

The New Puppy

January 2022 – Part One

The soft, electronic *bee-boo* of the automatic door chime sounded through the little pet shop, and from her seat behind the counter Barbara glanced up absently from her phone. Another day, another customer – or so she usually thought. But there was something about the woman stepping through the door right now that made her do a double-take.

She knew about cosplay, of course. But this wasn't quite it... or was it? How many thirty-something women walked around town looking like they'd just stepped out of the 1950s?

Not that Barbara was a fashion historian – not by a long shot. But that soft brown hair that bounced with every step... that short-sleeved, open-collared dress... that prim white apron... it all screamed of old-fashioned, housewifely charm. And so, as the heels clicked and the smiling woman approached the counter, Barbara felt something like embarrassed curiosity take hold of her. Who was this woman, and why the heck was she done up like that? Was this some sort of prank video?

"Hi there, sweetie," she breathed through scarlet lips, and Barbara started uncomfortably in her seat at the endearing term. *Holy crap, when was the last time someone had called her sweetie? Probably that overbearing aunt of hers, more than a decade ago...* "Um... hi? Can I help you?" she managed, finding her eyes dropping away uneasily from the woman's unnervingly bright and searching gaze. *God, why was she feeling so- so...*

"Actually..." The woman paused, and Barbara could feel her eyes sweeping from her face down over her name tag – almost as if she was sizing her up. "Hmm. You know, I think you just might." She chuckled softly, and Barbara's skin shivered with a sudden, unaccountable wave of... what was it? Apprehension? Excitement? "Yes, *Barbara*. That *is* your name, isn't it? I see that's what your tag says, anyway... But yes – I think you're definitely going to be a big help."

Barbara found herself stammering. "Um- like, okay? Are you- you looking for something?" "Well, yes I am," the woman smiled, flashing a bright, brief glance around the store. "You see, I've just decided to adopt a new puppy for my little boy. And you know... one simply can't have a puppy without making sure we have everything else we'll need. You know, to keep her fed, and happy, and under control..."

"Um, sure?" Why did Barbara feel so breathless as she slid off her chair and rose to her feet? "We have- like, all the dog stuff back here," she motioned, and even without turning her head she could

sense the woman following her – as much by her electrifying presence as by the smart click of her heels against the tile floor. "All the food and water dishes-" she gesticulated at the shelves on the right. "And all the, you know, toys, and leashes... and collars..."

Good god, why did it all have to sound so dirty right now?

"Is that so?" The woman's dark eyes were scanning once more – not the shelves of brightly colored and neatly arranged merchandise, but the figure of the sales associate before her. "Dishes for the little dear to eat and drink out of... of course. And toys for her to bite and chew on... Oh, and of course: we can't possibly have a puppy without a nice, durable collar and leash!" She chuckled softly. "After all, it's the collar that shows everyone that the puppy... *belongs* to someone."

Barbara shifted awkwardly from foot to foot, desperate to escape the tingling chills that were now racing up and down her entire body. "Uh, yeah?" *Say something- anything-* "Um, so, like, what breed is your new puppy?" She gestured fumblingly at the rack of collars before them. "Cause, like, some of these might be too... big... depending on, you know..."

"Oh, I actually don't know much about her pedigree," the woman laughed softly, and Barbara felt her stomach do an unexpected flop. "She's a bit of a mixed breed, I suppose. About average size. She has the prettiest blonde hair, though – and her eyes are so adorable..." Her tone was lowering, her fingers reaching for the dark, supple leather of one of the premium-quality, mid-sized collars. "I'm not quite sure of the size, though. Do you think this would be the right size, sweetie? Just right for a sweet, *obedient* little puppy?"

Barbara shivered as the woman's fingertips grazed delicately over the back of her neck. "Listen, I have a thought," she heard the woman murmuring over the hammering of her pulse in her ears. "Sweetie, now that I think of it, it seems that you're just about the right size. If it's okay... why don't I just... check the size on you..."

And then the cool leather was circling around the nape of her neck, tightening under the woman's dexterous fingers, drawing snug, pressing its smooth surface against her goose-pimpled skin.

She shuddered wordlessly, her eyes flicking up momentarily into the sweet smile of this highly unusual woman. Was she- was she literally letting this customer put a *dog collar* around her neck? Why on earth was she even allowing this?! But before she could sputter out her incoherent protests, the woman leaned closer... and with the low, breathy sound of that sweet voice in her ear, Barbara could only shudder and gulp and lapse into silent obedience.

"You're *such* a cutie," the woman murmured, and now her fingers were playing through Barbara's shoulder-length, golden locks. "Such an adorable, obedient thing. I saw that look in your eye the moment you said the word *collar*, sweetie. You're just a sweet, homeless little puppy, aren't you? Acting all big and adult and strong... when all you really need is to be adopted and taken home to be the best and sweetest little puppy that ever was..."

"Um- I- well..." Barbara was trembling visibly now, one part of her dismayed at what was transpiring, while the other was begging for it to continue. "I... dunno. I- I do like- puppies..." The last word came out as a pathetic little gasp, and the woman laughed softly. "Of course you do, sweetie! So does my little darling Ronnie – so very much..."

"Now, then," she continued in an almost conspiratorial tone. "I'll tell you what, *Barbara*. I'm going to give you the rest of the afternoon to think over what I've said, okay? I see you folks do deliveries. So what you're going to do, sweetie, is you're going to take down my order for everything a good puppy like you needs: two dishes, a leash, that pretty collar, no fewer than three toys... and of course a cage."

Barbara nodded mechanically, feeling the heat radiating from her cheeks as the woman giggled softly and tousled her hair one last time. "Good girl! Now then – all I need is for you to drop my my place tonight with all those things, okay? And then we'll see if you really are ready to be my adorable little puppy after all. Believe me..." and here she winked provocatively at the flushing clerk, "I know exactly how to spoil a little sweetie like you. And something tells me you're not going to pass on such a lovely opportunity."

The heels clicked. The skirt swished. And the strange woman had her hand on the door before Barbara finally found her voice. "Uhh... you- you forgot the c-collar, ma-am..." Her trembling fingers were reaching up to the cool leather around her neck, but the woman merely turned and flashed her brightest smile yet.

"Oh, no I haven't! Why don't you keep it for now, sweetie? It *does* look just right on you... exactly as though it belongs there."

And then she was gone, leaving Barbara – bewildered and wide-eyed with self-conscious shame – staring after her.

(To be concluded!)