

## Chapter 12 – Down One

Mattias' weekend ended well before he was ready for it to do so. Or at least it felt like that. He had gamed all weekend and that made it go by too quickly. That was to be expected. And he had basically finished a new game he had been excited about, so what wasn't to love, right? Come Monday morning, though, he found himself feeling a familiar sense of dread, a woeful lack of desire to role out of bed and move into his usual destination.

But this morning, it was worse. His phone blinked. A message. That sense of dread deepened. He couldn't explain why, but he knew that Olivia was likely still asleep, and Rory was definitely still asleep. So, either it was a message from late the night before or recent. He assumed it arrived recently. He sighed and took a breath, reaching over to grab his phone and pulling it over to the bed. He stared at it for a moment, before his groggy mind ordered his fingers to work. They did not cooperate, and he stumbled with the process of getting his phone unlocked and functional. When he finally did, he saw the message flash up in a preview. It was from a number he didn't recognize.

*Hey boss, sorry to do this...*

Great. He swiped his finger over the message and gave a quick read to the entire piece that had been sent to him.

*...but I'm sick and won't be in for a few days. It should be better by Black Friday though. I'll have a doctor's note. This is Ashley. New phone.*

He groaned. He hated that she was sick, but he hated being down a person too. It wasn't her fault, but it still set the day on a bad foot early in the morning. A grand way to start the last day before the hardest season of the year for them. He groaned and decided it best just to wallow in his dread for a few more minutes before getting back up with her. He eventually sent a text, something simple that didn't give too much information one way or the next.

*No worries. Feel better.* That was all he could think to say. She was sick, there was nothing he could really do for her except by handling whatever it is that she would have normally done. It made his day less of a good one, sure, but her's was likely just awful. He hated that the thought of his own inconvenience came to him first. She wasn't one to call in randomly, so it may have been something very bad. At least he knew it was genuine. After he thought about it, he didn't remember any of his team calling in since the move to the day shift.

He finally pushed himself up and got on about his day. Again, he went through the same motions. Get himself up, grab clothes, take a quick shower, get dressed, get lunchbox, and then drive to work. Deal with nausea. Regret ever having agreed to this and having to deal with the blasted sun the entire drive there. Today, was no different there. Actually, the sun might have brighter than normal, the sky clear and blue this morning, and people other than him seemed cheerful. Maybe it was just warmer and more pleasant than normal, or he had missed the memo about today being a good day. He didn't know. It didn't matter.

When he got to work, he headed inside with a quick jog across the parking lot. He joined the flood of people that were moving towards their respective jobs. He crowded into the elevator with a group and listened to the conversations. Or, rather, he listened to the tone of the conversations. Here, like on the road, there was a bit of warmth and general good demeanor about the people he was around. They all seemed to be happier than the usual Monday morning, at least in his experience. Though, he remembered Monday mornings less and less though as his time as a vampire had gone on. He wondered if he was just forgetting the weeks before the Holidays being a bit more welcome than the usual weeks. Maybe he was. Maybe it was just a pretty day.

Either way, he reached his office with no real trouble. Ava was there when he arrived, already talking on the phone with a client to plan some meetings later in the day with someone there. She gave a wide smile and a wide wave over to him, but she couldn't. That was a great relief to him. Based on her excited wave, he felt that her reading of the meeting they had over the weekend may have been a good one. He didn't consider it that way, and he thought he had been clear. Though, he was glad she had come in today and wasn't drained.

He took a quick look at Ed's office and saw her there on the phone. Unlike normal, she was standing facing away from everyone, looking out over the city. She wasn't moving too much, just nodding and he could catch her speaking from time to time. She seemed in a deep conversation, but not one that he would have been able to guess without hearing something from her. It was clear that she wouldn't have that though. She was making sure people would see or hear her.

He reached his cubicle area, where his team was already set up and ready to go. There wasn't anything out of the ordinary here though. His team seemed in good spirits too, though. Lindsay was working quietly, typing away on some incident report. Helena hummed along to some song in her headset. Maddox was catching up on some sport he followed. Pleasant.

All this pleasant Monday feeling made him wildly uncomfortable. Something felt a little off. It was just his paranoia, of course, but it was one of those little nagging things he did. He always twisted things, a weird perspective that all this nice and pleasant feeling must have been balancing out the bad that was preparing to be unleashed on them. Despite his natural inclination to this ideology, the day went on without incident. The guests were nice, the tasks easy.

The next day was much the same. The day was easy. The sun was bright, and people were in good spirits. Yet, something continually ate at him, that something wasn't right. Ashley was still out, and it seemed that she would be for a few days. But she had been quiet and hadn't spoken much to any of them it seemed. He had talked to Maddox and Lindsay, and she hadn't said anything. She let Helena know that she would be back, but it would be a full few days before she could be. She didn't even hint at the cause. Just that she was sick.

Finally, the worry got to him enough that he opted to send her a text. Just a quick check-in. He planned to disguise it too, just to make sure she wouldn't be able to accuse him of wanting to check up on her specifically. It was some stupid holdover from his youth. He didn't want to be seen as caring. He wanted to be aloof and off on his own. A mysterious and cool person, rather than a soft caring individual. Which even as he chose to act that way, he realized just how stupid of a thought process it actually was. That wasn't going to break the habit though. He had ingrained this silly behavior into his nature.

*Ashley, I just wanted to see if you were feeling better and if you needed me to get anyone to cover for you on BF. Thanks.*

That was all he sent. He sent it while sipping down another one of his red bottles during lunch break, recharging his blood stores and getting some much-needed energy back for the rest of the day. He expected her to text back rather quickly. After thirty minutes, he explained away the delay to her likely being sick and asleep. After all, the rest was important. But after a few hours of not receiving a response, he began to worry.

For him, worry had always been an insidious thing. He had a somewhat unnatural ability to see things coming – be it from patterns or changes to those patterns, or some supernatural force – but that only made things worse. He could take the smallest things, and until they were resolved, their weight would seem to grow and grow. And in this case, he worried about one of his team. He worried that something awful had happened. His mind immediately jumped to the idea that she was deathly ill and couldn't speak due to whatever illness it was.

He considered sending another text, but he knew that would be a little too much. He didn't know what to do but wait. But the waiting let him think. And the thinking made things worse. And then, with no warning, about five hours later he got a text back.

*I'm fine. I'll be in on Black Friday, but I need to take off til then.*

He paused and stared at those words for a minute. Now he knew something was off. Three full days off required a doctor's note, so she had to have gone there. So, she must have had something pretty rough.

*Sorry to hear that you'll be out all week. Anything I can do to help?*

Again, the text took longer than he would have expected. It took about fifteen minutes before it arrived back in his inbox.

*No*

That was it. Not a no thanks, or anything similar. Just, no.

Now, he was not close to his team. Not like some team leaders. He knew that, and never really wanted their day to day relationship to be any different. But he did care, and they were well aware of that. The short phrase shook him. Something was wrong, and it was much worse than he would have thought. He needed to give her an out. Something she could use.

*Okay. If you need it, just try to let me know by tomorrow if I need to make Maddox take Friday.*

Again, there was a long wait, somewhat arduous by comparison. Then again, she typed out a short and simple response.

*Ok.*

Ok. That was it. That didn't even sound like her, much less look like something she would type. He didn't text her often, but he saw a lot of her texts. She was always texting at her desk, which was fine given it didn't interfere with her job. The team members they worked with knew her primarily through text. It was her preferred medium to communicate in and she knew all the little tricks. So, he doubted

anything short of catastrophic would stop that. One-word answers just weren't her style, not in this format at least.

He couldn't dwell on it, though. There was nothing he could do for her outside of hope for the best. So that was what he did. As the week went on, she didn't show up. She stayed away, and he dealt with the fallout. He listened to Maddox's moaning and told Lindsay to be on standby in case she couldn't make it into work on Black Friday. Then, on that Wednesday, he went home.

For him, Thanksgiving was a little holiday now. He had very specific traditions. Given he couldn't really eat the meals anymore – at least not comfortably – so he didn't. He didn't have much family left, and though both Olivia and Rory invited him to join them and their families, he turned them down as he always did. Instead, he would stay home and do a lot of nothing. He had his game from the week before, and he had enough little red bottles to survive until next week, even if he didn't get any food. Still, since it was a holiday he ordered an overabundance of Chinese food.

It just seemed right to sit and enjoy an indulgence on one of the premier holidays of the year. Even he had to admit that it was a bit depressing to spend the day alone eating microwaved Chinese food ordered the day before. He should have accepted one of the offers. Maybe next year, though. Maybe next year he would spend the time with loved ones. His phone vibrated, the light from a text popping up.

*Hey boss. Sorry to bother you on the holiday, but...* He swiped just under Ashley's name to reveal the full message. *...I just needed to talk to you before tomorrow.*

He took a breath and considered going ahead and texting Lindsay. *Sure. What do you need?* He responded, opting to at least see what it was she needed.

*I'm in a bad place and couldn't visit family. I don't know why I'm even asking, but are you in town?*

*Yeah. Pretty much always could.*

*Could we meet for coffee?*

*Where?* He raised a brow and shook his head. Nowhere was open.

*I don't know.*

He sighed and glanced to his kitchen, and then back to the coffee table with a bunch of take-out sitting on it. He couldn't believe what he was going to do. *I have coffee here.* He typed out. *I could bring it to you.* He hesitated over the send button for a minute, before finally letting his finger fall on the screen to send the text. Then he waited. There were only a couple seconds before the first response came through.

*I know this is odd to ask and you can say no, but could we just meet there? I don't know really have a place to meet up at the moment.*

He started to type and another message but didn't have a chance before another text came through from her.

*You can say no. Just inviting my manager to my hotel room seems like it would look bad. Like really bad.*

He adjusted his text a bit and started to send it back.

*I mean, maybe this is a bad idea. You can forget I asked.*

He gave a shake of his head and waited for a second to see if she would text again. She didn't. It gave him time to type out something new.

*Ashley. Calm down. If you need to talk, we can. I'll send you my address.*

*Ok.*

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