

Chapter 14 – Black Friday

Black Friday came the next day. As far as Mattias could tell, this and the following few days were the real Holiday as far as most people were concerned. Black Friday, Small Business Saturday, Cyber Monday; this trifecta was a period of holy days set aside for the almighty dollar. Everything seemed to revolve around this particular weekend in the business world, and where business circled civilization was drawn. That thought was not meant as a judgment, though he did feel that the idea of Thanksgiving got a little overshadowed in the modern era.

An odd thought, he could admit, for someone that spent their entire holiday alone normally. Really, the day before had just reminded him of how important it was to have that connection to someone else as the genuine holidays approached. It made him rethink his plans for Christmas itself. He had planned on doing something unsurprisingly similar to his Thanksgiving if he was being honest with himself. It didn't sound as nice after the day spent with Ashley. He was getting sentimental in his old age. Or at least he felt more sentimental than he normally did.

Part of him wondered if it was the Sun that did it. If there was something about being in the sunlight more often again had reminded him of his humanity, and his need for other souls to be around to really feel like himself. Though, he doubted that. Really, it was likely just the situation. He felt like he may have genuinely helped her out, and that helping another person was what made him feel more human. He was sure that was the case if he actually thought about the situation for more than a few seconds.

It was odd what one's mind would do while sitting alone.

He had come to the office for the first shift for Black Friday. That meant he was in before the sun came up. While he wasn't the only person in the office, he was one of less than ten, when normally a couple hundred people would be in the office. It was quiet, and the lights were dim. He was essentially alone in his little part of the massive cubicle farm. He didn't even have the luck of needing to work early in the morning. He was essentially just sitting quietly and waiting for the hell to start.

It was the calm before the storm. The truth was, they were an entertainment company. Most people who were up at this point were out doing shopping, snatching up deals and fighting over doorbusters and the like. Once that first wave got home, then things would start. The many people that wanted to go ahead and set up their services, or maybe more realistically the people buying for themselves, would be running into problems and talking to their locations throughout the country. So then, he would hear the other poor saps here early start taking calls and typing away and know that his job was about to begin. As problems started cropping up at the locations and with the team here, then he would start taking calls.

For now, though, it was a wonderful mix of dimly lit lighting and quiet clicking on keyboards as people worked. Well, 'worked' may have been code for sitting around on whatever social media or streaming site the worker preferred. There was nothing to do for the moment. In his case, Mattias was being boring. He was reading the news and sipping on his usual drink. The red bottle was about half empty, encouraging him to swirl it about in his hand as he sat in the quiet. It was strangely enjoyable to

him, despite the nature of the news. It was all rough, except the occasional hidden gem of good news. Still, it was a decent way to start the morning.

As the morning pushed ever towards dawn, he began to hear others beginning to receive calls. Light murmurs of talking from other teams began in earnest and once one started, it seemed like the floodgates fully opened. Within minutes of that wave beginning, his station was lighting up as well. He set aside the half-finished drink and went to work.

Now, it was hard to describe this particular work if you had not done it before. The calls began and they did not slow down for hours. It was a genuine blur of activity. The conversations were all forgettable. The job was simple. Answer the call, fix the problem if possible, and then move on to the next. There was no pause between the calls, though. There was not a wait. You had time to hang up and take a breath. Maybe take a drink. Then another one was rolling through. Everyone on every side was dealing with the same thing. Workers that called just needed whatever it was fixed, and then they went back to the front.

The only saving grace of this sort of shift was just that. You were too busy to think. No single guest became memorable in a way that would stick with you until the next. You didn't have time to hold grudges or feel offended. There was someone else who needed help, someone next in a never-ending queue of folks that thought their issue was the biggest one you needed to address. And for that few minutes, it was. Then you'd move on. In a sick sort of way, he preferred this route to the normal job. He loathed taking it home, but he'd be too tired to care by the end of the day.

This year. He was lucky. He wouldn't have a lot of stories to share with anyone. His worst one was from a manager just opening the store. A line had been waiting out front for the new hot release, stacked in a long line in freezing weather all in service to hope to be at the store before supplies ran out. The manager was calm and collected, though. She had just reached the store and gone in to get ready and realized something was off. A couple of things, really. And that made her unique.

"Hey, GEC, store one oh nine two here. I have a couple problems if you have a minute," She said clearly. There wasn't a waver or a bit of nerve in her voice.

"Sure, shoot. What's the problem? S. Problems." Mattias corrected himself.

"Okay, first one is easy enough," She spoke, a little sound of a crunch as she nibbled on something. It sounded like nougat. He only knew that because nougat and coffee was a good way to start, and one he used to do a lot. One of those things that he sometimes missed too. "Lady's water broke in my line. EMTs are en-route, but it kinda made a hazard. Can I use the employee entrance for folks until I can clean that up?"

Mattias blinked as his computer screen for a moment. The technical answer was no. Employee entrance was too close to stock to let guests through at their normal locations. "That's a good one. Normally, no." He said with a nod to himself, "If you don't have something to block it off, I guess. But... try to find a way to block it off first."

She sighed loudly, speaking with her mouth full after that, "Okay," She took a second to chew and then continued, "Second. New stock isn't here."

"I'm sorry, can you say that again."

“New stock isn’t here.” She repeated, in an almost identical tone.

“That should have been in before yesterday.”

“Yup.”

“And did you file an incident report?”

“Yup.”

“And still nothing.”

“Nope.”

He paused. The whole short conversation he had been pulling up their internal files. Once there, he saw that she was being truthful. She had filed one the day the delivery should have been made, and one every six hours after that trying to get some traction. No one had sent her anything beyond a simple ‘looking into it’ sort of response. He had access to every team’s responses and looking through he found the logistics reports.

“Okay,” He said as he read across the logistics report. “Good news or bad news first,”

“Good news,” She requested.

“The driver that caused the problem no longer works for us. Also he’s in jail,” Mattias said, “Apparently he stopped to rest that first night, got in a fistfight over a lady,” He omitted the actual word, “And then fought the police when they showed up. Gave a fake name when dragged in. So the company found the truck yesterday, but it had been impounded and they can’t get the supplies back until after the paperwork is all wrapped up.”

“So not tonight.”

“Yup.”

“That was the good news?”

“Well, you figured out the bad news. Sorry. No way to get you any supplies today,”

“Any suggestions on what to do with the fifty plus people already kind of on edge because of the baby?” Again, her calm demeanor was far from refreshing. It seemed almost callous. He worried she was just going to give up and leave. Of course, he didn’t really have any skin in the game there, so, she could have and it would not have affected him one way or the next.

“What do you think is best?”

“Give them free stuff.”

“You could. Prepared to explain that to your regional?”

She didn’t say anything for a second. “Yeah. Lady’s havin’ a baby and my driver got himself pinched.”

“Yeah. What about an IOU guarantee for the expected supply? And a discount one what they pay for it when they do?” Mattias offered. He really didn’t want her to end up fired. Not over something this far out of her control at least.

“Okay, that might work. I’ll think about it.”

“Good, anything else?”

“No, just thanks,”

“All part of the job. Call back if you need anything,” He replied and hung up. Normally, he would have given more niceties, but he could see another call waiting. He had to move on. And that was his only interesting call. He kept working, and while there were plenty of calls, none of them past that one could be described as interesting. The call had made him wonder if he sounded as distant on the job as she had if he sounded as ready to be fired and to give up. Today, he didn’t think so, but on a normal day, maybe he would have.

He finished up his shift about noon when Ashley arrived to take over for the rest of the day. They talked for a minute, but then she was on the phones and he was headed out and home after an exhausting stretch of hours. He’d have the weekend to recover though.

When he got to the parking lot, he felt the sun hit his skin, and he felt a strong wave of nausea building, so he made it to his car as quick as he could. It had been a tiring day, but something made him feel a bit worse than he expected he would. Even reaching the car, he felt his fatigue build up enough to make him take a second of laying against the steering wheel before finally starting the car and heading out.

The drive was not bad though. With the Holiday, it wasn’t like there were a ton of people working, and for the most part, he felt it was an easy drive. It felt long, though. He wasn’t sure why. When he pulled into his apartment he found himself at the door with a deep sickening feeling in his stomach. He pressed the door in and found himself in the outer hall. Each footstep felt surprisingly heavy. He didn’t know why at first. Then there was a sense of vertigo. The hall moved with him, twisting about and fighting him as he tried to reach his apartment. This feeling made him uncomfortable, a little agitated. It was frustrating and painful. He wanted to move forward, to get to his apartment and find himself able to rest. He just wanted rest.

Until something caught his senses. It was a scent. The scent of blood. There was suddenly a taste in his mouth, a great hunger for something salty – something fresh. He needed it. He realized that, though, and pushed open the door to his apartment and quickly slammed the door shut behind. He locked the door behind him. He hadn’t felt this in a long while. He was losing control. He rushed to his fridge, which he opened and searched desperately for one of the red bottles he always had on him. He didn’t see any. The sudden remembrance of the night before came back to mind. He had an extra one or two to eat with Ashley. He only had one left.

He only half-finished it. The rest sat on his desk at work.

He felt his face twitch.

He could smell that blood and it was causing him to lose control quicker and quicker. His vision was blurring, his senses heightening. He felt his teeth itching, a pain in his stomach. There was a coldness overcoming him. The blood was no longer flowing within him, and he would need to eat soon. He didn't know how long he could hold it off.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and typed out two words.

Losing control

He sent it to Rory and then to Olivia. He wasn't sure how long he had. There were innocent people at the complex though.

He threw open his cabinets and began searching like a madman, mumbling to himself and asking again and again where he put it. When he found 'it', he pulled it out. The vampire tore the lid off a small plastic jar and moved back to his front door. He poured it in a line along the edge of the door, the smell of garlic taking over the home as he pushed back over to the bedroom and shut that door. He poured another line out there and dropped the empty bottle. He took a deep breath, coughing and hissing through the smells for a second. His eyes darkened and for the first time in a long time, the sun from his kitchen window burned to the touch.

Control was gone at that point. He knew there was blood nearby, and he needed it.

He wanted it. Once it was dark... he would have it.