

FORWARD

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A TWO WAY STREET

By Styx

The day was one of those that could only be described as perfect. The sky was a deep blue with a sparse collection of clouds that looked more like pure white clumps of pillow fluff. It was one of those days that would make furs of all ages want to call in sick. Fortunately though, this perfect day landed on a Saturday. Exiting an antique shop, James Sheppard & Zig Zag walked arm in arm. Her other arm was wrapped around her purchase. Zig contemplated the package and chuckled. This got James' attention.

"What's so funny Zig?" he asked.

She smiled and said, "Oh, I was just thinking how close I came to passing on your idea of antique shopping," she

hefted the package, "I've been wanting a lamp like this for years, but never knew where I could pick one up."

James smiled back at her, "Yep, you never know what you can find in one of these shops; Doug and Kelly got me into it a few years ago."

"Speaking of which," said Zig, "when are we going to have them over again?"

"Hmmm, well if this weather holds up we could have `em over for a Bar-B-Q next weekend," he suggested.

"Oh, that sounds great," she replied. "So what do you want to do for lunch?" she asked.

James thought for a moment and checked his watch. "Well, Salvatore's is close and I think we can still beat the lunch crowd," he said as he unlocked and opened the passenger door for her and took the lamp. James offered his other paw to help her in, then gave her back the lamp. "Perfect," Zig Zag said as she pulled in her tail and James closed the door.

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An hour and a half later, the couple exited Salvatore's with the intention of heading back to James' place. They had long since taken to alternating weeks at each others' homes. On their way back to the car, they encountered a street fur: a raccoon in his mid-twenties, about 5' 6." His clothes were threadbare and were just barely able to perform their function of keeping the fur from being arrested.

The raccoon coughed and cleared his throat and asked, "Hey buddy, can ya help a fur who's down and out?"

Zig quickly looked him up and down and spotted a few things she didn't like. She then noticed James starting to go for his wallet. She stopped him by stating, "No, I'm sorry we can't help you," and started pulling James with her as she resumed the walk back to the car.

"Come on," the fur pleaded, "just a few bucks?"

Zig looked back to him, "Get a job!" she snapped.

All of this shocked James to say the least. He had never known Zig to act so heartlessly, but decided to hold his tongue till they both got in the car. He again unlocked and opened the car door and helped her in. After he had gotten them on the road and headed out of town to his place, he stole a quick glance over at Zig. Seeing she was upset over what just happened, James thought, *I'll have to approach this carefully.*

"Zig, why did you stop me back there? He just wanted some money for food."

"No James, it wasn't food he wanted to buy, it was drugs," she stated calmly.

James cocked an eyebrow at that. "What makes you say that? Surely you don't think every street fur is a junkie."

"Of course not James, but I know how to spot the signs. He had blood shot eyes, he was always moving, ya know -

fidgeting. Not once did he stand still, and I was able to smell the residue from his last fix still on him."

James had to admit that he did catch an odd smell he couldn't place on the fur. He decided to press on, "How did you know what to look for and spot them so quickly?"

She closed her eyes and sighed, "Let's just say I can."

Time to rope it in, James thought, "Ok, I'll drop it," but James was still bothered by this. "When, is she going to trust me?" he thought.

###

The trip back was spent in uneasy silence. Upon arriving at their destination, James helped Zig Zag inside with her newly acquired lamp. After seeing that she was comfortable, he told her that he had some things to do in the workshop for a while. She nodded and said she was just going to sit and listen to some music in the great room.

Stepping into the workshop, James considered what kind of project to work on. He changed his mind and decided to do some neglected cleanup. He did not trust himself not to do something stupid and cause himself injury due to the fact he was so preoccupied with Zig's earlier behavior. As he was sweeping, he started arguing with himself. "We have been seeing each other for almost seven months now and still she shows little trust in me concerning her past. I keep telling her that I won't judge her, that I just want to help her deal with it." *Well, trust goes both ways, doesn't it?* "Huh? What's that supposed to mean? I've shown trust in her, I

told her about my past, how I met Doug when I almost screwed my Army career, how it was for me growing up a hybrid." *Ah! But what about the really big thing you haven't told her?* "What really big thing?" *You know, the inner voice paused, then, **YOUR FAILURE WITH BETH!*** James stopped cold, his eyes growing wide. He dropped the broom and seated himself on the nearby stool. "NO! NO, I CAN'T!" *COWARD! How can you possibly expect her to trust you, if you're not going to trust her?* "But how can I tell her? She'd leave me if I told her how badly I failed Beth. Hell, I wouldn't blame her." *The question is; do you have any right to expect Zig to trust you with the dark parts of her past when you have not trusted her with yours?* James slumped, defeated. Closing his eyes, he buried his muzzle into his arms now folded on the workbench. Trying to fight back the tears, he contemplated his impending loss of the femme he very much desired to make the next Mrs. Sheppard.

###

Meanwhile, back in the house, Zig Zag is also preoccupied by her behavior. She didn't want to be so short with James. "I just know I'd lose him if I told him about that part of my life," she thought. Zig sighed as she put in the Pure Moods CD and hit the play button. She sat on the large couch, pulling her tail around her feet and lower legs as sort of a blanket. No fur who didn't know Zig Zag beyond the public view would ever suspect that a romantic relationship would be something that would cause such worry for her. In fact, a romantic relationship (this relationship she had with

James) was completely new to her. So new in fact, that although the sexual act had played such a large part in her life -either by force or as part of her business-- James was the first fur she had ever made love to. Oh, there were other relationships in which she had slept with the furs she was involved with, but...those times were more of a recreational event, kind of like a game of volleyball. Something done just for fun, but no real meaning to it. Definitely not the deep sense of sharing of one's self that she felt with James. No, love was something that had almost been alien to her at the start of her relationship, because of all the losers before who had told her they loved her. She had begun to fear hearing it. She almost pushed James away permanently the first time he had told her he loved her. Zig Zag had always been thankful that with some help from the unexpected source of James' old high school girlfriend, she was able to avoid making that horrible mistake.

Her tail twitched as she thought to herself. "I should really be more open with him. I mean, he has shown himself not to be a judgmental fur." *Are you CRAZY?* The demon of Zig's inner voice demanded. *You can never tell him about that. He'd leave you and you'd be all alone again. Is that what you want?* "No I'm not crazy, not for the lack of you trying though. James values trust. The fact that I love him in the end isn't enough. He has to know I trust him as much as he trusts me." *Ha! And what makes you think he trusts you so completely?* "What do you mean?" *Come on, you've noticed how he is hiding something, something big that he does not want you to know.* She had to admit there were times when he seemed to be guarded, that there was

something he didn't want her to know, and it did bother her. "But if we don't trust each other, what then? I mean, do we eventually grow apart or do we stay the way things are right now? Do I even want things to stay the way they are now? It's nice for now, but to be honest I want something more." She thought back to the time when she and some of her talent and Sabrina went to the last con, and she and the other girls had gathered in one of the rooms and had played their little confession game. "If things were to stay the same between you, would you marry the fur you're seeing?" She had answered "yes," and she realized just then that she indeed wanted to be James' wife some day. "But how? She thought how can I take that step if I can't bring myself to trust him?" *FINE, TELL HIM! Cry yourself to sleep every night when he leaves you. You'll only have yourself to blame!* She drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs while keeping her tail wrapped around to cover her feet. She lowered her head after a few moments and her body began to shudder with racking sobs. In a ranch house a few miles outside of Columbus, Ohio, two furs thinking about the same subject, came to the same painful decision.

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James entered the house after finishing up in the workshop and found Zig in the great room. He had expected to find her on the couch, but not huddled up in the ball she was in. He placed his hand lightly on her shoulder. Startled, Zig looked up to find James with a concerned look on his face. "I shouldn't have pushed her;" he thought when he saw the

tears in her eyes. He took her paw and pulled her up into an embrace and held her close.

Putting his muzzle on the side of her head, he spoke softly, "Zig, I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have pried. I prom-"

"No" she interrupted, pulling back and placing a finger on his muzzle. "It's not that, it's-" she paused, taking her finger away. She clenched her paw to her chest, looking away and trying to gather the strength to tell him.

"Zig?" James asked. When she looked back, he continued. "I think we need to talk about a few things if that's alright?"

"Yeah," she sighed, "I think we should."

James pulled her down to the couch as he also sat down. James looked into her eyes and started. "Zig, I realized today that I have been unfair in expecting you to trust me about your past when I myself have not done so with you."

"James, I-" she began, but James held up a paw to stop her.

"Please Zig, this is hard for me. It's hard because I never wanted to tell you this, but as I said, I realize now that I was wrong." He paused, took a deep breath and went on. "I never wanted to tell you about this because I was so sure that you'd leave me. I....I never told you about Beth's death, it was-"

Zig Zag interrupted, "James, please don't." She took his paw in her's. "Please don't do this to yourself. It isn't necessary. I asked Kelly, because I knew you'd tell me if I

asked, but I didn't want to put you through the pain of telling me and I was curious."

James was surprised by this.

"What did she tell you?"

"Well, only that her aorta ruptured and she died almost instantly," she admitted.

"Did she say if I was with Beth at the time?"

Zig shook her head. "She said you had to go into the office, even though it was the weekend, to take care of some problem that cropped up."

He regarded her. "Then you know-- you know how I failed Beth."

This thoroughly confused Zig Zag. "What? What makes you say you failed Beth? From what Kelly told me, you could not have been a better husband to her."

James gave a short laugh but there was no humor in it. "Some husband, the way she died was my fault."

Zig Zag's eyes widened. "James, you can't blame yourself for Beth's death. You couldn't have saved her even if it happened at the hospital in an emergency room full of doctors. It was just too fast! You not being there made no difference. She still would have died." She gently squeezed his paws in hers.

"No Zig, you don't understand. I do not blame myself because she died. I blame myself for how she died." He was crying in earnest now, tears coming in a steady stream, his body shaking. "You're wrong Zig; my being there would have made all the difference. If I were there, if I hadn't left her to nip some stupid little problem in the bud, she...she.....SHE WOULDN'T HAVE DIED ALONE!" He cried out, unable to continue, his body consumed with racking sobs. Zig pulled him to her and hugged him as close as she was able; doing what she could to comfort him. "Oh fur!" She thought "He blames himself for not being with her when she died, but he couldn't have possibly known. Poor James, he's had this guilt bottled up inside him for so long. I don't even think he's told Doug & Kelly!"

After five minutes, he was able to speak again. "I failed her. I failed to be there when she needed me most. I wasn't there to hold her, to tell I loved her, to let her know how much I cared for her. I wonder sometimes if she died thinking that the company was more important to me than she was."

Zig Zag loosened her embrace and looked at him. "James, look at me and listen. There is no way you could have known. If you had, there wouldn't have been anything on this earth that could have torn you away from her. I'm sure Beth knew that too. From what you and Kelly have told me about her, I don't think there is any way she could have thought that you cared more for the company than for her. Do you hear me, James Sheppard?" She grabbed his muzzle and turned it so he faced her. She looked straight

into his eyes and punctuated each of her following words with a slight shake of his muzzle.

"You...did...not...fail...Beth." She let go and smiled warmly at him, "And I am not leaving. You aren't getting rid of me that easily!"

James looked away, then looked back. Seeing the love in her eyes, only then did her last statement sink in. "Zig," he said, "I can't put into words how much I love you." He pulled her into a long passionate kiss that left them both breathless. James leaned back against the armrest of the couch and pulled Zig Zag to him. She turned so that her back was to him, leaning against him as he brought his arms around her waist. *I can't believe what a wonderful femme she is* James thought as they snuggled, whispering to each other just enjoying being together.

###

They had been relaxing on the couch for a good while when Zig started thinking about what had happened. "He had been living with that guilt since Beth's death, more than two years now. This was it. This was what he was hiding from me. He was so sure that I would leave him and yet he told me anyway, to show that he trusts me completely. Well Zig, no backing out now. You have to follow through on your choice and tell him." *NO! He'll leave you, don't be a fool.* "I have to; I have to show I trust him as much as he has proven he trusts me." *Oh, what? You mean that imagined wrong against his dead wife? This is different, DAMN IT! What you did was real, Zig. You really did it. You didn't imagine it. If you tell him, he will throw you out*

on your striped ass. He'll be so revolted, he may even beat you! NO! He wouldn't - I could never believe that! I've given James plenty of cause to hit me in the past and he's never even come close. I love him and....I TRUST HIM!" Silenced, Zig's demon did not respond. She thought for a moment on just how to start.

"James?"

"Yes?"

"I too have something about my past I need to tell you about."

James sat up as she pulled away from his hold. She turned and faced him as she continued to sit on the couch. "Are you sure Zig? You don't have to. I didn't expect you to return my trust right away."

She nodded and said, "I appreciate that you'd let me off the hook James, but yes, I'm sure. I may not be able to gather the will again, so it's now or never."

James took her paws in his. This time, he was the one offering support. She looked at her paws in his and then looked into James' eyes.

"Like you, James, I was afraid to tell you about this because I was certain you would leave me." She paused a moment, looking down to the floor, but it was clear she was seeing something else. "James, I've killed a fur." She looked back at him, heard the sudden intake of breath and saw his eyes widen. She was expecting that, but the fact

that he didn't pull his paws away surprised her. She began to wonder if he understood what she had said. "It wasn't in self defense. I killed out of selfish need, and to make it even worse, she was only a child of fourteen." She fell silent.

This really knocked James off his guard, but to his credit he managed to maintain his composure. "Uh Zig? Why don't you start from the beginning and tell me how this happened?"

Zig Zag breathed in and exhaled heavily. "You know that I worked as a prostitute for a while after my first attempt at acting failed."

James only nodded, not wanting to break Zig's stride. He knew how hard this was for her. "Well, I had told you that after that I tried acting again, and that's when I got into adult films, but that's not really how it went. When I was still working as a call girl, I became addicted to heroin. Some of the Johns I had to...do business with were repulsive, and some others were abusive. Using heroin was how I dealt with it." She stopped for a moment, and then went on. "My madam figured out I was using after a couple of months and confronted me. She was sympathetic, but her rules were clear. She didn't want drugs mixed up in her business. As much as she felt for me, she couldn't make an exception. It wouldn't have been fair to the other femme's. Anyway, that's when she suggested I try acting again. My addiction by that time had me pretty tight in its grip. Working as a call girl to pay for my next fix was easy enough, but acting -" she sighed, "going to open talent

calls, auditioning, it was way more than I was willing to deal with. I didn't have any desire in me any more, other than to get my next fix. Well, it only took a few months for my habit to eat through what money I had managed to save. I soon found myself in dire straits. My supplier, an Irish setter who called himself Red, was a charming, likable fur on the surface, but he was really a low life who would sell his kid sister into slavery for five bucks. He had let on that he was attracted to me, I mean very attracted. When it got to the point that I couldn't pay for my next dose, I swallowed what little pride I had left and.... I offered myself to him." She cursed softly "I can still see the huge smile on that disgusting fur's muzzle as I confirmed the power he had over me, or rather the heroin had over me. It didn't matter, in his mind it was all the same. He said `You know how very tempted I am to accept that deal, babe, but I have one very important rule I never break and that's never let desire interfere with the bottom line. Sorry Stripes, but no deal.' You would not believe how hard that hit. I felt as though I had been gut kicked. I guess Red managed to scrape up some pity for me, though and made me a counter offer. He told me he needed a new "sales associate," he liked to call them. He really got off acting like he was running a legitimate business." She snorted. "I would be a dealer. The basics of the deal were simple enough. I sell the stuff, I give him the money, he gives me a regular supply for my own needs, I get a nice little cut, and best of all, I don't have to go anywhere near his bed. It took all of two seconds before I accepted, and so I started out in my career as a pusher. Red paired me up with another fur that'd been doing it for a while to show the dos and don'ts, like only

sell to furs that show the signs of a user. If you don't see the signs, then act like you don't know what the fur is talking about - could be a cop. You learn to spot users quickly. It becomes second nature. That's how I was able to spot that street fur today as a user. Well, I had been doing my share of poisoning the minds of furs for about six months, when a cocker spaniel femme came up to me. She was about thirteen or fourteen. I had expected her to ask directions or tell me she was lost or something, but you should have seen my eyes bug out when she whipped out some cash and said, 'gimme a dime bag.' I asked if she didn't think she was kind of young to be doing drugs and that kind of ticked her off. 'Look,' she snapped back at me, 'if you don't want my money, fine. I'll just go to one of the other dealers. I came here when I heard about you because I don't like how the male dealers leer at me.' Well, I thought if she were going to buy drugs anyway, she may as well buy 'em from me. Who was I to turn a customer away? I apologized and sold her the dime bag. She became a steady customer over the next six months. I found out her name was Cathy. One day I was doing my thing like always, and Cathy came by my spot and bought her usual dime bag. I decided to call it quits for the day a short time later and do some shopping. Walking down the street, I noticed an ambulance parked next to an alley and a crowd gathering. Morbid curiosity got the best of me and I decided to check it out. I pushed my way through the crowd to where the EMTs were working on a fur. I couldn't see who it was, as one of the EMTs was in the way from my angle. They were working furiously on the fur, performing CPR, but the fur wasn't responding. They tried using the defibrillator, but after

several tries even I knew they had lost the fur. They kept trying a few more times, but I didn't understand why until they finally gave up and called into the hospital that they couldn't save the fur. The EMT who was blocking my view moved."

Tears had been running down the side of her face for several minutes, but now Zig's composure crumbled. She collapsed into James' arms, unable to do anything but cry uncontrollably for ten minutes. For his part, James did nothing but hold on to Zig and try to comfort her as she released the bottled up pain she had kept pent up in her soul for so long. He began to suspect who it was that Zig saw. When she finally stopped crying and pulled away, Zig Zag sniffed and said, "It was Cathy," confirming James' thoughts. "I screamed her name and pushed my way through the rest of the crowd and asked what happened. The EMT that had been blocking my view held up the bag I had sold to her. 'OD I'm afraid, you knew this child?' I said I was a friend." She took on a look of disgust. "Some friend! I may as well have put a gun to her head and pulled the trigger."

She looked at the floor and James looked at her. He fully understood now why Zig Zag had not wanted to share this with him. He knew that he was going to have to help her come to terms with this, and the first thing he had to do was to get her to stop blaming herself. He was going to have to get her to look at this demon objectively, as she had done for him, but before he could do even that, there was something else that he had to do. He stood suddenly,

startling Zig. She was now convinced she'd made a horrible mistake. She was certain that at any moment, James would yell at her to get out. Her ears were pinned flat against her head. James held out his paw. Confused, she took it and stood. Would James escort her to her car and politely state that he did not want to see her again? James looked into her eyes and saw the confusion, mixed with fear and pain. He smiled at her and pulled her to him, hugging her close and kissing her for a long moment.

He then said, "I love you Zig Zag, and nothing you've said here today has changed my feelings for you." He caressed the sides of her face, wiping away her tears. "I will never leave you Zig, ever." Confusion, shock, disbelief, relief, love, and above all joy, Zig Zag felt all these things at once. Was James truly telling her what she thought he was, what she had hoped he would? Overcome with emotion, she leaned into the embrace. He supported her easily.

She looked into his eyes and asked, "James, how can you say that, knowing what I've done?"

"Because, just as I told you before, what's in the past is just that, in the past. What's important to me is who you are now, and who you are now is someone I love with all my heart," James answered back. "And because, like me you've been wrongly blaming yourself for something you could not have controlled."

"But James, I sold her the drugs that killed her," she argued.

James held up his paw, silencing her, and then gestured towards the couch. They both sat and turned to each other. "Now, I'm going to ask you some questions. I'm pretty sure what the answers will be, but I am hoping your answers will show to you that you should not have blamed yourself for Cathy's death, ok?" She nodded. "If you knew that Cathy was going to overdose, would you still have sold her the drugs that day?"

Zig looked back at James and replied, "No, of course not."

James went on, "If you hadn't sold the dime bag to her, do you think she just would have given up on the idea of getting her fix that day?"

"No, she would have just gone to another-" Zig stopped mid-sentence, her eyes wide as realization hit her, but then she shook her head. "No, it's not that simple James. I am the one who sold her the drugs."

James shook his head. "I know you sold her the drugs, Zig and yes it was wrong of you to do so. It was wrong of you to be selling drugs at all, but I am not here to condemn or condone the wrong doings of your past. I do want you to realize that even if you hadn't sold her the drugs, she would have gotten them from someone else. She killed herself, Zig. She was the one who decided to do drugs. Whatever her reason, it was her choice. She may not have intended suicide, but in the end every fur that does drugs will stop doing drugs one day - either the way you stopped, or the way Cathy did. She was old enough to know this, and probably thought the same thing almost all teenagers think.

`Oh, that only happens to other furs. I'm too smart to let that happen to me,' and all too often they're proven wrong. You just sold her the drugs, Zig, which was wrong. You were not responsible for her death." James watched her for a moment as Zig struggled to accept this interpretation of events.

He then spoke up again, "You know Zig, if what I suspect is true then some good has actually resulted because of the way things happened."

Zig looked skeptically at James. "What makes you say that?"

"Well, what did you do after Cathy died? I mean, did you continue to sell and do drugs?" James asked.

"No," she said, "I took what drugs and money I had left and gave them back to Red, including what was supposed to have been my cut. I told him what happened and that I was out. He, of course, warned me about going to the police. I told him that I wouldn't, and if I got caught, I wouldn't even mention him. I then checked with some friends on the streets and found out the name and address of Cathy's mother. I wrote her a letter telling her who I was and what I had done and that I was going to check myself into a rehab program, but that I was leaving my fate in her hands. I told her what I looked like and where the police could find me if she chose to turn me in. I told her I was truly sorry for causing her loss and that I would give my life if it would bring Cathy back. I also sent her five thousand dollars, part of the savings I had gathered together. You wouldn't

believe how profitable selling drugs can be if you can ignore the costs to your soul. I told her to use it to pay for Cathy's funeral or to donate it to an anti-drug organization in Cathy's name or something. I didn't feel I deserved it any more. The rest of my savings I used to pay for the rehab."

"Did you ever meet with her mother?" James asked.

"No," she replied, "I saw a femme who was visiting the center I had checked myself into a few weeks later. She looked so much like Cathy that I was sure it was her mother. I started towards her, but she turned and left when she saw me coming. Obviously, she didn't want to talk to me, not that I could blame her, really. I guess she was just curious to see if my claims of going into rehab were true."

"So Cathy's death was the catalyst for the changes you made in your life," James said, "If you had not sold her the drugs, if you had not felt responsible, you might never have made that change. You might still be selling drugs, or in jail for selling them, or worse, Zig, you might be dead today. Because of what happened, you changed your life. You stopped doing and selling drugs. You went and got help and as a result, you sit here a responsible, productive, and honest member of society, who is also very caring and compassionate. It's no wonder I love you so much."

He then took her paws in his and pulled her into his embrace again as he leaned back into the couch's armrest, kissing her again. After a few moments, she broke away from the kiss. Resting her head on his chest, Zig sighed contentedly. Closing her eyes and smiling, Zig Zag felt as

though she had been set free. Perhaps she had, for she now thought about sharing the other unpleasant things of her past with James, and for once the demon did not rail against it. The demon was silent, not gone, but rendered almost powerless against the love she and James shared. James also felt relieved and free now that Zig had helped him to realize that he had not failed Beth. Oh, he still wished he had been there. What fur would not? But he no longer hated himself for not having been there. With Zig's help, he had managed to forgive himself and hoped that Zig would be able to forgive herself, also. James and Zig Zag soon fell asleep in each others arms, content knowing that now, along with their love, their relationship would grow ever stronger. They knew this because now the love they shared was intertwined with the trust that the other would always be there.

THE END