

# **The Big Snip**

## **Dark City Lights New York Stories**

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WHEN THE NEW GIRL GOT in the van, all Sharon saw was a sunbaked skinny-ass white girl with chicken legs, and she wasn't sure how long she'd last. Probably couldn't lift more than fifty pounds, at least without complaining. She wore long sleeves and kept her nails trimmed to the quick, her dishwater hair tied back, tucked down the back of her shirt. Smelled like she'd just sneaked a cigarette.

Sharon gave her a week.

But she had lasted three, long enough for Sharon to call her by name.

“Good morning, Christina,” she said, and climbed into the passenger side. She placed two boxes of syringes and vials of Telazol on the floor between her feet. “First stop’s on Dyckman.”

Christina had a driver’s license, and wasn’t afraid to bully her way through traffic with the Neuter Scooter. They usually sent her fresh-faced girls from Queens or Long Island, who couldn’t parallel park worth a damn. All pink and scrubbed and so full of love for animals that they’d eagerly serve three months spaying feral cats and snipping pit bull balls on the street before they were allowed to intern at the veterinary hospital.

True, in the operating rooms you had a sense of urgency, like on a medical TV show. Except instead of second-string Broadway actors playing the patients, you got pampered pets who probably ate better than you did.

The Neuter Scooter was the front lines, where you earned your bones at People Who Love Animals. Every morning, they drove the modified Econoline van to pet owners who’d signed up for an appointment to alter their dog or cat at the PWLA (pronounced Poola) subsidized rate. You had to work quick and follow procedure, handle dogs that the owners often barely knew, plenty of “outdoor” pets and friendly strays, and cats who’d nuzzle your hand and then flay your arm a moment later.

Sharon had just lost Lynndie, a plump powder-white Minnesota girl she’d trained into an op table warrior, to the hospital staff. Even though she’d known all along that her protégé wanted to work inside—she was on her way to a vet degree—it stung of betrayal. They’d been a good team, had some laughs. It always hurt when the techs left. The unspoken words lingered like the stink of smoke on the new kid: if you worked in the van, it meant you were the B team.

When Fort Tryon Park loomed, Sharon pointed for Christina to cut right.

“I got it,” she said.

Sharon didn’t care for her driving. She hung in the far lane too long before a turn, and was a little too liberal with her use of the horn. But she couldn’t complain; she was a lifelong New Yorker, and had avoided getting her license first because there was no need, then out of stubbornness, and finally out of a strange sense of pride. She’d been born on Convent Avenue, a block downtown from City College, in what was now called Hamilton Heights. The street crested a ridge on land once owned by Alexander Hamilton, whose house, now a museum, had been moved three times that Sharon knew about. Nearby St. Nicholas Park had a fine dog run, and she’d inherited her parents’ building, living in one half and leasing the other to three white girls who’d been chased out of Williamsburg by hipster-inflated rents. Girls that reminded her of Christina.

Their first patient was a gray bully mix named Tuco, a rambunctious boy whose ears and tail were intact. Christina double-parked and left the engine running. The Scooter had twin tanks to fuel the equipment.

“Tuke’s not dog aggressive, but he humps just about anything in sight,” his owner said. The sun lit up her natural puff of burnt-orange hair. “He’s gonna break his lead and get himself killed one day, I know it.”

"He'll settle down when we're done," Sharon told her. She ran the woman's credit card on a little gadget attached to an iPhone while Christina squatted down to play with the dog.

"Who's a good boy?"

He mounted her knee like it was the southbound end of a northbound Shih Tzu.

"Not you," Christina laughed. "Not you."

They carried him in the back and closed the doors. The van had an extended roof so they didn't have to hunch over. Tuco stood on the steel operating table, wagging his tail, breathing in the smells of hundreds of other dogs and cats who'd been there before him.

"Gimme your paw," Sharon said. When Tuco obliged, she stuck him with a syringe of Telazol. He yipped and looked up like he'd done something wrong. Sharon rubbed his foreleg, easing the drug up the artery. "That's all, sweetie. That's all."

The wooziness hit his eyes, and Christina rolled him onto his back and strapped him to the table. Sharon checked his pulse, then gave Christina a nod.

"You're gonna end up doing it anyway," Christina said.

"If you don't practice, that's what we call a self-fulfilling prophecy."

Christina turned her head, but Sharon caught the eye roll. No one liked intubating when they first started. It was simple empathy, jamming a tube down a living creature's throat. They'd gag when they heard the slick and crunchy noises and felt the flesh resist. She held the dog's head as Christina unfurled the hoses hooked to the gas, and watched her angle of entry. "There it is. Ease it on in. You got it."

Christina bit her lip. Sharon gave her another try, then saw the confidence leave her hands. She took over. "Prep him," she said. "It's alright."

The tube went right in for Sharon; she'd done enough of them. It was like anything else: you needed the confidence to not be overly gentle, but not so cocky you didn't listen to your hands and wound up hurting them. She got the isoflurane flowing, and watched him breathe until she was satisfied.

Christina sighed and pulled a surgical drape over the dog. She took out a Bic razor and shaved a square of fur just above the testicles. "If I knew I'd be shaving balls when I made it to New York, I would've stayed home."

Sharon shook her head, then inflated the cuff on the endotracheal tube to hold it in place, so Tuco wouldn't vomit and aspirate during the procedure. "Least it's just dogs," she said. "Do they do men at those Brazilian places?"

Christina wet a gauze pad atop a blue gallon jug of chlorhexidine and scrubbed the square of pink-gray skin she'd shaved on Tuco's belly. "No," she said. "Far as I know, guys have to do that themselves."

"I don't know how you let someone down there," Sharon said. She could sign up for social security next year, but the flow of young vet techs kept her in the know. They talked about everything, including shaving their business.

"I don't," Christina said. "Couldn't afford to have someone else do it, even if I wanted them to." She squinted at the now-shiny patch of skin, and lifted up Tuco's genitals. "Fully descended. Ought to be a breeze."

When only one dropped, they called it a cryptorchid. The day Sharon told Christina that, she'd snorted like a wild hog. "You know a guy came up with that."

Like they're a friggin' bouquet, or something. Hello, honey! Wanna put your tulips on my orchids?"

Sharon ran a gloved finger over the prepped area, then quickly made an inch-long cut. She held one orchid with thumb and two fingers, like a tiny bowling ball, and squeezed it up its roomy sac until it popped out the incision she'd made. Then she closed the forceps around the vesicle so it wouldn't disappear back inside like a fleeing bait worm.

"Come on, do the snip," she told Christina.

Christina took the scalpel and leaned in.

"Just slice and go." On her granddad's farm the animals didn't even get anesthesia. Just cut and cauterize.

The razor severed the vesicle like overcooked spaghetti. "Now ligate." Christina tied it off and tucked it back inside.

Sharon tossed the freed testicle into the gut bucket. "Now number two. Come on, we got a long list."

The farm was one reason Sharon had headed for vet school. Seeing horses suffer from impaction colic, billy goats castrated with nothing but a clasp knife and a pair of pliers, and how the farmhands dealt with an explosion in the barn cat population. No, sweating in the back of an old van giving feral cats the Big Snip wasn't menial. For her it was a kind of penance.

She watched Christina perform the second removal, then closed the incision with a single stitch and a thin line of surgical glue. Christina cut the iso gas and removed the tube, and after he came to, they brought the sleepy pup, sans testicles, back to his owner.

"Plenty of water, keep him inside. He can go for a walk tomorrow, but no running for a couple of days. If he opens it up somehow, bring him in and we'll stitch him up."

THEY FOLLOWED THEIR CLIPBOARD NEARLY all the way up to Inwood. They snipped two toms, spayed a momma cat who'd littered twelve adoptees two weeks prior, then a yappy Chihuahua, and a fat black Lab mix.

"Cryptorchid!" Christina called. She treated them like four leaf clovers.

On the ride back toward the clinic, a big bald man in a cardigan waved them down from the crosswalk.

"Pull over," Sharon said. It was Timothy, an actor who walked dogs down in Morningside Heights on his off time. He had two Afghans on leashes.

"Hey girl." Timothy was built like a football player, with a smile almost too big for his face. "How's the nut cutting biz?"

"You know," Sharon said. "Our job's never done. How about you? Who you got there?"

Timothy lifted one leash, then the other. "This is Tazi, and this is Karzai. They're dolls, but so prissy." Tazi put her paws on the side of the van and stuck her long nose in the window to lick Sharon's hand. "Oh, that thing you did? Worked like a charm. They never even noticed."

Sharon nodded, "Told you they wouldn't."

"Oh, and I have an audition for *Jersey Boys*!"

A cab honked behind them. "We'll see you later. You can give me those tickets you owe me."

Christina pulled back into traffic, and cut crosstown. She squeezed the van into a spot in front of a Jimbo's Hamburger Palace, and they washed up in back before breaking for a late lunch.

Jimbo's cooked their patties on the griddle, and finished them under a steel cup made for ice cream sundaes. It steamed them, and kept them tender. There were few things Sharon was nostalgic about, but her father taking her to the first Jimbo's to open in Harlem was one of them, and their burger was the only one she'd eat.

They sat on Duct-taped red vinyl stools and waited for their burgers. Christina with a Diet Coke, Sharon with black coffee.

"How's Alex doing?" Sharon said.

"Alexie's good. Getting ready for pre-K already. I can't believe it."

"And Hester?"

"Kyle doesn't like her, but Lexie just adores her. He even flushes her poops down the toilet." She thumbed through her phone, and showed a photo of little tow-headed Alexie hugging a plump tortoiseshell. Cute little thing. The cat hung limp with a tolerant mother's grin.

They ate their burgers, the kaiser rolls soaked with grease and onions. A man ordering to go swept Sharon with his eyes. His hair and beard trimmed close, shot through with gray. She frowned at her burger and cut it in half with a wood-handled steak knife.

"What was your friend talking about?"

"Oh, just another snip."

Christina ducked and lowered her voice. "Remember what you said about guys shaving their junk? Kyle asked me to shave his, because he heard it would make him look bigger."

"Honey, no."

"One little nick, and that was the end of that," Christina said, with a snort. "I didn't have all this practice then."

Sharon shook her head. She'd heard on NPR that the popularity of shaved genitals had put the existence of crab lice in jeopardy. No big loss, that.

"The snip job for Timothy was on the sly," she said. "This couple he knew, theater patrons. You'd know their name. Big dog they brought home from Italy, where they were married." He was a Neapolitan mastiff named Otto, the size of a large black panther or a small bear, and the owners kept him intact. The woman wanted him neutered, but the husband wouldn't allow it. He was a good dog, but they couldn't control him, and he got dog aggressive. Timothy got his hand cut up, trying break him off another dog.

"They paid him and the other dog's owner off, to keep Otto off the vicious list. I met Timothy walking him in St. Nicholas, where the big dog run is. I had Caesar with me, and he put that Otto in his place with one look, no balls or not."

Caesar was her boy, a big white whale of a boxer mix with one brown eye and one ice blue.

"He told me about the disagreement between Otto's owners, and I suggested a solution."

"What did you do?"

"Neuticles," Sharon said. "You know. Those prosthetics." Some owners preferred their dogs to look intact. They'd crop the ears and the tail, but wanted two balls swinging around back there. "So we didn't shave him, I did the incisions, kept it real clean. Squeezed those fake nuts in there, like I was putting pits back inside a plum."

"No way?"

"Yup. Glued him up and you couldn't tell the difference, not even up close. And he settled down soon enough. He's still a spoiled, hyperactive dog, just like his owners. Hell, Timothy brings him to the dog park by car service. That dog gets a cab faster than he does."

The gray-bearded man stopped by Sharon's shoulder. "I could put a smile on that face."

Sharon set her burger down. "You know what'd make me smile? Not getting told to smile all the time."

His grin twisted into a sneer. "Well you don't got to be a bitch."

"Go on, now." Sharon wagged her steak knife, the teeth gristly with red. "I worked all day in back of a hot van snipping off dog balls, I can cut one more pair."

Christina covered her mouth not to laugh. She looked over her shoulder as the man slammed the door.

"Can't even eat my lunch," Sharon said, and wiped the shreds of meat off her knife with a napkin.

TUESDAY WAS TNR DAY AT the shelter uptown. Trap Neuter Release. They drove up to assist with the cats the shelter had caught. Feral things with matted coats and crusted eyes. Interns gave them shots and shaved the snarls from their fur. One tom yowled in protest, his voice roughened like a seasoned smoker's. It took three interns to hold him down and inject the sedative.

Sharon put Christina on prep and intubation.

"I don't know," she said. "You always end up doing it."

"This assembly line's just what you need to get over that hump."

The shelter was an old building with a lean to it, and no air conditioning except a few overworked window units. Sharon peeled off her lab coat and worked in a tank top. Christina wore her long sleeves and wiped her brow between the motions.

"Why don't you take that off?"

"Don't want to get scratched."

Sharon shrugged. The cats were sedated already. She was a firm believer that once an adult, a person had already decided whether or not they were going to be happy or miserable. She'd found happiness early in life, then lost it to her own pigheadedness; in the years that followed, happiness seemed difficult to find and harder to hold onto, and she slowly embraced the adage that if you wanted devotion, a dog was a sure bet, while people of either sex could only be counted on until they saw the next best thing.

So she didn't care whether Christina was comfortable, but she did mind if she learned to intubate. Sharon kept on her back until she worked through her

hesitation. It took a few tries and some guidance, but five cats later she was doing it. Maybe not like a machine, but with enough confidence to keep things running. She had one slip with the cuff, and a pink and gray female regurgitated. The vomit smelled like fermented fish heads.

Christina gagged. "It smells like garbage bags in Chinatown!"

To her credit, she fixed the cuff before running for the sink.

A goateed intern brought her a pair of clean scrubs to change into.

"Nice ink," he said, eyeing her lean forearms.

Sharon looked over while she glued up a scrawny female's belly. Christina's arms were covered in tattoos. The artwork showed talent, and her pale skin made for a good canvas. Swirls and autumn leaves and symbols. Over the inside of one elbow, a sailor's heart tattoo with her boy Alexie's name and birthdate in engraver script. Sharon didn't understand why anyone would want one tattoo, much less that many, but it wasn't the art that bothered her.

She put it aside and got back to work. There were always more ferals than they could snip in one shift, and today was no exception.

THE SHELTER PROVIDED LUNCH IN the form of cheap greasy pizza from the dollar a slice joint around the corner. They washed up and ate outside, where it was cooler, leaned against the brick.

Christina held out her arm and ran a finger over a track mark. The silver pocks showed through the ink. "These are from a long time ago," she said. "I'm a sponsor now."

"That's good," Sharon said. She tossed the spongy crust of her pizza toward a trio of pigeons. "See you inside."

AFTER WORK, SHARON WALKED AND fed Caesar, then took a blue train downtown to the Cubby. She drank Stoli and Seven; the fizz lingered on the tip of her tongue. A napkin around her drink absorbed the sweat, and the glass didn't touch the bar until she'd finished it.

She had lost her eldest brother to heroin when she was a little girl. She asked her mother: why would anyone give themselves a needle? Her mother had no answer, and in the fifty-two years since, Sharon hadn't found one. We all dealt with pain in different ways, even animals.

It always amused her, that adage about veterinarians being the best doctors, because the patient couldn't tell them what hurt. If you couldn't tell, maybe you had no business being a doctor. At least animals were honest about pain, and growled or snapped. People, they liked to bury it, in all sorts of ways.

The clinic had been broken into several times over the years, for syringes and sedatives. But more often, half-used vials of ketamine went missing. Her previous tech, Lynndie, had put herself through vet school by tending bar; she told Sharon that ketamine was called Special K, and it was used both recreationally and as a date rape drug. There were bars where if you wanted to remember the rest of your night, you finished your drink without it ever leaving your hands.

But it wasn't Christina's track marks that had bothered her. Like the tattoos, it was something you got used to seeing. There'd been something else just as familiar, around the wrists and forearms.

A woman half her age with close-cropped hair and a beauty mark beneath her left eye bought Sharon's next drink. They talked about the music and the weather and dogs, and Sharon forgot what it was she'd noticed until the next morning, when the young woman pulled a shirt over her tattooed shoulders, petted Caesar on the head, and let herself out of the apartment.

Bruises beneath the inkwork, on the inside of the wrists. Right where you'd hold someone's hands when you had them up against the wall, nose to nose. Thumbprint smudges between the radius and ulna, some yellowed and faded, others red-rimmed, fresh, and purple.

She thought Christina was smarter. But over the years, she'd learned that if a horse wanted water, it found the corral on its own, and leading them to it often engendered more resentment than gratitude.

She'd been kicked enough to know.

THEY WERE BUSY ENOUGH THAT Sharon stopped noticing when new bruises joined the old, and she was thankful she'd minded her own business. For all she knew, the marks could be from anything. Maybe Christina took judo, or liked being held down as a kink.

Christina's sense of humor didn't waver. Fridays, when the other techs on the shift went around the corner for a drink, she always bowed out, saying she had to pick up her son from his grandparents. And as her skills improved, she showed no inclination to abandon van duty for a cushier gig in the clinic.

The show of loyalty softened Sharon's view of her.

The last snip on the clipboard was a bull mastiff female on Riverside Drive by the tennis courts. The owner was a little man who had half his hair pulled back in a little ponytail knot, leaving silver locks framing his face. Plaid shirt with the sleeves rolled, revealing nice, strong arms. The kind of man who looked like a sculptor or Buddhist priest, but usually turned out to be a financial planner or a hand model.

"Jonquil's in heat," he said, rubbing her immense forehead. "Will that be a problem?" Jonquil was one hundred-and-ninety pounds of black-and-tan jowl and slobber, sitting spread-legged on the sidewalk, her pudenda swollen and red.

"There's a greater chance of bleeding," Sharon said. "I usually recommend waiting until she's out of her cycle."

"This guy at the park's got a Doberman he can't handle, he's all over her."

Christina raked her nails over the dog's back, and Jonquil butted her head into her, begging for more.

"You should bring her to the clinic."

"I can't really get away, is the problem. I've got clients all day, during your hours. And weekends, you're booked for months. I called."

He squatted and kissed Jonquil on her wet coal nose. "I just don't think Jonny girl wants puppies."

It took them both to lift Jonquil onto the table after the Telazol kicked in. Christina intubated her like a pro, and Sharon strapped her down and crossed her paws.

"Jesus," Christina said, as she shaved the belly. "She's red as a baboon's ass."



"Get her prepped," Sharon said. Usually she appreciated the sense of humor, but the lack of urgency set her off.

She made the cut with care, but blood welled immediately. Christina soaked it up with gauze and Sharon quickly inserted the spay hook, to fish out the first horn of the uterus. She extracted the grape-bunch of ovarian follicles, clamped it at both ends, and cut them at the bud.

Blood formed like red beads of sweat, then pooled. The dog's belly heaved beneath the surgical sheet. Christina inhaled sharply.

"More iso," Sharon said. "Quarter turn."

Christina adjusted the flow of gas and Jonquil's breathing settled. Sharon sponged the blood and ligated the uterus with three quick loops of surgical thread. She kneaded the flesh, leaning in close to see, but no blood appeared.

Sharon followed the pink worm of the uterus to the second horn, and squeezed it out. "You can see why we don't go for hot dogs much," she said.

Christina let out a breath of relief, and shook her head with a little eye-roll. Her fingers clawed for a cigarette.

Sharon repeated the cut, this time ready for the blood. She moved slow and smooth with practiced motions, cinched tight little stitches, and checked for bleeding several times before tucking everything back inside Jonquil's belly.

"Ease up on the iso," she said, as she finished tying up the knots to close the abdomen. "Let's get things cleaned up. Detube her."

"I'm too jittery," Christina said, her face flushed.

"She'll be alright. She's just got a big old heart."

Sharon flinched as Christina stepped in to give her a hug. Her hair smelled of strawberries and stale smoke.

Sharon patted her shoulder. "Your first scare?"

"Yeah." She rubbed her nose then looked away, cleaning up the operating table.

"I'll bandage her up," Sharon said. "Go have a puff."

"Thanks."

As Sharon bent to get the adhesive tape, she saw Christina squeeze toward the front of the van. Her hand went into the pocket of her scrubs, and came out empty.

OUTSIDE, SHE GAVE JONQUIL'S OWNER the papers for postoperative care.

"Doesn't she have to wear a cone?"

"No, just keep an eye on it. If it gets dark red, like her cookie, bring her in. And keep her out of the park for a few days, let her rest. She'll still be in heat a day or two, it'll take a while to get the hormones out of her system."

He handed them both a folded twenty, before walking sleepy Jonquil slowly up the stoop.

In the van, Sharon waited for the doors to close, then turned off the ignition.

"What—"

"What's in your pocket? That's the only question," Sharon said, clutching the keys in her palm.

"My cigarettes, what are you talking about?"

"Don't insult me now. Don't." The pleasant mask melted from her face, into the look she'd inherited from her mother.

Christina reached in her pocket and removed a pair of Neuticles. The expensive ones, soft as a breast implant. The largest size, like the ones Sharon had put in Otto the mastiff.

"What, you selling them?" Sharon said. "They cost a few hundred, wholesale. Am I gonna have to inventory the whole truck?"

Christina's lower lip trembled, and she mashed her palms into her eye sockets. She kicked the floorboards and rocked with silent sobs.

SHARON DROVE THEM TO A shady spot in Riverside park. Christina gripped the cracked beige dashboard the whole way. After they parked, she hiked her scrubs. Leopard spot bruises between her ribs.

"He likes to jam his thumb in there," Christina said. "Don't say it. I'd leave if I could. But he'll get custody. His parents, they say it every time they can. 'Oh we just love having little Alex over. Wouldn't you like to live here all the time, instead of your tiny apartment?' His name's Alexie, bitch!"

Sharon felt cold around the edges, like she'd barged into a house where the heat had been turned off. "If you need a lawyer, I know a few."

"It won't matter." Christina held out her arm, ran a finger over the track marks. "Kyle says they'll use my record against me. I'm clean five years, I'm not even on fucking methadone."

"Then why are you stealing, if you don't want a lawyer?"

Christina lit a cigarette, and rolled down the window. The cherry ember bobbed as she laughed out an exhale.

"Well, that's where I ask a big favor."

BESIDES THE NEUTICLES, CHRISTINA HAD palmed a syringe and a fresh vial of Telazol. Needle, a scalpel blade, surgical glue, and thread.

Sharon told her she was out of her mind.

"Well then Alexie goes to Kyle's parents, or protective services. My parents ain't worth a damn, so don't even ask. I can't take this anymore."

"Does he hit..."

"No, he just takes it out on me and the cat, for now. The last straw was when Alexie started talking. He uses the same condescending voice on him, when he gets mad. Next thing, he'll stand there smoking in the door of his bedroom while he sleeps." She looked out the window. "Looking at him like he's less than shit."

There was more. On the drive back, she learned where the bruises came from. When she said no.

She listened without comment, until Christina told her the plan. Then she laughed.

"You need the gas to keep him under," Sharon said. "He would've woken up with you down there, screaming and bleeding, then you'll really lose your boy. Pretty sure there'd be jail time."

No, this was a van job. And she would need a partner. A smart one.

SHARON TOOK THE SPARE SET of keys to the Neuter Scooter home Friday night. Kyle's favorite bar was one of those new speakeasy types out in Bushwick, where the only thing bigger than the ice cubes was the check. It smelled of old wood and music blared from cheap speakers, muffling any attempt at conversation.

Sharon wore a short dress that she sometimes took to Cubby's, or a hunting ground uptown when the mood struck her. She kept the makeup light, like a neighborhood holdout enjoying herself, someone who refused to let the trust fund kids take over.

It wasn't a difficult role to play. Gentrification had begun its creep into Hamilton Heights. She enjoyed the restaurants, but not the accompanying shift in neighborhood tone forced by increases in rent. You could always take a train to try a new place, but home was home.

Here the barflies were uniformly young, and mostly white. A couple had a stroller with their conked-out child, but most were singles out hunting. The kind of bar Lynndie had warned her about.

Sharon played with her phone until a spot opened at the bar near Kyle and his group, and ordered a Vodka Seven. They didn't have 7 Up, so she nursed a Moscow Mule instead.

Kyle wore a checked shirt and a knit bow tie, a long but neat beard, and those stretched horn rims that everyone seemed to wear. He was tall but not built, and dominated conversation among his friends with sweeping gestures reminiscent of a stage magician.

A young man coozied to the spot beside her and tried his game. Perhaps he felt it was his duty to talk to her, alone as they were in the crowd. He bought her a drink, and she bought him one, to let him know where they stood, and while he pouted, she used his body as a shield to spritz an entire vial of ketamine into Kyle's Rock & Rye.

She hugged her would-be friend goodbye and told him he was sweet, then cleared her bill with the bartender, as Kyle's friends slowly drifted off in pairs. He gripped the mahogany for purchase. She turned, brushing him with her hip.

"Oh hello there," Kyle said, with a gleam of eye teeth. "How'd I miss you?"

"I could be your grandmother," she said. His great-grandmother, maybe. She been the first to break the streak of motherhood by sixteen on her mother's side.

"No way," Kyle said. "Well, know what they say. Black don't crack."

She feigned a smile and sipped her drink. She saw why Christina had once liked him. He put on a good show. But there was a layer of demanding beneath the ready smile, a hunger for attention, that Alexie's sudden appearance must have offended. Her own father had it, but he'd been pleased to have a captive audience in his children. He may have pouted when they complained of hearing a story for the thousandth time, but he'd never become petulant. It was their mother who'd driven them away, one by one.

She let Kyle talk, as the K and alcohol loosened his rivets. When she suggested he might like to go home, he assumed she meant hers and leaned in to whisper. As she pushed him away, she thumbed the empty vial of ketamine into his jeans pocket.

She checked her phone. Christina would have Alexie in bed by now. She let Kyle snake an arm around her waist, and guided him out the front door onto the dimly lit, crooked sidewalks.

Down the block, Christina would be waiting in the van.

But Kyle would never make it there. The dose of ketamine was surely fatal, and that was the only way. Sharon had tried to explain, that dogs were one thing, and people were another.

And besides, it wasn't the balls that were the problem.

It was the brain.

