that. I’da given the order last night but Canon begged for your fucking worthless life.”

“Canon?” The question was out of her lips before she thought, only to be answered with another slap. “Aw!”

Another heavy slap brought Barbie to her knees. Raw’s grip on her jaw was anything but gentle. Barbie was forced to look into eyes blazing with anger.

Raw’s voice was cold, the threat in it making Barbie shiver. “Shut up! I ain’t gonna say it again. Clear?”

Barbie nodded as much as the painful grip on her jaw allowed.

“Good,” Raw continued. “Canon paid up for your packages. The books are alright now. You get outta here. Go to east or wherever the fuck you want. But you got no place on ma corners. Canon wants to give yer fucking cunt a chance, I got nothing to say ‘bout that. Got me?”

Another slap, this one against the side of her head, punctuated Raw’s question. “Yes, Raw. I got ya,” Barbie whispered.

The grip on her jaw morphed into a harsh shove against her head.

“Now get the fuck outta my house,” Raw spat out as she turned away.

Barbie could only crawl away.

“Canon?” The question was addressed to the darkened room. The slight light of the onset of dawn lighted the darkness.

The answer was slow. “Yeah...”

Barbie took a deep breath. Her nose was clogged from tears, her throat was tight. She had tried to leave. Go to east as Raw said. She had almost managed it.

Yet looking at the men guarding the corners there, seeing the working girls and the crackheads walking the sidewalks made her hands tremble and her eyes overflow with tears. The Kats were her family, the only family she'd ever known.

Barbie's voice was rough. "A year you said?"

"Aha..." Canon grunted in answer.

"Fine!" Barbie said. The edge was clear in her voice, so was the resignation. She had fucked up. Somewhere along the road she had lost the way. She would pay for it now, she knew that. But at least she had hope. At the end of this road, she would still have a family.

Canon stayed silent for long enough that Barbie felt as if her heart would wilt within her chest leaving nothing but empty pain.

The answer when it finally came was quiet. "Alright."

Barbie took a deep shuddering breath. "So?"

"So what?" Canon responded lazily.

"What now, man?" Barbie could not stop the anger from colouring her voice. She needed to know. Whatever penalty Canon decided, she would pay it. She knew that. But she needed to know.

Canon's light steps were like a whisper in the darkness. The coldness in Canon's voice made Barbie shiver. "You're mine now, Barbs. For a year... You ain't got the right no more to be asking what now."

A soft clearing of the throat brought Barbie out of her reverie. She looked up to see Cuddles offering her a cup of steaming coffee. Barbie smiled slightly at Cuddles as she accepted the paper cup.

As Cuddles walked away, her large body weaving carefully among the standing Russians, Barbie sighed. She would need to keep an eye on Cuddles. The large woman had a heart of gold and tonight would not be easy on her.

Canon had touched too many lives. There would be too much grief. And grief bore mistakes. And mistakes cost lives. It was Barbie's responsibility to make certain mistakes didn't happen.

"I'm your bitch now" ~Cuddles

Cuddles caught Rain's eye as she finally escaped the narrow straits of the Russians. She nodded quickly to show that she was alright. A single blink was Rain's only reaction.

Cuddles carefully cast her eyes around the corridor. Everyone had a hot cup of something in their hands. She had even managed to get a cup to the scary leader of the Russians.

Slowly Cuddles walked to the seat that held a long swallow paper box. Two remaining cups of coffee steamed in it. It was just cafeteria coffee, nothing to entice the senses, but at least it was warm.

Cuddles looked at the two last cups. Very carefully she looked at the lone woman seated away from everyone. Coffee for a cop. Cuddles looked at the cup and then back towards Amanda Lewis.

She was a beautiful woman, the tall detective, Cuddles recognised that. Her own tastes ran to men, tall well-built ones. A stint in jail though had taught her to appreciate the female form. And the detective was a fine specimen. Cuddles smiled sadly. She could not fault Canon's taste.

Cuddles looked at the cup once again, trying to steel herself to take it to the detective. She knew the other Kats were looking at her, their gazes a mixture of puzzlement and ill-concealed contempt.

She would not be doing herself any favours to be seen as catering to a cop. Still Cuddles felt she had to. No matter what the others thought or expected or believed was right. She owed it to the woman fighting for her life or already dead behind the ER doors. Cop or no cop, Amanda Lewis held a part of Canon's heart. And a part of Cuddles' heart belonged to Canon.

Cuddles stood uncertainly at the rear of the cell. Eggs and Latisha were standing like sentinels next to the bars. Cuddles knew that something was going to happen today but no one had told her what.

The change in the two women was obvious as they stood up straighter, their hands flexing at their sides. The guard that appeared at the entrance to the cell was a heavy-set man, his black skin contrasting sharply with his grey hair.

He looked at the cell and its occupants with bored eyes before gesturing impatiently. At the gesture, Cuddles saw a woman enter the cell, a change of clothes, underwear and a small towel in her hands.

"Here you are, Carver," the guard said slowly.

Carver nodded at him. "Thank you, officer."

"Don't want no trouble from you now," the guard said sternly.

"No, officer," Carver answered simply, her voice even and calm.

The guard looked at the newly arrived convict for a moment before turning away, shaking his head.

It was not until the sound of his jingling keys had disappeared in the hubbub that permitted the block that Eggs stepped forward.

“Canon,” she greeted warmly.

Cuddles’ eyes widened even as her mouth dropped open in surprise. She looked at the new arrival with new eyes. This was Canon!

Canon’s lips widened to a small smile. “Eggs. How are you, kiddo?”

Eggs smiled in return. “Good. I’m good.”

“Thanks for having me,” Canon said inclining her head.

Eggs inhaled sharply. Her voice was almost panicky. “Canon! It’s an honour, it is. Word! The girls been waiting like these pants is on fire.”

The sadness in Canon’s green eyes was clear for all to see. Her voice held regret. “Eggs... It ain’t like that. You’re first here. No dispute there.”

Eggs shook her head immediately in denial. “Naw, Canon. You the man. Everyone knows that. I bow, man. I fucking bow.”

A sharp gesture cut Eggs off. “It ain’t like that, Eggs. No question ‘bout it. Ya hear? No fucking question.”

Eggs’ puzzlement was clear in her hunched shoulders and shuffling feet. “Canon?”

Canon sighed heavily. Without looking she sat down on the narrow cot next to her. Negligently she put the pile of clothes next to her. Her voice was heavy when she finally spoke. “It canna be like that, Eggs. No cripple leads the Kats. Not if I got a say in it.”

Eggs' denial was immediate. "Aw, man. Don't be saying that. I'd follow you to hell n back!"

Green eyes roamed the room for long seconds before Canon answered. Cuddles felt tears stinging in her eyes hearing the sadness in Canon's voice. "It the truth, Eggs. Today's a good day. Tomorrow..."

Canon paused for a moment, a sigh escaping her lips. Her voice was stronger then. "Tomorrow I be ten years back...or more. You be a shortie, Eggs, running bags from corner to corner and juggling raw eggs. We be kicking them red devils from seventh."

Eggs shook her head but Cuddles could see it was in sadness not denial.

"That bad, Can?" Eggs said finally.

Canon nodded. "Worse, Eggs. Worse..."

Cuddles's eyes widened, her mouth falling open as Eggs carefully knelt in front of the seated woman. Large hands, used to beating flesh, touched gently a jumpsuit-covered knee.

Eggs spoke in a low voice. "I didna know... I'm so sorry, man."

Canon's smile was bitter. "Part o' the life, kiddo. No more, no less."

Eggs searched Canon's face for long moments. Finally she nodded slowly.

Eggs stood up quickly, her voice changing, becoming more assertive. "Have a look at the girls, Canon. There be some nice tail round here. Good peoples too. Proven on the streets. You gonna have a good time. A good time, man."

Canon merely looked at Eggs. A few moments passed before Eggs spoke again. Cuddles could hear a grain of nervousness in her voice. "I be thinking and no disrespect. Latisha here."

Canon's eyes lazily followed Eggs' gesture toward the tall woman leaning quietly against the other bunk. "Latisha," she said slowly, savouring the name.

At the sound of her name, Latisha straightened immediately. She nodded at Canon respectfully. "Canon..."

A minute nod was Canon's answer to the greeting before she turned back to Eggs. Her voice was hard. "Nah."

A moment passed in silence before Eggs started speaking, gesturing expansively. "No matter, Can. No biggie. I call the girls over. Choose what you like, man. Anything you wanna."

A curt shake of Canon's head stopped Eggs as she was moving toward the door of the cell. Eggs looked at Canon questioningly.

"Eggs," Canon said quietly. Her voice had an odd quality, like that of a patient teacher instructing a well-meaning but recalcitrant pupil.

"That ain't the way, kiddo. Family comes first. That the rule. Hear me?"

"I hear ya, Canon," Eggs answered immediately, looking at the ground.

Canon nodded at her bowed head. "Now tell me. Who's your weakest?"

Cuddles looked away as soon as Eggs' eyes turned her way. She had known that they would. It was the truth after all.

Canon's voice was calm, mild curiosity clear in it. "What the story?"

Eggs sighed. "Fuck-up. Big fucking mess it was. Couple of the girls. They... Twas a prank no more. Gave the kid some weight. For a joke, ya know. Told her to pass outside a popo joint. Initiation like, ya know."

“What the fuck?” The outrage in Canon’s voice made Cuddles look up.

Eggs was quick to explain. “Twas unsactioned. Fuckers both o’ em. Fucking fools. They got taken care of. Ya know Barbs.”

Canon nodded stiffly and Eggs continued hurriedly. “The kid. We could do nothing for the kid. Ain’t got no balls. Ain’t got no brains either. Fucking mess. Got four year. One down, three to go. I try. Keep her out of a mess. No much I can do. Fucking trouble, she is. Can’t do nothing. Can’t fight. Can’t stand up. Fucking whale can’t even run.”

Canon shook her head. “Fucking mess.”

Eggs nodded. Cuddles looked back down to the floor. It hurt her to hear it. It was the truth. It still hurt though.

A few moments passed as Canon looked up at the ceiling clearly in thought. Cuddles kept her eyes down, not daring to look at the other women in the cell. Latisha was standing quietly, keeping out of the way, as Eggs shook her head and glared at Cuddles’ bowed head.

“Alright,” Canon said finally. “I’ll take the girl. That be best.”

Eggs was shaking her head in denial even before Canon had finished. “Nah, man. Cuddles ain’t good for nothing. I got girls for ya. Good ones. Canon!”

Canon’s voice was cold, almost commanding. “Ya ain’t gonna waste a healthy bod to nursemaid a cripple. Hear me, Eggs?”

Eggs shook her head once more but did not speak.

“I’ll take the girl. That all there is. Who know? Maybe I’ll school ‘er some,” Canon said with finality.

“But Canon. Come on, man. Look at ‘er. What you gonna do? Swim though the fucking lard?” Eggs said quickly in an effort to dissuade.

Canon barked a laugh. “She got a tongue, ain’t she, Eggs? That good enough for me.”

Eggs shook her head, her voice becoming stern. “What if something happens, man? It ain’t like we own the joint. Cuddles there. She can do nothing, man. Nothing!”

Canon looked at Eggs impatiently. “I ain’t needing no fucking bodyguard, kid! I hold ma own.”

“How you gonna know her, man? You ain’t knowing her from Jesus!” Eggs replied angrily.

Cuddles felt eyes on her but refused to look upwards. She had no desire to see the contempt in the gaze of the woman that was a legend in the gang.

Canon’s words were thoughtful. “Paint an ace of swords on her. I’ll know her then.”

“An ace? Like a card?” Eggs asked with disbelief.

“Aye, girl. An ace!” Canon answered with an impatient shake of the head. “Believe me. I’ll know an ace.”

Eggs sighed but after a few moments she nodded in acquiescence. “As you wish, man. It be your call.”

Canon nodded back slowly. “Thanks, kiddo. It be alright. You’ll see. It be alright.”

Cuddles looked up when the silence lengthened to see green eyes observing her from head to toe. She swallowed painfully before slowly meeting Canon’s stern gaze.

“Come’ere, girl,” Canon said.

Cuddles walked quickly until she stood in front of Canon. An imperious gesture from Canon told her to sit. Cuddles paused for a moment. She knew she could not sit on the bunk. She had tried it once, only for the bunk's legs to groan and start to bow under her weight.

Cuddles waited for too long. Canon's voice was cold, almost angry. "Ya need a special invite, girl? What the fuck?"

Cuddles looked at the pockmarked floor in shame. She tried to speak but her voice broke at the first word. She coughed to clear her throat. "I'm sorry."

Cuddles never saw the movement that brought Canon to her feet. She did feel the hard grip of Canon's hand on her chin. Her head was jerked upwards until she looked into Canon's eyes.

"What the fuck is wrong with ya? Ya stupid or something? Sit the fuck down!" Canon ordered impatiently.

Cuddles had to blink to stop the tears from flooding her eyes. "I'm sorry, Canon. I can't," she said brokenly.

"Can't fucking what?" Canon's voice betrayed her anger.

Cuddles jerked away from the Canon's grip. With trembling hands she dashed the tears from her eyes. "I canna sit on the bunk. I'm too fat! I'm a fucking whale! That what ya wanna hear?"

The hand that grasped the hair at the top of her head felt like a band of steel. There was nothing gentle about the jerk that made Cuddles face Canon once more.

Canon's face was as hard as her voice. "I don't disrespect ya, girl. Don't go about disrespecting me! Ya hear?"

Cuddles nodded as much as the iron grip on her hair allowed.

“Good,” Canon said evenly. “Now. If ya canna sit on the fucking bunk, where the fuck do you sleep?”

Cuddles looked away, only for the grip on her hair to tighten. “On the floor,” she said in a small voice.

Canon shook her head. “Fuck!”

A moment passed, Cuddles not daring to move. Finally Canon spoke again. “Ya got enough blankets and shit?”

“Yeah,” Cuddles replied quickly.

Canon shook her head again. “Alright. Alright... It be alright.”

Cuddles nodded wordlessly. This was not what she expected.

Canon’s grip gentled until it was no more than an insistent but not painful pressure. “Look at me, girl.”

Cuddles took a deep breath and then look Canon in the eyes. Canon nodded after a moment. “Ya understand? Me ‘n Eggs here, we made a deal.”

Cuddles tried to nod but Canon shook her head immediately. She swallowed, trying to wet her throat. “Yeah, I understand.”

Cuddles waited for a moment but Canon was looking at her expectantly. She swallowed again. She knew all about it. She even knew it was not necessarily a bad thing. Still the idea left a bitter taste in her mouth.

“I’m your bitch now,” Cuddles said faintly.

Canon nodded. “That right.”

Cuddles looked down in shame but Canon forced her head upwards once more. Green eyes found hers and Canon's mouth twitched into a small smile. "It gonna be alright, girl. Hear me?"

Cuddles nodded as Canon searched her face. She wanted to look down again, hide from those eyes that seemed to see right into her but she did not dare. Finally Canon nodded.

Cuddles steeled herself. She had witnessed enough scenes like this in her year behind bars to know what was coming next.

She never expected the strong grip to change into a caress, gentle, almost loving. Canon's words came to her to a whisper that carried. "None o' that shit, girl. I ain't got nothing to prove. It gonna be alright."

Cuddles turned incredulous. This was nothing like she expected. Canon was shaking her head but a small smile played on her lips. A moment passed and then another but the gentleness in the caress against her head and cheek never changed. Cuddles swallowed and took a quick breath.

She nodded once again. This time Canon's caress changed into a light pat against her temple. Canon nodded back slowly. "It be alright."

Cuddles blinked the memory away. Even after all these years it still seemed like it had happened yesterday. Cuddles looked at the still hot cups of coffee. The years had passed since then. But she owed a debt to Canon. A debt of schooling. A debt of gratitude.

The two years she had spent with Canon until her parole came through had been the best and the worst of her life. Cuddles had learnt to live by rules that never changed and never flexed.

Canon had made her lose a hundred pounds. She resented that in a way, even as she felt grateful for it. And Canon had taught her a trade. Cuddles had been taught every trick in

the book and quite few that weren't. By the time she was paroled, she was lighter, stronger and for the first time in her life dangerous.

The others still looked at her oddly. They still made jokes about her. But now it was only behind her back. For the toughs in the corners, her quiet manner and gentle smile made her an oddity, an outsider.

But Canon had been right. Cuddles could still hear Canon's slightly hoarse words even after all this time. "A muscle is an outsider. Ya got to keep yer distance. Doing the job well, that earns ya respect. Bragging just earns ya time."

The toughs and the street dealers looked at her oddly. But these days when Barbs needed something done, done well and quietly, she always sent Cuddles to do it. Cuddles had overheard her once speaking to Rain. The memory of the words still brought a flush of pride to her cheeks. "Cuddles 's good. She the best I got."

Cuddles took a deep breath. Her eyes passed over the curious faces of the Kats watching her and the watchful gazes of the Russians. Her hands tightened on the paper cups. With slow even steps, she walked toward Detective Amanda Lewis.

She had worn an ace for two years. It had not taken long to understand that it was significant. Too many nights of listening to Canon's nightmares had told her more than she needed to know.

Not the details, certainly not the details. But enough to know that the woman the Kats had nicknamed Ace was someone Canon loved. A cup of coffee, cop or no cop, was the least Cuddles could do. This night there was no blue or the black and red. This night there were only memories and mourners.

"That's the shit that's gonna go down" ~Canon

Detective Amanda Lewis sipped from the cup of still hot coffee. Her eyes followed the heavy-set woman walking back to her friends. Amanda's gaze slid away from the Kats watching her with hatred and contempt.

They didn't understand. How could they after all? To them she was the enemy. The cop, the popo, the pig. Even after all these years, they did not forget, or forgive. Even these youngsters that had never known her, even they would not forget or forgive.

A bitter laugh reached her lips but never left them. It was ironic. Here she was, in a cold hospital waiting room. Gangbangers, local and foreign, were her fellows. Amanda knew that when her captain heard of this, there would be hell to pay.

A part of her tried to care but it did not succeed. Canon was dead. Her mind was numb. She had expected it. She had spent so long expecting it. Now that it was real, it seemed impossible to believe.

Her eyes, seemingly of their own accord, moved until she could catch a glimpse of Snow in between the Russian bodyguards' bodies. Canon was dead. And Amanda was angry. It was so easy to blame her.

Snow was the one after all. For her Canon had come back to the life. Amanda blinked forcing the tears that wanted to break through back down.

"Do you see the woman in any of these photos?" The exasperated voice asked for what seemed like the millionth time.

Washed-out green eyes turned lazily to look at the tall thin man with the thinning hair. A few moments passed in silence before green eyes, almost glazed in the light of the naked overhead lamp, turned away from the man once again.

"Listen to me! We got the car, we got the bandages, we got the pills. Piled with your prints all over. We got the tape from the pharmacy. You're going down! You hear me, Canon? You going down!"

The man's words seemed like the sound of the waves crashing against some nearly distant shore. A scene flashed before Canon's eyes. Blood dripping, Canon's hands red with it. Fingers pinching, praying for the tenuous hold not to slip. The sound of sirens,

too far away. The gun in Canon's other hand held tight, forgotten. Canon's voice, unrecognisable. "Hold on, Ace. Hold on, babe. Your pig back-up is coming. Come on. I got ya. Hold on."

The door crashing open made all eyes turn to the figure of the enraged woman in the pin-striped suit. Her voice sounded so strong, so strong. "What the fuck you think you're doing?"

The word tumbled out of Canon's lips without thought. "Ace."

Amanda felt her heart stop for a second. She moved to Canon's side without thought. Strong hands turned Canon's face gently to look into luminous blue eyes. "Where are you, Canon?"

A small smile appeared on chafed lips. "You did hold on. Didn't ya, Ace?"

Amanda blinked as her face shattered in a grimace half-grief half-pain.

"Who the hell you think you are?"

The men's voices pulled her from the pain that seemed to well unbidden, unstoppable.

Canon looked so lost.

Amanda extended her badge to the two men shouting. "Shut the fuck up!"

Canon shook her head with a pained grimace, her words coming out sluggish. "Hey, Ace."

Amanda turned back to Canon. "I'm here, Canon. I'm here."

Canon's voice was toneless, defeated. "Fucked up my parole, didn't I?"

Amanda's eyes blinked as if to hold back tears. "You've done your time, Canon. You ain't on parole no more."

The words took long moments to penetrate the pained fog in Canon's brain. The question was born out of stiff lips. "Then what up with 'em cops? Been clean, said I'd go clean." Ace...a name surfaced...Amanda... Amanda. "Amanda."

A tear fell from Amanda's eyes. It was immediately brushed away. "That's right, Roby. Amanda. Sit tight now."

Ace...Amanda turned to the two detectives, her voice colder than the sleet on a November night. "Was she hit on the head?"

The tall balding detective answered cautiously, a note of suspicion in his voice. "Just a bump. They roughed her up a bit. Nothing much. The doctors gave the all clear."

Amanda's answer was rapid fire out of lips stiff with anger. "A bump? The doctors? What doctor? Some fucking intern fresh out of med school? Are you fucking idiots?"

The smaller detective's voice was smooth, belaying his grey hair. "Detective, calm down please. Miss Carver... is not a victim."

"Miss Carver, detective, has never been a victim. And if you look at that file your partner is carrying around like a banner, you'll see a medical report thick as your skull. You cannot interview Canon without a neurologist's opinion," Amanda hissed at the older detective.

The man's eyes widened even as his partner started leafing through the file hurriedly. "What are you talking about? The doctor said no concussion, just a bump on the head."

Amanda took a large breath, letting it leave her lungs slowly. Her voice was calmer but the undertone of anger was clear to all. "Two years into her prison sentence, Canon hit her head. Badly. Very badly. She lost the greater part of her memories. Any further injuries to the head may induce coma, severe bleeding or further loss of memory. Did you or your fucking doctor check whether she knows what day it is? What month? What fucking year?"

The soft voice stopped whatever the detective was ready to answer. "1997."

Both men saw the despair colouring Amanda's face before she turned to look at the woman sitting stiffly on the chair. "Canon... Roby, you seeing flashes?"

The nod was barely discernible but both men saw it. Amanda's voice was gentle, as if speaking to a frightened child or a wounded animal. "Canon...it ain't '97 no more."

Green eyes, a sudden flash passing through them for a moment, rose to look into deep blue. "It's 2008"

Amanda slowly lowered herself to rest one knee on the interview-room's dirty floor. Her voice was gentle but forceful. "Canon, baby. I need you to listen to me now."

Green eyes blinked once in the old mannerism that almost brought the tears back to Amanda's eyes. After a quick breath, the detective continued. "What's the last thing you remember? Not a flash, Canon. A clear memory."

The answer was slow to come. "That bitch."

Amanda felt the two detectives perking up even as she delivered her next gentle question. "The one that hit ya?"

Canon's answer was immediate. "Nah...the one I'm living with."

"Sally? You remember Sally? What about her, Canon?" Amanda asked slowly.

A sad grimace contorted Canon's face. "Fought again. Calls me Roby you know. Always Roby. Fucking bitch. Hate that name."

Amanda nodded once but before she could speak, Canon continued, her voice holding a sense of wonder. "Fuck me, Ace. I've been in 'n out, ain't I? Holy fuck! You put me in, didn't ya? Shit! How long, Ace? How long was I inside?"

The lead detective had to turn his gaze away from Amanda as she threw her head back, her brow scrunched in pain. “Fuck. Ah fuck, Canon. They really scrambled you, didn’t they? The fucking bastards...”

Canon never had the chance to answer as the door banged open once again. The small rotund man with the wiry glasses glaring at all and sundry in the room. His voice was high and nasal. “Detectives. This is over. My client has nothing to say to you.”

All three detectives turned to look at the man with narrowed eyes. Amanda was the first to speak. “Your client?”

The short lawyer smiled slightly. “Miss Roberta Carver... I’m doing my pro bono...”

The words fell heavy in the ensuing silence. The redness in the two detectives’ faces betrayed their anger. Amanda did not spare a glance at them but merely turned slowly to look at the woman slumped on the chair. She opened her mouth to speak but with a shake of her head closed it again.

The lawyer took a seat next to Canon with small jerky movements. His voice was low but Amanda noted that he kept his tone gentle. “Miss Carver, my name is Chester Holms. I will be representing you.”

Amanda watched carefully as half-closed green eyes turned to look at Holms. “Who the fuck are you?”

Holms did not answer immediately but slowly opened his briefcase. Amanda’s eyes narrowed as he took out a book with a colourful jacket, obviously new. His words were slow even as his eyes searched Canon’s expression. “I thought you might want to read this.”

Canon’s eyes did not open fully but Amanda caught the sharpness that appeared suddenly as soon as the book was on the table. “This new...”

Holms spoke even more slowly than before, as if every word had to be pronounced just right. “Your original...well it got damaged...and we had to...we had to take it to the binders.”

“So?” Canon’s voice had a quality Amanda had not heard in years and it chilled her blood.

The lawyer answered more quickly this time. “It will take a while but it will be fixed. But I thought you could read this one till then.”

Canon’s nod was slow but her voice remained even. “You got my marker, Mr. lawyerman?”

Amanda looked at the lawyer as he opened his briefcase once more, this time taking a torn slip of paper out of it and placing it carefully on the book. Canon’s movements were slow but Amanda caught the assuredness, long missing, of her hands. A steady hand held the paper for a single moment before carefully placing it inside the book, only a corner sticking out the top.

Canon’s hand remained on top of the book lying on the table as green eyes turned to the lawyer. “You know your game, Mr. lawyer?”

Holms swallowed once before answering in a steady even tone. “Yes, I do, Miss Carver.”

“Gimme a sec then, counsellor,” Canon said with a nod.

Amanda watched as green eyes turned to her, searching her face lazily. “Hey, Ace...”

The tall detective stepped next to the woman handcuffed to the interview table. “Canon...”

A small movement barely followed slid the book across to Amanda. “Early Christmas this year...Detective.”

Amanda breathed deeply before taking the book in her hand. With slow careful movements, she opened the book on the page marked with the torn slip of paper. A single finger turned the paper around until Amanda could read the few words written on it.

The round childish handwriting brought a grimace to her face. She had seen it only once before but she would never forget it. The message written in round wobbly letters made Amanda's eyes closed for long moments. "If they flip me, look at the medical files. It's a child's game."

Blue eyes full of remembered pain and untold regret opened to gaze deeply into pale green ones. Amanda had to clear her throat to keep the tremor from her voice. "You sure, Canon?"

Strong fingers flexed even as green eyes blinked slowly once. "Now, Detective... First, Mr. lawyer man here will tell 'em boys o' yours that I ain't saying nothing. Then they gonna hustle a tad but ain't gonna get nothin' out of it. And then...then, Detective, the counsellor here... he gonna get your name off my shit. And you...you, Ace... you gonna get into that rustbucket you call a ride an' you gonna get outta here. For good. Hear me, Ace? That's the shit that's gonna get down."

Amanda sighed as her head bowed low. "It ain't gonna have to be this way, Canon."

The gentle touch against her cheek made Amanda raise her eyes. "That's the only way, Ace. I gotta do what I gotta do. And you gotta go catch some punk-ass criminal. That's the word, Ace. That the word."

Amanda blinked to keep the tears from falling but she could not stop herself from leaning into the still gentle touch. A soft caress of a fingertip against her temple and then Canon's hand withdrew to rest once more on the table.

Amanda rose to her full height slowly, her eyes steeling with each passing moment. She looked down once but Canon's eyes were half-closed once again, her face a blank mask. The tall detective turned away with a jerk. Slowly Amanda walked to the older detective, her hand extended holding the book closed.

As the older detective hesitantly took the book, Amanda spoke, her voice cold. "The page-marker is a message, detective. You've been played. She told them to hit her on the head. A half-decent lawyer will throw any testimony out of court in a heartbeat. You won't match the writing. It's with her left hand. But it may get you an edge...for aiding and abetting..."

Amanda's nod to the bug-eyed detective was small, almost perfunctory, before she walked purposefully to the door. Without a word, the detective opened the door, stepped out and let it close behind her. As the latch closed with a clang, the grey-haired detective turned to look at the woman sitting stiff-backed on the chair. A pang of sadness made his heart clench at the sight of the lone tear trekking down her cheek.

He was old enough and experienced enough to know he had just witnessed something private, something that his eyes were not meant for. He was old enough to know as soon as his gaze met the blank green eyes of the woman that this was all they would get. The game was over and they had lost the big fish.

His nod was a mere jerk of the head but it was enough as the prisoner's lips curved in a tiny sad smile. He'd been there before enough times. Roberta Carver, aka Canon, once top hitter of the Red Cats had played the game and she had won.

He could only shake his head. He just wished he knew the story of it but he knew that he would never find out. That was the way of it and all he could hope for was a conviction on aiding and abetting. Three to five at the most even with Canon's record. The old detective sighed once. Three to five was better than nothing.

“Fuck if I know” ~Canon

Amanda took another sip of coffee to hide the tears that flooded her eyes. Canon had done three years in jail for that. She had never said a word. Not a word. Amanda did not need Canon's confession to know. Snow was the woman Canon had been protecting that night.

Amanda had never found out exactly what had happened. But she knew enough. It had gone well before that. Canon had lasted a whole year out of the game. But that night. That cold November night something had happened. Something that sucked her right back in.

Blue eyes met blue for a single moment before a bodyguard's heavy body severed the connection. Amanda was angry. She wanted to blame Snow. In a way it was her fault after all. If she had not lured Canon back into the life, maybe Canon would still be alive.

But Amanda couldn't. She wished she could. Yet the evidence before her eyes gave the lie away. Snow looked lost. Angry for sure and cold as always. But still lost.

Amanda closed her eyes. Snow was not alone. She had seen the same look half-bewilderment half-lost child in Barbie's eyes as well. Amanda knew she would see the same look if she looked at the mirror.

The coffee had gone cold but Amanda drank the last of it regardless. With a jerk she stood up, walking the few steps to the garbage can. Amanda let the empty cup fall in without looking.

She turned slowly, her jaw clenched. As she started walking, Amanda could see both the Kats and the Russians tensing. Carefully she let her hands stay limp at her sides but she did not stop walking.

The Kats looked at her as she passed by them heading for the Russians. The lead Russian, a tall man with a drooping moustache stepped in front of Amanda blocking her way. Amanda looked at him impatiently for long moments.

Snow's voice was loud in the hospital's corridor. "пустил ее"

Amanda tensed at the sound of the order. It could mean anything as far as she knew.

The tall man slowly stepped aside. Amanda watched him carefully. His gesture was clear as he motioned her on.

Amanda nodded at the guard once as she walked through the Russians. They were watching her but Amanda did not look at them. She had eyes only for the white blue-eyed woman waiting for her to come.

Barbie was standing at Snow's side, her eyes darting between Snow and Amanda.

Amanda refused to meet the Kat's gaze. There was too much history there. And even after all this time, Amanda could still not face the unanswered questions in Barbie's eyes.

She cleared her throat waiting for an acknowledgement. Yet Snow remained cold, seemingly unconcerned, her eyes lazily roaming the corridor but never coming near to Amanda.

Amanda took a breath. There would be no acknowledgement from Snow, that much was clear. She kept her voice low. "Thanks for calling me."

Snow was slow in replying. "Canon would have asked for you."

Amanda nodded carefully. She could not dispute that. As she could not dispute what Snow left unsaid. If it were up to her, Amanda would never have set foot in this hospital. Amanda shook her head. She would not get into that now. There was no point. "If anything changes call me...please."

A curt nod from Snow was her only answer and Amanda closed her eyes to keep the anger from exploding. With a grimace she turned on her heel to leave.

Barbie's hand on her shoulder was heavy. "You're going?"

Amanda turned slightly until she faced Barbie. "Yeah. I'm going to the scene. Make certain there are no..."

Amanda paused for a moment. "...complications," she finished.

Barbie looked at her, her face hard, her eyes unyielding. "As you wish," she said with a shake of her head.

Amanda spared Barbie a glance before walking away.

Barbie kept her voice low. "I'm sorry, man."

Snow's lips creased in a small bitter smile. She just shook her head silently.

Barbie nodded slowly. "Look. I'm gonna go have a smoke. The doctors come out, send one of ma girls. Right?"

Barbie turned to leave when Snow's low voice stopped her. "Canon said you quit."

Barbie turned back to Snow slowly. "Ain't no biggie."

Snow stood up abruptly. "Don't."

Barbie's eyes narrowed. "What you say?"

A slim pale white hand gripped her arm. "Don't. Please."

Barbie shook off Snow's grip as gently as she could. She hated people handling her. Yet Snow's pale blue eyes held no compunction. "Why?" Barbie asked hoarsely.

Snow blinked, tears shining in her eyes. "She was so proud of you, you know. I think she told me like ten times."

Barbie sighed, her breath catching in her chest. Snow's voice was so sad it felt like a blow against her gut. "She hated it, you know. That she couldn't quit. When you did it..."

Snow looked away abruptly. "ебать" she whispered.

When she turned back to look at Barbie, her eyes were dry, her gaze hard. "Do what you will. No big deal," she said harshly, her accent hard.

Snow did not watch as Barbie moved through the guards on her way outside the hospital.

Her gaze seemed welded to the doors of the ER, hoping for a glimpse of something, anything.

The pigs had lost her, Natalya was certain of that, there were no sirens in the distance and no heavy footfalls following her. Another time she would laugh in the darkness but not now. Now all she could do was walk on toward the sound of the waves she could not hear and the tall shadows of the cranes on the docks that she could not see, blood dripping off her nerveless fingers.

Her good hand clutched the 9mm in a sweaty grip, her eyes feverishly looking around for people, it would not do to be seen. Anyone in this saint-forsaken country of law-abiding vicious drunks would report a bleeding staggering woman to the police. She walked on through the sparse cover next to the empty road, trying not to trip and fall over the slightly uneven ground.

Natalya watched carefully as a woman stood, the wind flapping her unbuttoned jacket, her eyes lost in the darkness of the waves on the horizon, her breathing even. There was no one around, wherever this around was. Something whispered in the back of her mind about docks and Pollacks but the voice seemed too far away for comfort.

She approached carefully, as silently as she could. “Don’t move,” Natalya ordered digging the barrel of her gun into the woman’s back.

As soon as the words registered, the woman stood stock-still except for the nervous narrowing of one eye.

“Give me the keys,” Natalya ordered and the woman complied with slow careful movements.

Natalya snatched the keys from her hand.

“Get in the car and don’t do anything stupid,” Natalya ordered once again.

The woman's movements were smooth as she opened the car door and sat on the driver's seat. No jerky trembling hands, even as a trace of a smile played on her lips. She stayed immobile, as Natalya staggered to the other side of the car and jerkily opened the door.

As soon as Natalya closed the passenger door, the woman turned slightly towards her. Natalya did not wait for her to speak. The hoarse voice sounded odd in the closed confines of the car. "Drive!"

Natalya jerkily threw the keys at the hostage. Her hand snaked out and caught them in the air. Another trace of a smile appeared on her lips.

The hostage turned on the engine and without a word or sound reversed and headed toward the road. She did not ask and Natalya gave her no instruction so she just turned left toward the highway and pressed down on the gas.

The waves of pain threatened to drown her every time the car hit the slightest bump on the road. Still Natalya gritted her teeth against the pain and the waves of nausea that rose in her gut. Taking a hostage was never a good idea and she had to keep alert, especially since the woman she had found in the empty roadside behaved too strangely for her comfort.

Even through the numbing effect of pain her mind had detected the strange reactions of the woman. When she had taken the decision to take her hostage after watching her look toward the dark water for long minutes, Natalya had expected panic, possibly even screaming. She certainly did not expect the calm and collected acceptance of her terse orders.

Still that was not what had rattled Natalya, sometimes shock made people shut down instead of sending them into a panic. What had set her teeth on edge was her hostage's fast reflexes in catching the keys out of the air and the shadow of a smile that seemed to play across the woman's face every few moments. The suspicion was too strong to deny, it would be just her luck this night to take hostage a cop.

For a moment Natalya debated asking her hostage outright but she rejected the idea immediately. If the woman was a cop, she would deny it for certain and, more importantly, it gave her an advantage if the woman did not know Natalya was on to her identity.

The even voice brought a shiver down her spine. "Where to?"

“East. Go east,” she replied with a hushed gasp.

A nod was her answer. The car sped on, just inside the speed limit.

A bump on the road made her breath catch as the pain cascaded.

“Ya got to take care of that,” her hostage said calmly.

“Drive,” she hissed in reply.

The hostage barked a laugh. “Fine. Ya keel over dead, it ain’t on me.”

“Drive!” she said through clenched teeth, the pain making the hand holding the gun tremble.

The car sped on as Natalya tried in vain to fight the pain and the blood loss.

Natalya woke with a gasp of pain. The voice against her ear made her pause in sudden fear. “Don’t move.”

Natalya’s hands tightened instinctively. It took her a moment to realise she was still holding the gun.

The voice, finally Natalya recognised her hostage’s hushed tones, continued conversationally. “I’m cleaning ya up. Stay still.”

Natalya nodded against the bedspread. Her mind felt sluggish and nausea roiled in her gut. Her side sent hot lances of pain to her brain and it was all she could do to keep from screaming.

“What are you doing?” Natalya asked hoarsely.

The hostage answered quietly in the odd lilting speech that Natalya recognised as belonging to the inhabitants of the city’s supposedly non-existent ghettos. “I’m cleaning ya up. Looks to me like a through ‘n through. ‘Twas a clean shoot. Stitched ya right up. No biggie.”

Natalya felt the pat against her back as the woman slowly stood up, making the rickety bed move.

“Where are we?” Natalya asked, her breathing laboured.

A short laugh answered her. “Some fucking town. Who the fuck knows?”

Natalya tried to sit up but the pain made her gasp, her head swimming. The flat of a hand against her back pushed her back down to the bed. “Get some fucking rest. Ya need to go to a doctor. I ain’t no surgeon. Patched ya up but that all I can do.”

Natalya’s grip on the gun tightened. She swallowed forcing the nausea down. “Why?”

Silence greeted her hissed question. Natalya took a deep breath, hissing with the pain. “Why are you doing this?”

The hand returned against her back, this time just lying there. The voice that answered her sounded odd. There was no teasing undertone in it, no sign of the even calmness she had heard from the woman before. “Fuck if I know.”

There were questions that need to be asked. Things she needed to take care of. Natalya panted against the scratchy bed spread. Only a few moments passed before she lost the battle with the darkness.

Snow blinked away the tears that seemed to spring to her eyes without her consent. Her eyes returned to the end of the corridor and the door to the ER. She watched the door for a few moments, before she turned away.

She never looked at her men, guarding her. Nor did she spare a glance for Barbie standing with the rest of the Kats.

Without thought her fist clenched. Snow moved her fingers, rubbing them with each other. Unthinkingly her hand opened, her thumb rubbing her ring finger.

There was no ring there. It was foolish for people in her line of work to get married, even more foolish to have any visible signs of their associations.

Snow blinked away the tears that sprang to her eyes once again. Snow wished she had been foolish. When there had still been time.

“Nope. Not a citizen.” ~Ace

Detective Miles Edwards looked up from the filthy uneven pavement of the alley he was in. The hubbub of the officers and the CSIs around him faded over the thousand sounds of the city all around him.

He sighed once. Slowly he turned toward the tall black woman standing just a step outside the police tape. He did not meet her eyes, instead letting his gaze roam beyond the tight confines of the alley.

They were there, as they had been since before he had arrived. Too many years on these streets had taught him to see beyond the obvious. The two Kats sitting on a porch just

opposite the mouth of the alley were obvious. There for all to see, black and red amongst the citizens.

Yet Miles' gaze was drawn to the two well-dressed white men standing seemingly unconcerned further away. In this mixed neighbourhood they should have been indistinguishable but Miles could tell they were players. He did not know for whom yet but he would find out.

It was an open-and-shut case this one. Two good eyewitnesses, the evidence as he could see it supporting their statements. Even the two uniformed officers that had responded to the 911 call corroborated the witnesses' statements. An open-and-shut case.

The victim's name had not rang any bells when he heard it. After all there were many Carvers in the city. The Kats gave him a clue. The appearance of Detective Amanda Lewis in his crime scene made him certain.

She had not passed the police tape. She had been waiting for him patiently, clearly unwilling or unable to get involved. Miles sighed deeply. This was bound to become more complicated than he had wanted. An open-and-shut case, more like an open-and-shit case.

Miles walked slowly toward Amanda Lewis, absently taking a cigarette pack out of his jacket pocket. By the time he ducked underneath the yellow police tape and stood before Amanda, he was already puffing on a lit cigarette.

"Lewis," he greeted quietly.

"Edwards," Amanda replied evenly.

Miles flicked some ash from his cigarette. "Something I can help you with?"

Amanda looked towards the crime scene, white chalk clearly delineating where bodies had lain just hours before. Her voice was hoarse. "Give me a heads-up, Miles?"

Miles stayed quiet for a moment. It was only professional courtesy to give Amanda information. She had helped him with a few cases over the years. And he still owed her. It had been his mistake after all. Still, it rubbed oddly on him.

He pursed his lips and shook his head. He could not deny the request. Not without good reason. And when it came to Canon, there was no good reason. "Looks like a rape gone apeshit. Some citizen saw it, run in to stop it. The perp shot her. Three shots. Citizen stabbed him twice in the chest."

"Fuck," Amanda whispered under her breath.

Miles clicked his tongue. He kept his voice low, unfrontational. "Seeing you here and them Kats over at the corner, I'm guessing it was no citizen."

Amanda's blue eyes seemed almost white in the streetlamps' harsh light. She cleared her throat once. "Nope. Not a citizen."

"Deal gone bad?" Miles asked, observing Amanda closely.

The tall detective shook her head. "No. No way."

Miles nodded slowly. It was just a potshot on his part. Everyone knew that Roberta Carver, aka Canon, never did petty deals on the streets.

Amanda looked at him. "You going to the hospital?"

Miles nodded quickly. "Yes. The rape victim is conscious."

"Alright. Thanks for the info," Amanda replied, her eyes once more returning to the dark alley and the twin pools of blood gleaming under the lights of the CSI team.

Miles nodded at her before turning to walk toward his car. Once inside he paused for a moment, his eyes following Amanda Lewis as she entered her own car. She drove off quickly. Miles wondered whether he would find her at the hospital. He bet he would.

The officers he had talked to had been pretty clear. The man would probably live. The woman was a goner. Miles shook his head. If he was right and it was obvious he was, this was a bigger case than he had imagined.

Miles almost laughed. For most people, even for the brass at the station, it would be just another case. A good one too. A mark up for their stats. But Miles knew better. The brass saw nothing more than numbers. Most times they weren't wrong. But this time, numbers didn't count. The people did.

Canon of the Kats was dead. And Miles didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

Miles ran towards the one lit interrogation room, bowling over a uniformed officer in the way. "Get the fuck outta my way!" He yelled hoarsely.

"Hey! Stop!" A voice shouted from behind him but Miles paid it no mind. He opened the interrogation room door, his breathing hard. The moment he saw his target, his mind seemed to snap.

"You fucking bitch! You're dead!"

He was on the woman before the detective taking her statement had even time to move. Miles managed to get two good punches in before hands grabbed him and pulled him back. His struggles were ineffectual but Miles did not notice. His vision was consumed by pale green eyes looking at him angrily.

The woman spit blood on the floor and looked Miles over. Her snigger was clearly audible to all. Miles lost it.

"Stop! Stop damnit!" The detectives holding him jerked his arms behind his back.

“What? You protecting bangers now? Cop-killers?” Miles shouted at them, his eyes wild.

A roar from the woman behind him made the sergeant standing at the door shout quickly as he stepped in covering Miles. “No! Canon, no! She’s in surgery!”

Canon looked at the sergeant. Her voice was harsh. “Better be...”

Miles looked bewildered at the two detectives still standing next to him and the sergeant. “What? What the fuck?”

The two detectives looked at him expressionless, as the sergeant turned to Miles. “Detective, please. Calm down!” he said commandingly.

Miles shook his head. He could not believe this. He did not care how much clout the bitch had. She was going down for this. “Calm down? One of my own is down and you’re protecting a fucking killer?”

“Detective, please,” the sergeant tried to calm him once more.

“Please the fuck what?” Miles shouted at him.

The sergeant put his hands forward. His voice was calm, his eyes burning into Miles’. “Canon is not the shooter.”

Miles looked from the sergeant to Canon and back again. “Not the shooter? What?” he said, his voice full of disbelief.

“Please come with me,” the sergeant said immediately, gesturing towards the door.

Miles took a step towards the door.

“Go on, fuckhead,” Miles heard Canon say behind him. In a flash he was turning around, his finger pointing at Canon.

“Listen to me you fucking dyke. I’ll fucking kill you!” Miles said with venom.

Canon’s snigger was full of contempt. “Yeah, shitbreath? Come on, come on. What? Ain’t got the balls to take me bound?”

As Miles surged forward once more, the sergeant and the detectives stepped in front of him.

“No! Detective! For fuck’s sake, man, stop or I’ll fucking arrest you, so help me God,” the sergeant hissed at him.

Miles shook off the restraining hands, allowing the men to lead him outside the interrogation room. As soon as he was out of the room, Miles turned on the sergeant. “Fine! I’m out! What?”

The sergeant sighed once but his voice was calm. “Canon is not your shooter! You were not at the scene, were you?”

Miles shook his head. “I got the call that my girl is down and you got the fucking gangbanger in.”

The sergeant gestured negatively, his voice low. “Canon is not the shooter. She saved the officer.”

Miles could not believe what he was hearing. “What? What the fuck you’re talking about?”

The sergeant took him by the hand, leading him away from the door of the interrogation room. “The call came out. Officer down. Canon called it in,” he said after a moment.

“No way! No fucking way!” Miles shouted.

The sergeant's grip on Miles' arm tightened. "Listen to me! I was one of the first on the scene. I was on my way home. Canon was holding the officer's artery closed until the paramedics got there."

"What? What?" Miles shook his head, trying to clear it.

The sergeant spoke to him slowly. "I don't know what this is about, sir. But Canon is not your shooter. We got her gun. It's not been fired any time recently."

Miles looked away from the sergeant, his eyes surveying the crowded hallway unseeingly. "How? How? Fuck! What the fuck happened?"

"I don't know, Detective. I don't know. But the witnesses said, Canon got there as the shooters were leaving," the sergeant replied quietly.

"What's that bitch saying?" Miles asked, anger once more edging his voice.

"She ain't talking," the sergeant admitted, looking away.

"Oh... I'll make her talk," Miles said threateningly taking a step towards the interrogation room.

The sergeant stepped in front of him. "Detective, I cannot let you do that."

"What? Who the fuck you think you are?" Miles shouted at him.

The sergeant's eyes flashed in irritation. "Listen to me, boy! She ain't gonna talk to you. And you are too invested in this. Go to the fucking hospital. See to your undercover officer. We'll take care of things here."

Miles shook his head, absently lighting another cigarette. He took a deep drag, as he turned the car on. He did not look forward to going to the hospital.

“I ain’t no prince charming.” ~Canon

“I am very sorry for your loss. We did everything that we could. Unfortunately...”

The doctor’s words were like stakes burying themselves one by one in Natalya’s heart. Instinctively she took a step away from him.

He kept on talking, condolences falling from his lips with practiced ease. Natalya refused to hear any more. She wanted nothing from this man. He had failed. There was nothing more to say.

Natalya’s heart clenched and it was all she could do to remain standing as the pain radiated from her chest. Her fists clenched instinctively even as her mind retreated unwilling to witness this scene any longer.

Natalya opened the door, her hands trembling. The sight of Canon at her doorstep brought a smile to her face. She looked at Vladimir and nodded. Vladimir nodded back, a smile playing on his lips.

Natalya took a breath. She swallowed once as she looked at Canon. “Please, come in,” she said quietly.

Canon looked at her, her eyes hooded with suspicion. She nodded after a few moments and stepped inside.

Natalya gestured towards the couch and the unopened bottle of beer on the coffee table. “Sit down, please. Have a drink.”

“I’m alright.” Canon shrugged, standing just a couple of steps inside the house.

Natalya sighed quietly. "Please... Canon. Just a drink," she said beseechingly, gesturing at the couch again.

Canon looked away for a moment. Finally she nodded and sat on the couch. "Alright..."

Natalya smiled widely. It felt good. Seeing Canon for the first time after four years. She had gotten regular reports from their contacts in prison, even a photograph or two over the years. Still it was not the same.

"So..." The trembling in her voice was something Natalya could not disguise. She had thought about it for so long. Had imagined it so many times, she felt like laughing or crying.

"Hm..." Canon grunted, her eyes never leaving Natalya.

Natalya waited for a few moments but it soon became clear that Canon would not speak. She swallowed then, her heart beating erratically. Natalya almost laughed. Here she was, an ex-con, the primary enforcer for a major Russian mobster in this part of the world, and her hands trembled at the thought of speaking.

"Ah... I... ah..." Natalya stammered as the right words refused to come to her tongue, no matter how many times she had rehearsed this scene. Her sigh was loud. Natalya shook her head in irritation. "I don't know how to start this," she finally blurted out hurriedly.

Canon looked at her for long moments, her face hard. "What you want?" she asked curtly.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," Natalya said with a gasp. She had expected anger. But not this collected coldness.

Canon looked away. When she looked back at Natalya, a shadow seemed to have come over her features. Her voice was low but there was no disguising the roughness in it. "Ain't your bad. I ain't holding it against ya. Shit happens."

“Yeah... ah...” Natalya said slowly. Nervously she put a hand over her eyes. There was nothing she regretted more than being unconscious for those crucial few hours. If only she had been awake. If only Sergei had not put Grigory in charge of taking care of things. If only...

Natalya shook her head. If onlys had no point in this life. Still she could not shake the guilt that had plagued her for four years.

“You should not have been involved. This was... ah... internal,” Natalya said carefully, her eyes avoiding Canon’s.

A strong but gentle hand the same Natalya remembered from those fateful three days, grasped her hand.

“I tole ya. Shit happens. No sweat,” Canon said in low tones.

“I...” Natalya started and then stopped. She shook her head once again, blinking the tears away.

“Snow...” Canon said, her voice low and rough.

“Yeah?” Natalya looked at Canon, hope filling her eyes.

Canon shook her head angrily but her voice remained low, sadness more than anger colouring it. “I been in the can for four years. Four fucking years. Hmm...”

Canon stood up abruptly. Her voice broke but she went on regardless, refusing to look at Natalya. “This my first night out. I gotta go. I got...things to do.”

A shiver seemed to pass through Canon. Jerkily she stepped towards the door.

“Canon!” Natalya called out as she stood up too.

Canon froze in mid-step. “Yeah?”

Natalya moved swiftly until she was standing in front of Canon, blocking her way to the door. "Do them here. Please," she said, her eyes blazing.

Canon turned away from Natalya, taking quick steps, putting distance between them.

"Girl, ya don't know what yare talking about. I'll talk to ya, alright? In a couple o' days," she said roughly, tossing her head.

Natalya stepped behind Canon, almost touching her back. "Please. Just stay. There's nothing... anything you want. You'll have," she breathed, her voice carrying no further than Canon.

"Fuck! Like I said. We'll talk. Not now though." Canon's reaction was almost violent as she stepped away, turning to face Natalya.

Natalya gasped seeing the tears that reddened Canon's eyes.

"What you want? Booze? Drugs? Girls? Whatever it is, you can get it here," she said quickly, stepping closer to Canon once again.

Canon retreated immediately, putting her hands in front of her as if to ward Natalya off. Her voice trembled. "Fuck! Don't do this. Just don't."

Natalya stepped forward immediately until her chest pressed on Canon's outstretched hands. She kept her voice low, the pleading clear in it. "Please. Проклятье! Please..."

Canon snatched her hands back as if burnt. She shook her head once again.

"It been four years. Four years, Snow. Ya ain't owe me nothing. It's done. It's over," Canon panted.

"No! It isn't like that. It isn't. I... I think of you," Natalya said stepping forward once again.

Canon did not retreat this time but she put her hand up once again. “Fuck! Girl... Shit! This ain’t the right time. There be no right time. Just let it go, you know. Let it go.”

Natalya grasped Canon’s hand, refusing to let her go. “Why? Cause I’m white?”

Canon was quick to tear her hand out of Natalya’s grasp. “Fuck! Oh man.”

“Why?” Natalya said strongly, stress and anger making her accent heavy.

Canon’s shake of the head was filled with sadness. “I ain’t no prince charming. And you ain’t no Snow White,” she said heavily, her eyes on the floor in front of Natalya.

“It isn’t over, till you say it’s over,” Natalya said clearly and strongly.

“Fuck! It’s... fuck! Not tonight, alright?” Canon stepped back again, her eyes darting over the living room but never once stopping on Natalya.

Natalya shook her head stubbornly. “Tonight! You leave now, you’ll be gone. I... I’ve waited,” she said, her voice breaking at the last.

Canon’s eyes were wide as she looked at Natalya. “You shouldn’t have,” she said immediately.

Natalya did not answer. She merely stared at Canon until the black woman looked down to the floor once again.

Canon’s voice trembled. “They say you do only two days. Day you go in, day you come out. I didn’t. I felt every day. This ain’t how it should be.”

Natalya nodded. Too many things about this, her adopted country, still did not make sense to her. But prison she knew. Some things were the same here in the land of opportunity as they were in the homeland.

“I want... I want to know you,” she whispered.

“Can’t happen. It can’t,” Canon denied the possibility immediately.

“Why?” Natalya pressed mercilessly.

“The game. It ain’t wise,” Canon replied after a moment but her eyes did not meet Natalya’s fevered stare.

“Fuck the game!” Natalya shouted, angry at the evasion.

“You don’t know what you’re saying,” Canon ground out through clenched teeth.

“Stay...” Natalya hissed, coming closer to Canon.

“Nah...” Canon shook her head negatively.

“Stay... please,” Natalya pleaded as she stood a hair’s breadth away from Canon.

“Snow...” It was Canon’s turn to plead this time as she tried to move away once again only to be stopped by Natalya’s sure grip around her waist.

“Please...” Natalya breathed in Canon’s ear, her insides clenching at finally breaching the distance that haunted her.

Vladimir’s hesitant touch on her shoulder pulled Natalya from her memories.

“я сожалею,” Vladimir’s sad voice sounded in Natalya’s ears.

She looked at his washed-out blue eyes and saw the sincerity there. Natalya nodded once. There were no words left in her any more.

“In my part o’ the world, ya learn to live with yar gut.” ~Canon

The phone’s ringing sounded over the noise of the TV. The old man reached slowly for it as he turned down the volume on the TV.

Sergei Armanov’s command was curt. “Болтать”

Vladimir’s voice on the phone was small. The old man could tell he was trying to be quiet. “это я”

Sergei grimaced. Vladimir had a tendency to state the obvious.

“она умерла” Vladimir’s word made Sergei close his eyes. He had been expecting it but expectation never made the reality easier. He sighed heavily. The black one was dead.

“Как она?” He asked after a moment.

No reply came to his curt question. His heart started to thud in his chest. He did not approve. What God-fearing man would approve of such things? But Natalya was still his niece. And one of the most valuable members in his organisation.

Vladimir’s response was slow. Sergei could hear the worry in it. “Наталье не очень хорошо. Что мы должны делать?”

Sergei sighed once more. Natalya was not well. He did not approve but he could not disprove the evidence from his informants. Even if he could, he could never doubt what he had witnessed with his own eyes.

Unnatural it was but Natalya was happy. Happier than he had ever seen her before.

His answer to Vladimir was heavy. “оставаться с ней. держать ее безопасной. отделаться от полиции.”

There was not much else he could do. The men would keep Natalya safe. And away from the police that was already too involved in this.

“Да,” Vladimir replied quickly.

Sergei put down the phone. Slowly he walked to the mini-bar at the corner of the room. He poured a single shot of Russky Standart. He kept it in his hand for a moment.

“черная, обрети душевный покой,” he whispered to the empty room before drinking the stinging shot in a single gulp.

Everyone deserved to rest in peace. Sergei poured another shot. Slowly he brought it up until it was level with his eyes.

His voice was rough, his accent so heavy that it was barely understood. “Rest in peace, Canon.”

He drank that shot more slowly. Everyone deserved to rest in peace. Especially villains with golden hearts.

Sergei Armanov entered the house confidently as he did all things. Two bodyguards preceded him, another watching his back.

He stopped just inside the living room, looking at the men gathered there. Vladimir was the first to get up at the sight of Sergei. He nodded respectfully. Sergei nodded back at him. He did not take offence. Vladimir was not much for words.

The last to stand up was the one Sergei expected. Grigory was acting out more and more these days. Sergei looked at his son through hooded eyes.

“Где она?” Sergei asked without preamble looking at Grigory.

Vladimir was the one to answer gesturing towards the closed door that led to the bedroom.

Sergei glared at Grigory but his son was not looking at him. Sergei sighed. He did not have the time or the patience to deal with a spoiled child now.

“Где черная?” he asked directly to Vladimir.

Vladimir avoided his eyes for a moment. Slowly he gestured towards the bedroom once again.

Sergei felt the blood rise to his head. With an angry glare at Vladimir he walked to the closed door. Without knocking, he opened the door and stepped inside.

Sergei looked around the small bedroom. Doctor Ivanov looked up from where he was taking care of his patient. He met Sergei's eyes only for a second before returning back to his work.

Sergei looked at the young man sitting at the lone chair with narrowed eyes. He was a youngster, one of Grigory's men. After a moment Sergei dismissed him. There was a lot of bravado in the man's stance as he sat on the chair, a gun in his hand. Sergei had little use for bravado.

Only after he had surveyed everything in the room, did Sergei turn back to the bed. Natalya looked pale under the inadequate lighting. Doctor Ivanov was stitching her back with small meticulous movements.

Sergei looked at the last occupant of the room. The black woman that had brought Natalya in stood just opposite the doctor, gently cleaning the seeping blood from Natalya's wound.

“Как она?” Sergei asked finally.

Doctor Ivanov did not look up from his stitching. “She will be fine. I flushed out the infection and she is on antibiotics now.”

Sergei’s eyes narrowed. It was not like Ivanov to speak in English. It took him a moment to realise that Ivanov was including the stranger in their midst in their conversation.

Another man may have said something at that moment but Sergei did not. He merely waited until the doctor finished with his meticulous work. Sergei had been meticulous as well.

He would never have come here, nor allowed Grigory to come if he had not been certain. His contacts in the police had checked the name and the description of the woman that had delivered his niece to Vladimir’s doorstep. This woman, Canon as they called her on the streets, was no cop.

Doctor Ivanov finished after a minute or two. He carefully wiped his hands with a towel. With a respectful nod at Sergei he left the room.

Canon wiped her hands quickly with the discarded towel. Sergei watched as she slowly turned to him. Green eyes met his gaze and held it.

Sergei held the gaze unflinchingly. Long moments passed in a stare-down. Sergei knew he would not look away. He had looked at the eyes of the KGB and never looked away. Yet he could tell. The woman in front of him would not look away either.

Finally he chose to speak first. No matter what the woman wanted, he owed her. Natalya was family. “What do you want?” Sergei said slowly, enunciating the words as clearly as possible.

Canon’s answer was clear and quick, never avoiding Sergei’s eyes. “To get out of here alive.”

Sergei nodded slowly. That was not what he had expected. Given who the woman was, he was expecting some deal, drugs or guns, whatever her gang needed.

Canon tossed her head. “Ya’ll got some beef with the popo. I ain’t got no problem with that. Just wanna get outta here.”

Sergei’s eyes narrowed for a moment before he turned to the young man still sitting at the chair in the corner. “Выйти,” he ordered.

The young man hesitated for a moment looking first at Sergei and then at the woman. “Теперь!” Sergei hissed at him.

The young man looked away immediately and left the room as quickly as his feet could take him.

“Sit,” Sergei told Canon, gesturing at the empty chair.

His eyes narrowed when Canon shook her head negatively. Sergei was a keen student of body language. It was not the shake of Canon’s head that made him look at Canon curiously but the subtle movement of her body, as if she were trying to shield the unconscious Natalya.

“As you wish,” Sergei said finally.

Canon nodded slowly at him.

Sergei waited for a few seconds debating how to play this game. With a sigh, he spoke. “Why you take care of Natalya?”

A small smile creased Canon’s face. “That her name?”

The question was like a blow to Sergei but he let nothing show on his face. Instead he nodded simply.

Canon inhaled noisily. “That a good name.” She paused for a second looking at Sergei carefully. “There ain’t no reason. In my part o’ the world, ya learn to live with yar gut. Snow White here looked like good peoples.”

Whatever Sergei was preparing to say in answer was cut off by a single low moan from the bed. He had barely managed to take a step towards Natalya when Canon was already kneeling at her side.

Sergei’s stomach churned as he watched Canon place a gentle hand on Natalya’s sheet-covered back. Her voice was low, calming. “Easy now, girl. Yer with yer peoples now. Easy, Snow. Easy, girl.”

Natalya slowly opened her eyes. Her voice was barely a hoarse whisper. “Where?”

Sergei watched the gentle smile on Canon’s face. “With yer peoples, Snow. Yer safe now. Yer gonna be fine. Doc stitched ya up real good. Word!”

A hushed grunt was Natalya’s answer, even as her eyes closed again.

Sergei watched the change avidly as Canon’s gentle face changed to that of a hardened banger. She stood up slowly and turned to face him.

Sergei waited for Canon to speak but after a few moments it became obvious that she would not. Sergei nodded, more to himself than Canon.

The land of opportunity had a dark and ugly underbelly. Sergei knew that well, he was part of it after all. Yet what people often forgot, citizens and players alike, was that even criminals were people.

Sergei knew that better than anyone. How many would believe that a Russian mob boss with a reputation for cruelty had loved his wife more than anything and that her death from cancer had broken his heart? Who would believe that a man like Sergei Armanov would love his family, his only son and his niece and nephew, and would do anything for them?

Maybe some kind-hearted soul would believe. There were still pure people in this ugly world. Sergei laughed in the recesses of his mind, his face remaining hard and expressionless. Even such a kind-hearted soul would have trouble believing that Sergei Armanov who had cheated, lied, stolen and murdered his way to power had a soft spot for honour and integrity.

Sergei took a long hard look at the woman in front of him. He had little to do with the black communities in this, his adopted, country. He was an Old World man with Old World beliefs and prejudices.

Yet Sergei could recognise honour and pride when he saw it. Even if it were the wrong colour. He took a breath, not deep, not quick, just an ordinary breath.

There was only one thing that he needed to know. Just in case. "Are you Natalya's ...friend?"

Canon snorted in answer. "Yer girl here, she put a gun to ma head three nights ago. I ain't never see her before that."

Sergei nodded quickly. He had not truly expected a different answer. He kept tabs on Natalya and the girls that infrequently populated her bed, as much as he kept tabs on Grigory and the whores that surrounded him day and night.

Sergei allowed his eyes to fall on Natalya's prone form. He could not help the grimace from his face. Natalya had been lucky. That bullet could have cost her life. She had been lucky twice. Sergei needed no doctor to tell him that someone had taken care of that wound long before now. Enough to stop Natalya from bleeding to death.

Finally Sergei Armanov looked at Canon. His voice was low, his accent heavy. "My men will drop you off wherever you want."

Canon stared at him hard before nodding slowly. "Ya'll need to take care of ma ride. Torch it. No evidence. Your boys, they get me a bottle of booze and an eightball. Popo won't touch me then."

Sergei smiled slightly. "It will be done."

For the first time since he had entered this room, Sergei saw Canon's eyes avoid his own. He watched carefully as her eyes first came to stop on Natalya. A small smile creased her lips before being replaced by a look Sergei could only describe as determination.

Canon looked around the room then. As soon as she spied a notebook on the dressing table she moved towards it purposefully. Sergei watched patiently as Canon struggled with the pencil in her left hand.

Finally Canon tore the piece of paper from the notebook. Quickly she moved to her oversized jacket where it lay forgotten beside the bed. Sergei tensed as Canon rummaged through the jacket pockets. One could never be too careful.

He almost exhaled in relief when Canon stood up again, a dog-eared book with a colourful jacket in her hands. Carefully she put the torn piece of paper in the book.

"If the popo haul me in, this... this'll make sure I never testify," Canon said giving the closed book to Sergei.

Sergei accepted it slowly, looking at it curiously. Canon took her jacket off the floor, wearing it quickly.

She nodded toward Sergei before moving towards the door. Her hand was on the handle when she turned back to Sergei. Canon's voice was low. "When Snow comes round, she might wanna finish it," she said gesturing at the book in Sergei's hands.

Sergei glanced at the sleeping woman on the bed before meeting Canon's serious eyes. He could hear the message, both the obvious one and the one between the lines.

Sergei nodded his understanding. Canon glanced once at Natalya before turning and leaving the room.

"One of us..." ~Detective Nick Fischer

Detective Miles Edwards nodded at the nurse curtly. She took a deep breath before snapping the sheet from the corpse's face.

Miles looked at the bloodless face impassively. There was no mistaking the identity of the dead woman in front of him. This was no scam, no elaborate charade for Canon to disappear.

No, Roberta Carver was clearly dead.

Miles nodded at the nurse again. Her movements were abrupt as she put the stained sheet over Canon's face.

Miles turned away from the gurney. His steps were slow as he neared the door.

Miles nodded as Detective Nick Fischer motioned him inside the small interrogation room.

"What do you want, Miles?" Fischer asked as soon as the door closed behind Miles.

Miles' voice was hoarse, his eyes haunted. "Why? I just don't get it, Nick. I don't get it."

Fischer sighed once and shook his head. His voice lost the professional tone. "They fooled you, Miles."

"What?" Miles asked immediately.

"You don't even know, do you?" Fischer sighed.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Miles shouted unmindful of where they were.

Fischer’s voice was low but sharp. “Everyone knows. Everyone. Canon don’t mix business and pleasure.”

Miles shook his head in immediately denial. “What? That’s bullshit. Fatima Aiser, aka Barbie-doll.”

“You are a fool!” Fischer hissed, looking at Miles with contempt.

“What?” Miles shouted, taking a quick step towards Fischer. They had been friends in the Academy but Miles did not care how many bridges he had to burn. He would get to the bottom of this no matter what it cost.

Fischer stood his ground. “No one knows what went on between Canon and Barbie. There are rumours but that’s all they are. Believe me, more than one cop tried to flip Barbie on this. They never got anything. Whatever happened, no one knows about it. And if someone knows they ain’t talking,” Fischer said, each word careful and precise.

Miles passed a hand through his hair, his breathing hard. “But I was told... that was the only way in.”

Fischer pursed his lips. “The way into Canon. Yeah. But not the Kats. The moment your undercover officer got into Canon’s bed, your case was over,” he said with another shake of his head.

Miles grasped his temples, his eyes closing as if in pain. “God! Fuck!” he swore.

Fischer leaned against the room’s bare wall. The disappointment was clear in his tone. “I don’t get you, Miles. You’ve never been around here before. Not once. Yet you had an undercover operation for almost a year? Hell! Where did you find the funding for it?”

Miles looked at him shaking his head. “I don’t know. The orders came from the top,” he admitted finally.

“Bullshit!” Fischer hissed. “That’s bull and you know it.”

“What?” Miles asked immediately.

Fischer’s eyes were cold as he looked at Miles. “Whoever it was, they fucked you up. And you... you got sloppy, Miles. You didn’t learn your suspect. You didn’t try to find out.”

“I was told this was on the hush. Your precinct isn’t to be trusted. You got too many ties to the Kats, everyone knows that,” Miles said plaintively.

Fischer rubbed the stubble on his face as he usually did when tired. “Yeah... that ain’t a lie,” he admitted slowly. “And we got the lowest stats of all the city. Fuck, man! It ain’t no sense to go after the Kats. There ain’t no crime here. No bodies on the street, no citizens complaining. Why the hell spend that kinda money on an undercover operation here? Someone played you for fools.”

“Bullshit. Bullshit...” Miles said in denial.

“Fuck you, Miles,” Fischer spat out moving towards the door.

Miles moved quickly in front of him, blocking him from leaving. His voice was conciliatory. “No! No! Nick! Please... I need to know. That fucking dealer says there’s no mole. That... they followed me. They got Amanda because of me.”

“Canon told you that?” Fischer asked immediately, his eyes narrowing.

“Yeah...yeah...” Miles admitted after a moment.

Fischer nodded at once. “Then that’s what went down.”

“What?” Miles cried out.

Fischer sighed. "Listen to me. You don't know this part of the city. This ain't your usual dealing thing. The Kats ain't like that. Shit! I don't know what the Kats are like. But Canon ain't like that," he said in a low earnest voice.

"That's bullshit, man, and you know it! Everyone's making out like this bitch is a fucking saint. Bullshit! She ain't! Nowhere near. She's a dealer and a banger and a goddamn killer," Miles said angrily. He was so tired of everyone treating a gangbanger like an honest citizen.

Fischer shook his head in wonder. "You think I don't know that, Miles? Yeah. Canon deals and bangs. And sure as hell, she's killed. No bodies though. No blood on the street. Detectives here have tried to make a case for years. Never got nothing. Every now and again some fucker from downtown will come here thinking he'll make his name on Canon and the Kats. You know what? They all left with their asses hanging out. Just like you have."

"And that's alright with you?" Miles asked belligerently, his anger getting the better of him.

Fischer's gaze was angry, his voice impatient. "You know nothing do you? Ah...Miles. The citizens here, they protect them. Hell, even the reverends protect them. And the cops? The cops won't do nothing about it. Cause there is nothing to be done. People in this neighbourhood, they're safe. They're happy. The Kats keep the peace. For real. We get to do our jobs. No interference. No fucking gang killings. It's a different life."

"Then you're the fool, Nick," Miles replied contemptuously.

Fischer smirked, his eyes turning cold and impassionate once again. "Maybe... But I'd take an honest banger over a piece of shit cop or DA everyday of my life."

"So that's how it is," Miles asked him in a hard voice.

Fischer nodded, the smirk never leaving his lips. "That's how it is, Miles. You're putting Canon in not for dealing, not for banging, not for killing. You're putting her in for not letting one of us bleed out in the gutter. One of us, Miles! One of us..."

Miles Edwards opened the door slowly, his nose wrinkling at the smell of blood, antiseptic and disease that permeated the hospital. He did not turn to look at the dead body on the gurney as the door closed behind him.

He had been young then. Young and foolish. Now he knew better. He had been played for a fool back then. Even so, he refused to shed even one tear for a killing scumbag like the one laid out on the gurney.

Nick Fischer had been right all those years ago. The Kats' part of the city was quiet. In the rest of the city gang killings and drug deals gone bad were a common occurrence. Not where the Kats ruled.

Yet Miles knew equally well that there was blood on those streets as well. It was hidden, not displayed in drive-bys and shoot-outs for the world to know. Yet everyone knew, even if no one talked about it.

The Kats kept their territory not through strength or bribes but through terror. Not the obvious terror that the other drug-dealing scum specialised in. This terror was different, more insidious than anything Miles had come across.

Methadone clinics and homeless shelters were protected where the Kats ruled. Citizens went to work each morning and to church each Sunday feeling safe. Parents sent their kids to school and let them play on back yards without fear of a stray bullet taking their lives away.

Miles' steps were slow and measured as he traversed the hospital's blindingly lit corridors. He would not shed a tear for Canon. Such as her did not deserve his tears. But he was sad. Not for Canon but for the people left behind.

And people disappeared. One moment they were there and the next they were gone. Everyone knew even if no one dared say it out loud. You went against the Kats, Canon made certain not even your cold lifeless body would be found. Miles hated it but he could not deny the truth of it. Terror kept the streets safe.

“This is a debt I have to pay” ~Snow

The music was turned low as the car sped through the empty city streets even as the sun rose. Natalya could feel Vladimir glancing at her every few moments. His worry was something palpable.

She was grateful, though. Vladimir had seen too much in his life. Too much to waste time and breath in empty words.

Natalya was looking at the buildings passing in front of her eyes sightlessly. There were people around but none of them caught her attention. A part of her wanted to scream, another wanted blood.

Yet they were thin voices in her mind, mere distractions. Natalya closed her eyes. There was nothing out there she wanted to see. Nothing she wanted to hear.

Natalya gritted her teeth, trying to force the pain down. The pills on her bedside table were a constant temptation. Yet she could not take them. She had to keep a clear head. She had to...

Vladimir's voice as he talked to her uncle was tight, the anger clear in it. Although Sergei's face seemed expressionless, Natalya could see his anger in blue eyes that seemed frozen.

Chester Holmes, the attorney that had been with them since they had first come to America, looked on, lips pursed in his usual expression of deep thought. Natalya glanced at him quickly and then looked away. As always Chester would help them but it was not up to him to make decisions or advice on them.

Natalya looked down on her lap and the dog-eared book there. It was open, the page marker untouched in the middle of the page. Natalya did not dare touch it, no matter how much she wanted to. Her fingerprints should not be on that piece of paper.

Yet she could not help but read the rounded childish letters again and again. As soon as Vladimir's contacts with the police had given them the heads-up, Sergei had their contacts in the hospital look into this information.

Natalya swallowed hard. She had not seen the file, just gotten the bare strokes of the case. It was enough to bring tears to her eyes if a too hard life had not dried them out of her long ago.

Natalya shook her head. No wonder Canon seemed lost half the time. She was.

Vladimir's voice was getting more and more heated, even as Sergei's eyes froze more and more. Natalya looked at her hands. She had always been proud of her hands. They were strong, capable hands. They were beautiful too, attractive, well taken care of.

Her voice was strong and even. "Let Chester do his job. This is a debt I have to pay."

Natalya did not look at Chester as he looked at her in surprise. He was used to being left out of the conversation as his clients conversed in Russian until they were ready to give him his instructions.

Instead Natalya's eyes looked steadily, unflinchingly at Sergei.

Long moments passed as Sergei looked at her, a million questions in his eyes. Natalya's gaze never left his eyes.

Sergei's voice was heavy. "Ваши отпечатки пальцев на автомобиле."

Natalya raised her chin. She spoke in English. Chester needed to understand how important this was. "I'll burn them off. My prints are not on file. Not anymore. They'll have nothing."

Silence reigned as Natalya stared into Sergei's eyes, her eyes never moving. After a few moments both Chester Holmes and Vladimir looked away from the pair.

Almost a minute passed in silent communication between Natalya and her uncle.

Sergei was the first to look away. His voice was raspy. "Вы уверены в этом?"

Natalya nodded. "I am certain. This is the way it has to be."

Sergei grimaced even as he shook his head in a rare expression of anger and denial. Finally he nodded at Natalya.

Slowly Sergei turned his gaze to Chester Holmes. His voice had regained its usual evenness. "You will represent this woman. Give her our assurances. We will...make certain her time inside is... safe and comfortable. Yes, Chester?"

Chester Holmes stood up, gathering his briefcase in an easy movement born of long practice. "As you wish, Mr. Armanov."

Chester waited for Sergei's dismissing nod before moving towards the door. Natalya's heavy voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Get a copy of this book, Chester. A new one. Put in the pagemaker from this one. Hopefully she will trust you if you have this," Natalya said throwing the book at him.

Chester caught it in mid-air. Carefully he leafed through it. A moment passed as he studied the torn paper serving as a page marker.

Chester Holmes was not a stupid man. He looked at Natalya and nodded silently.

Natalya watched Chester Holmes as he left the room. Only then did she turn to look first at her uncle and then finally to Vladimir.

Her voice was strong, not a single tremor marring its coldness. “ПОДГОТОВИТЬ, ЧТО ВАМ НУЖНО. Я ГОТОВ.”

Vladimir looked away from her burning gaze but he nodded slowly. Without a word he left the room.

Natalya took a deep breath, her eyes falling to her hands. She looked at them carefully, committing them to memory. She would never see them unmarred again.

Finally she raised her head, looking straight at Sergei. Her voice was cold, business-like. “Grigory.”

Sergei closed his eyes for a moment, a rare show of weakness. When he opened them again, his gaze burned. His accent was so heavy that Natalya thought he was speaking in Russian.

“He is my son. He is a fool. Things like this cannot happen. I will take care of Grigory.”

Natalya looked at him steadily before nodding slowly. She needed no more. She was no hotheaded idiot needing to bay for blood. If Sergei Armanov said he would take care of something, then it was done.

The car stopping brought Natalya out of her thoughts abruptly. She opened her eyes, looking around. It took her a moment to realise that they were not in front of the building she lived. Rather they were standing in front of the impressive looking townhouse, Sergei had bought a couple of years ago.

Natalya looked at Vladimir questioningly. He shrugged in answer and then turned and got out of the car.

Natalya shook her head. Another day she would have simply ordered Vladimir to take her to her own place. She was no little girl to need her hand held.

Not today though. Natalya just sighed and opened the door of the car. She had neither the energy nor the will to get into an argument now.

“...ya gotta get clean. For real.” ~Canon

Barbie heard the minister’s words. Good words, inspiring and gentling at the same time. Reverend Wallace was a good man and a fine speaker. And he knew what to say in occasions such as these.

Barbie let her attention wander away from the minister’s words. There was nothing there she had not heard before and nothing she would not hear again.

Her attention returned slowly to the coffin dominating the stage. A part of her could still not believe that it was Canon in that coffin. Her eyes closed behind her dark sunglasses, her memory unbidden bringing forth scenes of the past.

Barbie kept her eyes closed but she could not escape the sounds from the TV placed at the opposite wall. She had tried enough times to get to it, somehow lower the volume.

The cuffs had a longer chain than any pair she had ever seen before. Certainly enough for her to get to the toilet-bowl next to the bed but nowhere near enough for her to get to the TV. Barbie had even tried throwing things at it. But pillows, toilet rolls and paper plates did not do much to the sturdy TV set.

Right now Barbie had the thin pillow over her head trying to drown out the sounds but it did not help much. She could recognise her own voice clearly, as well as Canon’s hoarse

tones. She could tell every sound, every moan and plea coming out of her lips as the tape went on and on in an endless loop.

As the gurgling sounded loud and clear in the confines of the tiny room, Barbie felt her stomach lurch as it always did. Even after three weeks, the shame had not left her; it had not even faded. Barbie scrunched her eyes tight but she could not stop the images burned in her brain from parading across her eyelids.

The images would not stop and with them they brought the remembered taste that made her stomach turn. Barbie felt that she would never be able to wash the taste of piss from her mouth, just like she would never be able to forget her own voice pleading and begging.

Not that she had the opportunity to forget. The constant loop of the video made certain that she heard every word, watched each shameful act again and again in a never-ending presentation of her shame.

The shakes had stopped weeks ago but Barbie would give anything for a quick fix right now. She shook her head under the pillow. There would be no fix, she knew that, not as long as Canon had her there.

The sound of the steel door unlocking made Barbie sigh in relief. With quick movements she took the pillow off her head. As Canon came in, a big KFC box in her hands, Barbie sat up, the chain connecting her to the wall rattling as she moved.

Canon nodded at Barbie as she sat the box of fast food on the bed and then patted the pockets of her oversized jacket until she found what she wanted. A moment later a handful of paper napkins joined the box on the bed.

“Thanks,” Barbie said with a smile, gesturing at the food.

Canon shrugged in answer.

Barbie cleared her throat. “Canon...”

“What?” Canon husked as she went back to the half-open door and lifted a large-sized soft drink from the floor just outside.

“Turn that shit off, man. Please...” Barbie said, licking her lips.

Canon glanced at her before closing the door carefully. She did not say a word as she walked the few steps to the bed and left the paper cup on the floor next to it.

Barbie sighed in agitation. Her voice rose, pleading. “Please, man! Canna take no more. It ain’t like that no more.”

Canon did not answer, merely turned on her heel and walked to the door.

Barbie could see her opportunity for relief from the constant stream of sound and vision assaulting her slipping away from her. “Come on, Can. I be clean. Three weeks like. Ain’t no need for that shit no more,” she cried out desperately.

“Eat your dinner, Barbs,” Canon answered finally, as she opened the door.

Barbie shot up from the bed, going as far as the chain on her wrist allowed. “Please, man... please. I hit bottom, Can. I on the up now.”

Canon closed the door once more before turning back to face Barbie. She looked at Barbie for long moments before she cocked her head and her eyes narrowed in thought. Finally she snorted once before taking a small vial, a syringe and a spoon out of her pocket. Without a word she left them at the table next to the still playing TV.

Barbie turned away, her shoulders hunching. “Aw shit, man. Don’t do that,” she said in a small voice.

Canon’s voice was hard, unyielding. “Why, Barbs? Hook still there?”

Barbie took a quick breath. She turned then to face Canon, willing her eyes to stay on Canon’s face and not stray towards the fix that she craved. She tried to make her voice unconcerned. “Nah. Just don’t wanna look at the shit. Word, man.”

“That right?” Canon asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Yeah. Most def,” Barbie answered strongly, nodding emphatically. Still she did not take her eyes off Canon.

Canon pursed her lips, looking straight into Barbie’s eyes until the younger woman looked away.

“Look at it! I said fucking look at it!” Canon shouted abruptly, making Barbie jump in surprise.

“Ah, man...” Barbie shrugged and looked at the floor. She never saw Canon’s eyes narrowing to slits.

Canon’s movements were slow, deliberate as she came to stand next to Barbie, her hands coming to rest on Barbie’s flanks.

“Canon, man. What you doing?” Barbie said faintly, hope and apprehension warring in her mind.

“Ya looking good, Barbs...” Canon replied huskily, her hands moving slowly, deliberately up and down Barbie’s sides.

At the sound of Canon’s voice, Barbie breathed deeply. She could hear the want in Canon’s voice and much as her heart sped in fear, she rejoiced in hope. Maybe she could convince Canon to let her go, unlock the cuffs. And after that...

Barbie leaned into Canon’s hands, her own coming to caress Canon’s back. Over Canon’s shoulder, her eyes came to rest on the small vial on the table on the other side of the room.

The rattling of the chain as Barbie started rubbing her chest against Canon made Canon freeze.

Barbie smiled but she kept her voice soft. “Take this shit off, Can. Ain’t no problem. Be better without ‘em.”

“Ya think?” Canon husked, as Barbie’s lips found the pulse point on her neck.

“Yeah... Feels good, ain’t it? Gonna feel better with no iron,” Barbie whispered into Canon’s ear, her tongue darting in and out with every word.

“Yeah...” Canon grunted, grabbing Barbie’s ass hard.

Barbie pressed back into Canon’s hands before leaning forward once again. “Come on, baby. Take ‘em off. It gonna be good, I promise ya,” she said seductively.

Canon grunted, pulling Barbie’s ass forward until they mashed against each other. Her voice was harsh. “Ya give me it to me, girl. Real like. Then...”

Barbie smiled as she licked the column of Canon’s neck. “Yeah... Deal, man. Deal.”

Barbie paced full of agitation, pumping her fist open and closed with each step. She did not even register the pain from between her legs or the acrid taste in her mouth. Her eyes slid off the discarded syringe. All her senses were focused inward, waiting for the high to start. It was taking too long, longer than it had ever before.

Canon’s barked laugh made her turn towards the woman pulling on her trousers. Barbie looked at Canon, suspicion blooming in her mind. The green eyes that met hers were cold, as was the smirk that painted Canon’s lips.

“What’s this shit, man? What’s this?” Barbie shrieked.

Canon laughed. "Baking soda."

Barbie surged forward but steely hands stopped her before her fists connected with Canon's body.

"What? Why the fuck you do that?" Barbie shouted angrily as she tried vainly to get away from Canon's grip.

Canon's hands tightened on her wrists until Barbie grunted in pain.

"Got a new movie for ya to watch?" Canon said contemptuously, nodding towards the mounted camera on the wall.

Barbie turned her head toward the camera, only then seeing the little red light that indicating it was recording. "What? Shit, Canon! Why?"

In the couple of seconds that Barbie was focused on the camera, she never felt Canon's swift movement. She only felt the coldness of the steel handcuff as it locked down on her wrist.

Barbie turned back to Canon, her eyes flashing in anger.

Canon's lips twitched as she stepped away from Barbie. Her voice was hard. "You ain't got no shakes now, Barbs. This... this true bottom."

"No! No, man," Barbie cried out, trying to get to Canon but the chain stopped her short.

Canon shook her head. The slap against Barbie's cheek echoed in the room. "No fucking excuses this time, Barbs. Last time, you got the shakes. Fiend do anything for a fix."

"I ain't no fiend," Barbie protested immediately.

“Yeah? What you do now? Ain’t no excuse for that. Ya got the hooks, girl. And ya ain’t getting outta here less them hooks be gone. Feel me?” Canon replied, gesturing from Barbie to herself.

Barbie shook her head but it did not help. She knew what she had done. The pain between her legs flared and she knew she would be shitting blood for at least a few days. She swallowed quickly, only for her to finally register the taste in her mouth.

Her stomach clenched. Barbie barely had time to reach the toilet bowl before she puked violently. The sight of yellow bile only reminded her of what had last gone down her throat.

A few minutes passed before Barbie finally stopped retching. Her voice was hoarse as she sat on the floor dejectedly. “Why? Why did you do this? Why?”

Canon squatted slowly until her eyes were level with Barbie’s. Her voice was soft but serious. “You wanna in the game? Ya gotta be clean. Body ‘n mind.”

Barbie shook her head, her voice rising in accusation. “Fuck... Fuck you! Ya want this!”

Canon’s smile was sinister, her voice becoming barbed. “Sure I do. Ya lay it good, Barbs. But ya know what, girl? It up to you. Up to you, Barbs. This... this all a fiend gets. I can keep ya good. But this? This what ya gotta do.”

“No!” Barbie cried out immediately. She was not a whore, not for a fix, nor for her life.

“Ya don’t want this shit? Then ya gotta get clean. For real,” Canon’s reply echoed softly in the small room.

Barbie shook her head, blinking the lone tear that had reached her eyes away. It was a good homegoing this one. So many people had come. Many of them, Barbie had not even known except as faces on the street.

Not that Canon would have cared. Barbie had no illusions about. She had heard it from Canon more than once over the years. Funerals were for those left behind. The dead did not feel.

Still it was a good homegoing. People would talk about it for a long time. It would be remembered, just as Canon would be remembered.

Barbie smiled sadly. Canon would be remembered. She had touched too many lives not to. Her eyes tracked slowly behind the dark sunglasses to where La'Wanda stood next to Rain. She had tears in her eyes.

Barbie did not blame La'Wanda. She had reason to cry. Canon had always been both respectful and friendly to the woman that had won Barbie's heart.

Barbie did not cry. There would never be enough tears to make due what she had lost. Just like there would never be enough words to describe what she owed.

Even after all these years the rumours persisted. But that was all they were. Rumours. Only two people had ever known what had happened that year. Neither of them ever spoke about it, to others or to each other.

Sometimes, even after all this time, Barbie would remember and her stomach would churn in reflex. She had reached bottom in that basement. Barbie had learnt things about herself in that dark cold basement that she would like to forget.

But there was no avoiding the truth. There was no twelve-step program for drug dealers that liked their own product a little too much. Canon's way had been brutal, immoral, cruel, but it had worked.

Barbie looked at the coffin in the centre of the congregation. She inclined her head slightly. Not enough for others to notice but enough, just enough.

Her whisper was for the ears of the angels. “Rest in peace, my friend. Thank you...”

Barbie’s eyes tracked back to La’Wanda, falling as they always did on the small bundle she carried against her chest. Little Robby slept peacefully as she always did cradled in her mother’s arms.

“You rest now.” ~Ace

Detective Amanda Lewis sat stiffly, hearing the minister. She did not move, she did not shuffle her feet. All her attention was on the sombre coffin in front of her and the truth it held.

Canon was in that coffin and Amanda could only breathe, allowing neither tear nor sob nor scream of anguish to escape her tight control.

Amanda perked up immediately at the heavy sounds coming from the figure on the bed.

“Hm... Hm...”

Amanda leaned forward, touching Canon’s hand lightly, careful not to disturb the drip. “Hey. Hey, Can,” she said quietly.

Amanda did not really hope for a response. The doctors had been clear. Canon was lucky to be alive. She was double-lucky to regain consciousness. Beyond consciousness, the doctors had merely shrugged.

A young one had taken Amanda aside, advising her sagely not to expect much. Such extensive brain injuries rarely had a good end.

“Hm...” Canon moaned softly.

“Hey. It’s me, babe,” Amanda tried once more. The doctors had said after all that speaking to Canon could do some good.

The grunt transformed into a barely understandable word. “Ace?”

Amanda blinked, her mind unable for a moment to process the change from round sound to intelligible word. After a moment, she spoke out, her voice filled with hope. “Yeah. No! Don’t move, man. You hurt bad.”

“Fuck,” Canon husked as she opened her eyes slightly, green barely showing over heavy eyelids.

Amanda blinked the tears that appeared without warning in her eyes. Her own voice became rough with emotion. “It gonna be alright, Can. It gonna be alright.”

“Ace!” Canon breathed, turning her head a tiny bit towards Amanda.

Amanda was quick to put a warm hand against Canon’s cheek, just below the heavy bandages that covered her head. “Yeah. I’m here, baby. I ain’t going nowhere,” she said soothingly.

“Tell Barbs...” Canon breathed, the last word no more than a slight movement of her lips.

“Yeah. I’m hearing ya,” Amanda replied immediately, even if she could not really tell what Canon was saying.

Canon took a quick breath, moving slightly under the off-white hospital issue sheet. “Tell Barbs take care of ya,” she finally said in a barely audible whisper.

Amanda winced as soon as the words registered. The doctors had told her of that possibility too. Extensive brain injuries often caused loss of memory. “Canon...” she warned lowly.

Canon tensed a bit. “Tell ‘er,” she grunted as strongly as she could.

Amanda sighed and shook her head. It broke her heart but she had to come clean. It was the one thing, she had vowed to herself when she was recovering from her injury. She would never lie to Canon again, ever again.

Not that Amanda had had any hope of seeing Canon again. If it had not been for this mess, Amanda would never have dared approach Canon on her own. But when she heard that the inmate was in hospital near death after a prison riot, she could not stay away.

“Canon... Don’t you remember? My name is Amanda Lewis. Detective Amanda Lewis,” Amanda said, her voice catching.

Green eyes opened a tiny bit more and sluggishly turned towards Amanda. Amanda could swear she could see a glint in them.

“Canon?” Amanda asked hesitantly.

Canon’s voice was no more than a whisper. “Tell Barbie...”

“What? What do you want me to tell?” Amanda asked taking a quick breath. She needed to hear this. Maybe it would become the closure she needed, the closure that would finally drive the nightmares away.

“Tell Barbie... no retaliation. You safe,” Canon whispered, her eyes closing slightly until they were no more than slits.

Amanda’s breath caught in a sob. Her vision blurred with tears she could not stop. Almost a year she had spent undercover. More than ten months she had burrowed herself into the city’s drug underworld as Canon’s girl.

She had lived in hope that sharing Canon’s life and her bed would get her enough information to net the Kats once and for all. Amanda smiled bitterly. All she had found was a woman that liked fried chicken and white folks’ rock music and never, ever, mixed business with pleasure.

“Canon... oh man, I am so sorry. I am so sorry,” Amanda sobbed. The pain and grief that kept her awake at night for two years but could never be expressed, not in the light of day and not in the dead of night, suddenly found an outlet.

A few moments passed with only Amanda’s strangled breaths cutting through the steady whirring of the machines monitoring Canon’s vitals.

Canon’s words were little more than a whisper but Amanda heard them clearly. “No shit. Fuck you, officer.”

Amanda kept her eyes closed and her head bowed unable to meet the accusation she was certain to find in Canon’s eyes.

“You right. That shit. It was not correct,” Amanda said brokenly. It was the truth and she could not deny it. As she had lain fighting for her life in a hospital ICU, the DA had slapped Canon with obstruction of justice.

What was worse in Amanda’s thoughts was that when Canon’s case came to trial, she had not been there. Miles Edwards had brought the message from the police brass loud and clear.

If obstruction of justice was all that a year’s worth of police spending had bought them, one Detective Amanda Lewis had no business cheating the city from its due. Roberta Carver, aka Canon, number two of the city’s only female gang was going to be put behind bars. And no mere detective would be allowed to derail that arrangement.

“Ace!” Canon said clearly, her voice stronger than before.

The urgency in Canon’s voice made Amanda look up, her eyes immediately finding Canon’s half-closed ones.

As soon as their gazes connected, Canon spoke, clearly trying to make her words heard. “Tell Barbie. Fuck that shit. That history. Feel me?”

The toll the effort to speak clearly had taken was clear in the grimace of pain that transformed Canon's face. Amanda's heart sped up. Canon needed to rest. The doctors had been clear. She had been lucky but she was not out of the woods yet.

"I will tell her. I will. You rest now. Rest," Amanda said slowly, gently. Her hand gently caressing Canon's tense cheek.

Canon held Amanda's gaze for a moment more before her eyes slid close.

Amanda continued her light touch of Canon's face for a moment longer as Canon once more slipped into oblivion.

Detective Amanda Lewis blinked to keep the tears from her eyes. Behind her heavy sunglasses, her eyes closed tightly.

The minister's voice droned on. Amanda did not look at the people around her or those surrounding them. There was nothing here she wanted to see. The police officer inside her would have no chance to match names to faces or think about possibilities for a good case.

Amanda allowed her eyes to see only the coffin. Her bitter smile was small, too small for others to notice. She did not want to think about the knowing glances she would receive from her colleagues and superiors tomorrow. In truth, she could not even find it in herself to care about them.

Canon was dead and Amanda's heart broke anew. It had been years since that undercover stint. Amanda still carried the scars though, the scars on her body and the scars on her soul.

She had been schooled in that year undercover. Not about the game and the job but about people. Amanda had found out the most difficult truth of all. There was no evil. Evil was no more than moments in ordinary lives.

Detective Amanda Lewis knew better than anyone that even ruthless killers could be gentle, amoral drug-dealers could be kind and soulless villains could be loving.

After all Canon had been all those. Ruthless, amoral, soulless. A killer, a drug-dealer, a villain. Gentle lover, kind friend, loving partner.

A lone tear coursed its way down Amanda's cheek.

“We got tonight...” ~Canon

The words of the minister boomed in the silent cemetery. Snow's eyes were riveted on the closed coffin. Snow could hear Barbie's heavy breathing at her side. On her other side, Amanda was quiet as a mouse. But Snow acknowledged neither them nor the rest of the crowd.

It was the ornate coffin that held her attention. This was a gang funeral, her own people felt out of place. In death, Canon had been reverted back to her roots. Black and red dominated the scenery around her. Even the bangers from the other gangs respected the funeral's ethos, their colours hidden for now.

Snow needed no colours. Her pantsuit was in heavy unrelieved black, following the customs of a country far away. The paleness of her face stood out like a blemish on perfect skin.

Natalya Armanov, the woman that the people around her knew as Snow White, Snow for short, did not care.

The words of the minister faded. They spoke of things that meant little to Snow. They had meant little to Canon.

“Hey...” Natalya greeted as she entered the dark living room.

“Yo...” Canon’s soft voice replied as Natalya navigated the room expertly in the dark.

Natalya sat on the couch next to Canon. She kept her own voice soft, allowing the music to dominate. “Why you listen to that stuff? It sound like...like tears.”

A warm hand patted her knee. Canon’s voice was sad. “Listen. Same old song. Crumbles to the ground. Dust in the wind. That’s life. We live, we die. That’s it. There are no tomorrows.”

Natalya sighed quietly. She could not keep the worry from her voice. “You are getting sad again. Your head hurting?”

She could see Canon’s head shaking in the dark negatively. “Nah, babe. It ain’t the head.”

Worry made Natalya’s heavy accent come out strongly. “Then what? You are sad. Why? What happened?”

“Nothin... nothin...” Canon said quietly as she patted Natalya’s knee again.

Natalya sighed quietly. She gripped the hand on her knee gently. “Come on. Enough of that sad shit.”

Natalya felt more than saw Canon turning to her. A hesitant hand touched her cheek. “I love you, you know,” Canon said in a hoarse whisper.

Natalya leaned into the caress before turning her head, lightly touching her lips on calloused fingers. “I know.”

She stayed there for long moments before squeezing Canon’s hand. “Come on, Can. Let’s go to bed,” Natalya said, kissing Canon’s fingers once more.

“Yeah...yeah...” Canon stood up slowly.

Natalya stood up as well. As Canon turned towards the door, Natalya spoke in whisper.
“Can?”

Canon turned immediately, her arms slowly coming around Natalya’s waist. “I’m here.”

The sadness in her voice felt like a knife in Natalya’s heart.

“Hey! We’ll be old before we are dust. Да?” Natalya said quickly.

Canon’s voice was gentle, sadness still colouring her voice. “Yeah, babe. Old and grey, eh?”

“Да! Old and grey... pills, diapers, the lot,” Natalya tried. Humour was always the best solution.

Canon laughed out loud. “Ha! Diapers? Right!”

Natalya put her arms around Canon’s shoulders, drawing her in gently. “Come on, Can. We got tonight, don’t we?”

“Yeah, babe. Yeah... we got tonight...”

“It’s a new city...” ~Miles

“So, rookie. What you thinking?” Miles asked quietly, his eyes roaming the cemetery.

Dona Powell glared at him. Her voice was hard but she kept the volume low. “What the fuck am I supposed to be thinking? And don’t call me rookie, Miles!”

Miles barked a short quiet laugh. “But you are. Here you are a rookie, Dona. You need to learn this city from scratch.”

“I know, I know,” Dona sighed. It was true after all. A new city but an old job. Dona was certain it would not take too long to learn what she needed to do her job and do it well. “So what the fuck we doing at a funeral?”

Miles smiled widely, glancing at Dona before his gaze returned to the funeral taking place at the bottom of the small hill. “You, my dear detective, are being schooled.”

“Schooled?” Dona asked irritated. He huffed mockingly.

Miles’ tone became softer. “Yes, Dona, schooled. In a world that’s ending and a world that’s just being born.”

“Fuck it, Miles. Do you need to go all... all intellectual on me now?” Dona asked, her tone betraying her irritation. Miles was a good man. They had cooperated on a few cases before. But still Dona hated it when people started to wax philosophical.

Miles shook his head. “Look, Dona. Look! What you see?” He said waggling his eyebrows at Donna.

Donna shook her head. “What the fuck?”

Miles glared at her. Dona sighed. “Fine! A funeral. A gangbanger’s funeral. And don’t ask which fucking gang. You know I aint’t had time to look at the colours.”

Miles smiled slightly. “Dona, come on, indulge me. A gangbanger?”

“Fuck you, Miles!” Dona shot at him, receiving no more than an enigmatic smile in return. A few moments passed until it was clear to Dona that Miles was serious with his questions. She sighed once. She so did not like playing this game. Still there was nothing she could do about it.

She was the newbie in this place and Miles was her partner. “Alright...alright. Let’s play but make it quick. Fucking great. A lieutenant I’m guessing. You got all sorts of colours showing.”

“Yeah...” Miles nodded waiting for Dona to continue.

“Fuck you, Miles!” Dona said but there was no vehemence in her voice this time, only resignation. “I don’t know, man. What the fuck you want me to tell you? I got no fucking idea why there’s white boys at a banger’s funeral.”

“Ha!” Miles exclaimed. His tone became smug. “Not just white boys, Dona. What you see is a good part of the Russian mob that’s been slyly, oh so slyly, entering our part of the world.”

“The Russians? Fuck me!” Dona whistled at the revelation. “I thought you didn’t have all that many these parts.”

Miles nodded. “They’ve been coming in. Quietly but coming in,” he said glaring at the people below. “What else?” he asked after a moment.

“Alright! I see different colours. Too many. But the red on black is the stiff’s colours,” Dona said quickly, starting to warm up to Miles’ game.

Miles smiled at her and nodded encouragingly. “Good. That’s the colours of the Kats. The only major female gang in the city.”

“I thought those had gone out with the eighties or something,” Dona said in disbelief.

Miles shook his head negatively immediately. “Or something, Dona. Not in this city. Where there is red and black, the Kats rule. And where the Kats rule...”

“Yeah...yeah. Heard it a hundred times before,” Dona said dismissively, waving the concern away. It was always like this. Different cities, different colours but the same story. “Who’s the stiff anyway?” she asked.

“Wait...wait. What else, Dona?” Miles was shaking his head at her again.

“Oh shit! I don’t know what the fuck else, Miles. Fuck me! Looks like you got some citizens down there too. Wrong funeral maybe?” Dona replied after a moment of observing the funeral.

“Ha!” Miles laughed. “Right funeral, I’ll have you know.”

“Come on! How big a family did your stiff have?” Dona shook her head. This sounded more and more like a joke.

“No family. She was an orphan,” Miles said quietly, his tone serious.

Dona looked at Miles questioningly. His tone seemed almost sad to her. “Miles...”

Miles sighed heavily. He took a few moments to reply. When he did, his voice was heavy. “The woman in that box down there? That’s Canon, Dona. Canon of the Kats. Lieutenant of the Kats as long as I can remember. And the only person in this goddamned city that could get all gangs, the Russians and a fuckload of citizens at the cemetery. Together.”

Dona looked at Miles in disbelief. She searched his face carefully. It was not unknown for older detectives to rib a newbie in all sorts of ways. Yet the gaze that met hers unflinchingly held no humour.

“The name sort of rings a bell. Hell, if I remember why though,” Dona replied finally, her tone changing. She narrowed her eyes at the crowd in the funeral below. Miles seemed too serious for her liking. It looked like there was something here after all.

Miles nodded. “I’m pretty sure, you’ve heard the story by now. Hell, I’ve been all over the country and people know the fucking story. Ever heard of a gangbanger that saved a cop’s life and the fucking DA put her in the can for it?”

“Holy bloody fuck! That’s just a fucking urban legend,” Dona answered immediately.

Miles smiled at the disbelief in her voice. “Urban maybe, Dona, but a legend it’s not. See that sister down there? Sitting next to the Kat and the ice queen?”

Dona nodded immediately. She had spotted the woman from the very beginning. She did not quite fit with the rest of the crowd, odd as the gathering down below was. “Aha...”

Miles spoke quietly. “That’s Detective Amanda Lewis. The cop. And the stiff? That’s Roberta Carver, aka Canon. The gangbanger that saved her life.”

Dona looked at Miles but the veteran detective was clearly serious. Dona whistled softly. Of all things, this she had not expected. “So?” She asked finally, clearly interested.

“So what?” Miles fired back immediately.

“So what’s your point?” Dona asked.

Miles smiled at the eagerness in Dona’s voice. Yet his own was low and hard. “It’s a new city, you’ve come to, Dona. And we...any of us...we don’t know fuck all about it. Canon’s been there since I was a rookie walking the beat. And now Canon is gone. For good...”

End

Thanks for reading. Any comments, good or bad, are welcome at rh.black@hotmail.co.uk
~RB.

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