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## *LXXX - Is this the end?*

Bridget pushed open the door to room 12B with her shoulder, a big smile on her face. In her paws, she carried a tray with various pills and a syringe. Some pills were in sealed glasses, some in small plastic cups. She looked forward to this room. She'd planned it so she had some extra time here. Every day had good and bad moments. It came with working in a section of the hospital that dealt with everything from liposuction to third degree burns. She'd been a nurse for many years, and she'd seen miracles and horrors aplenty. Yet, the pure pleasure of sending a fur home in good order never lessened.

"Good morning, Jean," she said, smiling to the vixen in the room. "Today's the day, hm?"

Jean looked back over her shoulder and smiled. She was standing by the window, arms folded over her bosom. The New York Skyline was an impressive sight, and today was a beautiful, clear day.

"It is. It'll be a *long* trip home," she answered and chuckled. "I'm sure Esteban will be very tired of me before we hit the city limits. I'm going to need a lot of stops."

Bridget nodded and smiled warmly. She looked the vixen up and down. Jean was wearing a light denim dress, tied in a halter behind her neck. It was very short but the badger had to admit the vixen had the legs to pull it off. Her tail was held high too and

she'd styled her hair some. She'd applied her makeup just right...toned down and unobtrusive. All in all, she looked as good as one could expect for someone just out of the hospital.

"Yes, but that's how it is. You look good today, Jean. And you've dressed sensibly for this. Remember...don't pack up the wounds in too much clothing for a while yet. Dresses are good, pants aren't. At least until you're completely healed," Bridget said, approval evident in her voice.

"Yes mommy," the vixen said and laughed softly. She looked back out the window. "It's a bit strange, Bridget..."

"What is?" the badger asked and put down the medicine tray on the table. "Shall we take care of your last injection then?" she asked and picked up the syringe.

"Gahh...I hate those things," Jean said and shuddered. "They hurt. Why're you giving me that? I'm not in bed, and I'm going home in an hour."

"Red tape, Jean...you start the day here, so you have to get your injection to make sure you don't get blood-clots while here," the nurse said, apologetically.

She didn't like doing this. Jean obviously hated that particular injection. She'd been a good patient. Apart from the horrible situation the very first night after surgery, which the vixen hadn't been responsible for in any way, she'd been a model patient. She'd been helpful as far as her condition allowed. She'd never complained about the amount of medicine she had and never tried to wriggle out of her injections, even at first when she got several a day. When they needed to move her bed into the hallway for half an hour to clean the room, she hadn't objected either. When the food had been delayed, she'd joked about how that was very nearly a blessing, instead of giving the nurses grief about it. Perhaps most importantly of all, Jean had only ever buzzed for a nurse if she *really* needed help. Some patients buzzed three times an hour, because they were bored and needed entertainment for five minutes. Bridget highly approved of Jean's prudence in that area. Overall, she *liked* the vixen.

Jean nodded and moved over to the bed. She pulled the dress up slightly and leaned over to one side. The injection stung as much as always but she bit down hard and accepted it. At least it was the last time she had to take this.

"I hope I haven't been too much trouble while here. I've done my best to not get obnoxious. There are furs in the other rooms fighting for their lives, after all."

"So did you, in a manner of speaking, Jean. But don't worry. You've been a very, very good patient. Every nurse here thinks so. In fact...I have a confession to make..." Bridget said and discarded the syringe in the container meant for it, and gave the vixen one of the small plastic cups with two pills in it.

Jean looked at it and smiled a while. "Ahh...hormone tablets. My first in over five weeks, all in all. Three weeks before coming here, plus my stay in the hospital," she said and swallowed the small round tablets. "What's your confession? That sort of thing sounds terribly serious and God knows I'm not a believer..."

Bridget giggled. "Good one. Very good one. No, it's nothing religious. It's just that...you know, we see a lot of furs coming here for this. A sex-change is a big thing, and...quite often we ask ourselves in the nurses room...what the hell some of those furs are thinking. Some of them get past the tests with a shrink who has no idea what is going on and who just wants to make some money on a patient. It's terrible and yes...I've experienced furs waking up the the next day, regretting what they've done, when they realized the full implications. And in those cases, we can do *nothing* for them. When they go home...we know they're probably not going to last more than a few months before they kill themselves or go mad. It's awful to witness. Fortunately, those are a minority. But you...you know, one of my colleagues said she'd always been a bit wary of transsexuals before meeting you..." she began, searching for the right words.

The vixen smiled and shook her head. "I didn't get a sex-change, Bridget," she said, softly.

"How do you mean?" the badger asked and looked confused.

"If I got a *sex-change*, that means I was male before I started. I never was. I just had a physical disability to deal with. You helped me fix it. Now things are the way they should be. I can get on with my life. When I came here, I stood in front of a door. I opened it, walked through it and now there is no turning back. I don't *want* to turn back. A part of my life is...at an end. It's time for a new part to begin. There's nothing...mysterious about all this. I got help for a purely physical, medical problem."

Bridget listened and nodded. "You know...you're right. That's a very good way of looking at it. You're a nice femme, Jean. You'll do well out there. Just remember not to deny your past, okay? Remember that it's a part of you, and a part of what *made* you the femme you are now. Don't reject it."

"I won't. Like I said, this is *an* end...not *the* end," Jean said and extended a paw to Bridget. "You've been very kind to me while I've been here. Thank you."

Bridget smiled and took it, shaking it. Then she patted the vixen's cheek. "You're alright, Jean. Don't let anyone tell you differently," she said and headed out of the room.

Jean turned once more, looking out over the city one more time.

###

The door closed behind Zig Zag. She took off her jacket and placed her purse on the small table next to the coat-rack. Marvin was taking care of business at the studio today. Not because she didn't want to be there, but because she had a meeting to deal with, later. She looked around her home and ran a paw through her hair, ruffling it a little. She'd dealt with a lot of meetings lately. This would be the last one.

It would also be one of the most important ones of her career.

She wouldn't consider doing a meeting like that at the studio. It was one of those occasions that demanded lunch at a good restaurant. Considering the business she worked in...a discreet restaurant as well.

She headed into the bathroom and started undressing. She let the water run into the tub and turned around to get some scented bath-oils off a shelf. It'd still be several hours until the meeting but too much rested on it. She wasn't going to leave anything to chance. The water slowly filled the bathtub while Zig Zag looked at her own reflection.

"You aren't getting any younger, Zig..." she told herself and smiled crookedly. "That's okay though. We only grow older."

It didn't feel bad to admit that. She'd have been horrified at the thought only a few years ago, but now it wasn't bad anymore. She had a good life, at last. It hadn't been easy. She'd fought tooth and claw to get there, at times. It was uphill most of the way and she'd certainly collected an awe inspiring amount of emotional scars along the way. More than one physical one as well, but at least those weren't visible.

She put her paws on the edge of the sink and chuckled, looking down at the white porcelain. Her emotional scars showed more clearly than the physical ones. It was the world in reverse.

A lot of her world was arranged that way, she reminded herself. Most of the decent furs she knew worked in a business that made indecency an absolute necessity. She was a mixed species fur who'd made it to personal success. There were many other examples. She raised her gaze again and looked back at her reflection in the mirror. It had been such a long road. She remembered the looks on the faces of every single casting-assistant

and director in Hollywood when she tried to get into the mainstream movie-world. That look of thinly veiled disgust and badly hidden amusement.

It was stupid, too. If there was one thing she knew already back then, it was that she could act. Now she didn't act anymore, of course. But she certainly still worked in the world of movies.

Recognition had been long in coming but this meeting could lead to it. Not from mainstream studios. She knew perfectly well that the big studios would rather go bankrupt than acknowledge her existence. This was about acknowledgement from someone else.

She grinned ear to ear.

"The golden palms of porn," she mumbled. The biggest annual award-ceremony in the world of porn took place in Cannes in southern France. Not long after the 'Palm D'ors' awards. The biggest movie-award in the world would always be the academy award, but the Cannes-awards came a really close second. Someone in the world of porn had thought up the brilliant idea of holding a similar award ceremony where the best porn-movies of the past year would be found.

At first, it had been just a joke. No one had expected it to last more than one or two years as a kind of slap in the face to those who wouldn't admit sex was a huge part of the world of movies. But it had been a success. The French had received this protest-award surprisingly well and the idea had stuck.

The point, of course, was that 'Amat Victoria Curam' wasn't finished yet. The editing wasn't done. But that wasn't really a problem. The next 'Hot D'or' awards as they were called, wouldn't be held until May the following year. The point was that getting involved with Pethouse and Harry Rex had been a success. At the time, she didn't think she had needed Pethouse funding, and she had managed to get the movie done without asking Harry for assistance. It would've meant giving up a lot of control to the canid and she wasn't prepared to do that. The marketing, however, was better left to Harry Rex and his furs.

Zig Zag smiled. It had been a small stroke of genius. There were already ads for 'Amat Victoria Curam' on the pages of that magazine. When the movie hit the streets, there'd be a few interviews to do as well.

If this meeting went well, it could go to Cannes in several categories. Rafe might even get nominated for his part. Admittedly, the female stars of porn got a lot more attention

than the male ones, but Rafe was physically big enough to be hard to overlook. Wolves tended to be, with Esteban as a notable exception. That one was tall and fit, but lean rather than brawny.

Zig Zag smiled slightly at the thought of the maned wolf. Today was the day, after all. He'd start the trip home with Jean. When he got back to work, it'd be as a cameraman, rather than an actor. AVC had marked the end of his active career in porn, after all.

Again, the skunk's thoughts revolved to the movie, and the meeting later.

"It's not an academy award," she told herself and slipped into the bathtub. "But it's the biggest thing imaginable in my world."

She leaned her head back and closed her eyes, still smiling. Everything was going her way. Her relationship with James had never been better. Her business was going from success to success. She had real friends that she could actually rely on. She never really had a chance to grow bored, either, as one challenge gripped the next.

She had a good life, indeed.

It felt good to admit it.

###

Rafe ruffled his hair and sat down, putting his feet up on the table in the common room, stretching. Tamara, Wanda, Michael, Yohni and Gabrielle were already seated. Michael tossed the wolf a bottle of cold water and opened one for himself. Rafe caught it easily and looked at the others. Everyone looked like they were in high spirits.

"It does feel good to finally get back to rehearsals. I never thought I'd hear myself say that...but the wait was getting unbearable," he said and took a swig from the bottle.

Wanda nodded and pulled her hair back, applying a scrunchy to keep it in a ponytail. She sighed contently and stretched. "I think, to be honest, that after AVC, it'll be a while before work seems like work again," she said and smiled languidly.

"I'm sure if you don't think work feels like work, you can find any number of volunteers to help get you tired," Gabrielle said and jabbed a thumb at the bed.

That got a few chuckles. The mood in the room was relaxed, overall. Relaxed and comfortable. Rehearsals for the next movie had already been underway for several days. No one thought about costumes or sets yet. They were still in the 'soft opening' phase.

An expression that, when used openly, usually brought a few giggles from the cast. Most of them had admitted to one another that AVC had taken a toll. It had been fun, and none of them would've wanted to miss out on it, for love nor money, but it had been terribly hard work. The emotional stress had been just as bad. There had been a quiet, invasive feeling about the whole thing, telling the cast and crew that they couldn't afford to mess this one up. Everyone had known what was at stake, even if it had never actually been said aloud.

Now it was back to 'business as usual'.

"You know, furs...we've come a long way in a short time," Wanda said and took a sip of her coffee-cup. "I remember a porn-studio...and this seems like such a long time ago...where the most exciting thing happening was whenever Rafe dropped his pants."

"I can drop my pants now if that'll help you," the wolf said with a big grin.

Wanda chuckled and nodded. "I'm sure you could, and you wouldn't hear me complain. My point is...since Gabrielle started here, we've had our worlds expanded quite a bit," she said and crossed her legs.

"That's hardly all my doing," Gabrielle interjected. "That whole mess with my Dad was not something I *wanted*, after all."

"No one says it was, dear," Yohni purred and kissed the filly's jaw.

"Exactly. I'm simply saying it happened since you started here. None of us blame you, Gabby. I think I speak for everyone when I say we're quite happy you joined the cast here," Wanda said, smiling warmly.

"I am!" Yohni exclaimed and raised a paw with a grin. "But somehow I think that's obvious."

Tamara nodded and reached out for the coffee to refill her mug. "And let's face it...if it hadn't been for you bringing Jean along to that party, AVC would never even have existed. Speaking of that vixen, isn't today the day you told us she's getting out of the hospital?" she asked and stayed leaned forward, looking at Gabrielle.

Gabrielle smiled and ruffled Yohni's hair with a wink. "You're cute when you're silly," she muttered, then looked at Tamara. "Yeah, Esteban will be taking her home today. Or at least, they'll start today. I have no clue how long it'll take them to drive the whole way. All I know is that they have a nice, big and above all *comfortable* car and that Jean will need an awful lot of stops so she can stand up and take the pressure off the wounds."

Rafe shuddered and swallowed. "I'm trying not to think of those wounds, Gabby...have a heart. I rather like my genitalia, y'know," he said in an almost pained voice.

Wanda smiled languidly. "I rather like your genitalia too, Rafe..." she purred and sipped her coffee again.

The look on Rafe's face got a laugh from everyone. Clearly the wolf hadn't expected that comeback.

Michael looked at Gabrielle and put his elbows on his knees. "So you're saying it could be...what...a week before they're back here?"

"That's how long they have the car for at least, so who knows?" the equine answered and slipped an arm around Yohni.

Michael nodded and smiled, then sipped his water.

No one said anything for a few moments. Gabrielle kissed Yohni's hair and smiled, pulling the mongoose closer. Wanda was right, she thought. Things certainly had come very far, very fast. A year ago, she'd been working in a condom factory. She'd hated the stench...and the boss...the work had been droll and boring. All the jokes got stale very fast. It had been...no life at all. Now, she *had* a life. A great job, nice colleagues, an employer so great it defied reason and a wonderful girlfriend.

Things had certainly changed. For the better. Looking around at her friends, she smiled warmly to herself. Even when she'd grown too old to work in front of the camera anymore, she knew she'd still know all these furs as good, close friends. Furs she could rely on. Perhaps it was the intimate nature of the work. Perhaps it was the fact that ZZ Studios was an island in the middle of Columbus that 'ordinary' furs shunned and looked down upon...at least when asked. She didn't know what it was, but she knew she belonged there.

The daughter of a crime-boss, working in porn. She giggled to herself. It'd make a good airport pocket-novel.

"Hey...when we're done here today, what say you that we all go out for a drink? Yohni and I usually go to a place called 'Spirit of New Orleans'. Jazz-place...really nice," she asked.

"Jazz? Not really my thing," Tamara said and shrugged.

"I'm sure the Irish Coffee there is your thing, though, and I swear the atmosphere is fantastic," Gabrielle assured her friend before looking at the mongoose snuggling up against her. "Isn't it right? You didn't think it'd be your scene either."

"Break out the gumbo, babe. Jazz isn't my thing, but 'Spirit' definitely is!" Yohni giggled.

"Come on all, I'll buy the first round of coffees," Gabrielle said and looked at the others.

"Then it's a deal," Tamara grinned. "If you buy the first Irish Coffee, then it's a deal."

"I'll buy the next round," Yohni offered. "I think we could all do with this."

Everyone nodded and agreed. Gabrielle smiled to herself and crossed her legs. They could always move on from 'Spirit' if they absolutely wanted to, later. But it was a good place to start. Somehow, she didn't think they'd be moving on, either. 'Spirit' got under one's fur and before you knew it, you'd be snapping your fingers and bobbing your shoulders to the band on the stage.

Again, Gabrielle looked at Yohni. The mongoose looked back and smiled.

The equine smiled. She couldn't remember a moment where she felt this content before. Everything was as it should be. If she could stop time then and there, preserving that moment for all eternity...she would have. But of course, that wasn't possible. Instead, she leaned her head down a little and kissed Yohni. A lingering, gentle kiss.

"I love you," she said, quietly.

Yes...everything was just the way it should be.

###

"It's been very nice getting to know you," Timothy said and wrapped his arms around Esteban in a tight hug.

The wolf returned it and smiled. Saying goodbye was something he was notoriously bad at, but somehow, he didn't have the imagination to think this *was* a goodbye. He knew he'd see both his hosts again, and that he'd stay in touch with them once back in Columbus. The last few weeks had given him a lot. Two new friends, a new job and most importantly, it had given Jean peace of mind. Something he considered a gift to him as well.

"That feeleeng ees mutual, that's for sure..." he said and squeezed the stallion back, before letting go.

Malcolm extended a paw and grinned. "I'll leave the hugging to Timothy. But he's right though. It's been a pleasure having you here, Esteban. Don't be a stranger...we're probably going to end up going to Ohio for a vacation soon. Timothy wants to see his sister again."

Esteban nodded and shook the offered paw firmly. "There's no chance I'll be a stranger. You're good furs. You opened your home to me, a total stranger, when I reallee needed eet. I won't forget thees."

Malcolm laughed warmly. "Don't worry about it," he said with a smile.

Esteban looked at the two equines a moment. They were so very different and yet, they were definitely good together. The wolf had to admit, every time he looked at Timothy he could see a lot of Gabrielle. There was no denying the family connection. Both in behavior and appearance. He had an attitude and a quick, sharp tongue, but at the same time, Esteban had seen something in Timothy that was in complete reverse with Gabrielle. It had become more obvious to him, since he'd met the filly's brother. Timothy needed someone in his life to protect him. Almost certainly because of his father's behavior towards him. Previously, that 'someone' would've been Gabrielle. Nowadays, Malcolm filled that role. The Arabian stallion was certainly strong enough to protect Timothy. Yet it was obvious that it wasn't the reason they were together.

They were a couple because they were right together, and because they loved each other.

The thought made Esteban smile. He nudged his suitcase with one foot and grinned. "I hope I haven't messed up your home too badlee while here," he chuckled.

"Oh, I'm sure if I spend a week in the guestroom with rubber gloves and a box of sterile masks, I'll get it back to some semblance of it's former self," Timothy groaned, keeping a teasing glint in his eyes.

"Nahh...you're too squeamish, dear. We'll have to hire a professional for this," Malcolm said, the corners of his mouth creaking upwards in a badly contained smile.

"I have a better idea..." Esteban said, shaking his head in amusement. "Why not seemplee torch the house? Eef eet's so bad."

"Good idea. We'll keep whatever you left in there from spreading!" Malcolm said and grinned openly. "Nahh, it's fine. Now you'd better go and get your vixen from the hospital. You can't keep a lady waiting."

"That never stopped you, before?" Timothy said, mock-offended, sticking his nose up and crossing his arms over his chest. "Hrmp."

Malcolm blinked and looked at the bronco. "Ooh...kaaay....while talking about *torching* the place, Mr. I'm-on-fire..." he teased and prodded Timothy's ribs.

Esteban laughed and picked up his suitcase. "I'll meess you both. I really hope you weell come by Columbus soon," he said and opened the door. "Thank you again...for all your help. I weell never forget thees."

"Give Jean our best," Timothy said and stopped playing insulted. "Tell her never to let the world get her down again. She's too good for that."

Esteban nodded again...gave a little wave, and headed out the door, and down the stairs. The car was parked nearby. At first he'd wondered if it was safe, parking such a large and expensive car anywhere in New York but he'd quickly told himself to stop thinking so badly of the place. This wasn't Bronx or Queens after all. Malcolm and Timothy lived in a very nice part of the city. The car was perfectly safe. It hadn't been parked there for more than thirty minutes anyway.

It was time to get to the hospital. It'd take some time through New York traffic but that was alright. He was in reasonably good time. The nurse had told him to pick up Jean at eleven in the morning and it was nowhere near that. He did want to get there a little before eleven though. In case there was anything the doctors needed to let him know. After all, driving to Ohio was a long way and if Jean started feeling ill, he'd need to now what to do.

He smiled. Now it was time for him to really look after his vixen again. He was looking forward to it.

###

Francois LeBrun closed the doors to his ovens and brushed his paws off against one another. He smiled, making his mustache curl slightly. Esteban had called briefly that morning, to let him know the car had been picked up. Now it was just a matter for the wolf of driving it back to Ohio in one piece. It had cost a pretty penny to rent that kind of car for that kind of trip for that long, but Francois knew it was necessary.

The alternative had been to get on a train in New York and via a number of changes, get to Columbus. That would have worked...reasonably well, but the problem with a train was, you couldn't stop it at will to get out and get some fresh air. It was crowded with furs of all kinds and there'd be little chance for any kind of privacy. He wasn't going to let Jean suffer through that many miles with aches from surgical wounds, surrounded by complete strangers. He'd rather pay for a good car for a week.

So he had.

He took off his apron and hung it on the rack he kept for it, then headed to the sink to wash out the flour from his paws. He took his time. There was no rush. The bakery would be closed the entire afternoon. He was taking the afternoon and the next two days off, to stay near the telephone in case Esteban called with news.

Not to mention that it had been quite some time since he had anything resembling a vacation.

He'd given Esteban his home number, so he could call if something should come up on the way back, but if he wasn't there to pick it up, it meant Marie would. That could lead to disaster. It'd be better to avoid that kind of confrontation.

Marie wasn't ready to accept, and he still had a tightrope to walk because of it.

Francois shook his head at the thought. He wasn't going to waste any more time worrying about that. It was impossible for him to solve as things were at the time. What mattered to him was that his family worked. Even if that meant making it work as a divided family for a while. He would find a way to mend things eventually, but that might take years.

"Ah Francois...it was not what life's work you had in mind when you left France, no?" he chuckled to himself and took his coat. He slipped it on and reached for his beret. He turned it over a few times in his paws and smiled to himself. The world had a strange way of never quite dealing the cards one expected.

He put his beret on and flicked the light-switch, then headed into the shop. A customer was just leaving and the young, lapine femme behind the counter smiled and looked his way.

"You look ready to leave, Francois?" she asked.

"Oui...I am taking the rest of the day off, Sue. Something I must deal with of a personal nature," he said with a crooked smile. "You take the day off. I won't be back to work for the next two days either."

The young rabbit nodded and began closing down the cash-register. "I understand. It must be some stressful days for you, with your daughter and all that," she said, sympathetically. "You do need to take care of yourself too. You take on a lot of work for yourself, on top of it all."

Francois nodded. Sue was right. He was working too hard. Again, the idea of an apprentice sprang to mind.

"Sue, how long have you worked for me now?" he asked, scratching his cheek.

"Two years...maybe a little more," the rabbit answered, looking a bit puzzled about the question.

"C'est bon..." Francois pondered and stuck his paws in the pockets of his jacket. "I think we should start advertising for a new femme for the store..."

Sue looked crestfallen. She blinked rapidly and her ears drooped. "H...have I done something wrong? Offended a customer? You? Please don't fire me...I'll make it better whatever it is. I need the job. Please, don't fire me," she began.

Francois was taken slightly aback by the outburst and he immediately shook his head. He hadn't meant to scare Sue in any way. He'd simply spoken his thoughts aloud, not realizing that he only said half of what he thought of.

"Non...please relax, Sue. I meant I was going to promote you..." he said, pulling his paws out of his pockets. He reached over and took one of the rabbit's paws, patting it gently. "You're not being fired at all. I meant...I am going to ask you if you would like to move from the store to the bakery. I'm going to take on an apprentice and you know this bakery better than anyone else, except me."

Sue blinked back a few worried tears and smiled. "You're not just making fun of me now, are you?" she asked and sniffed. "I really do need the job...but I'd love to take you up on that offer."

"Tres bon!" Francois exclaimed and smiled a wide, warm smile. He patted the rabbit's cheek in a fatherly way and put his paws back in his pockets. "That's what we shall do then. When I have a new salesfemme, you'll start as my apprentice. I'm not getting any younger and any artist needs to teach his craft to someone."

"Ahh yes, the art of baking good bread," Sue chuckled. "Almost forgotten, these days."

Francois winked and nodded. Then he left the bakery and started walking down the street. That felt good. It took a weight off his shoulders and Sue would do just fine. She was a dedicated worker, she paid attention and she knew the difference between bread and good bread. Marie might not approve of him taking on a female apprentice but he'd work around that. On the other paw, she might not mind at all.

That was one of the things that Francois liked about his marriage. After that many years, he still couldn't predict his wife. Predictability would kill any marriage, he felt. His was certainly still fresh.

He stopped and looked at the sky for a moment. Then he smiled again, just to himself. Life might never be predictable, but that was part of what made it fun.

When he walked on, there was a slight spring in his step.

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Esteban held the car door open for Jean. It had been pretty hectic at the hospital, and his head was still spinning. Medicine, things to remember, how to cope of against all odds if the stitches should start coming undone. It had been difficult to grasp it all. The nurse had been quite nice about it but in the middle of it, three furs got wheeled in. Esteban hadn't seen them but judging from the doctor's voices and the urgency therein, they had been hurt pretty badly. Jean had taken it pretty much in stride. Apparently, it wasn't the first time during her stay there that a nurse had to bolt off to help save some badly burnt fur.

It hadn't made it any easier for the wolf that all he really wanted to do was take his girlfriend in his arms and just hold her for a very long time.

"You look beautiful today, Chica," he said and looked at the vixen. His eyes grew warm.

Jean smiled and kissed the wolf's cheek. "Thank you," she said and got into the car. Esteban had already placed the bathing-ring on her seat. She winced a little...it wasn't exactly comfortable, but she adjusted the seat a bit, lowering the back some and that helped. She took a deep breath and nodded to Esteban to let him know she was okay.

The wolf closed the door and headed around the car to his own seat. He got in and smiled to Jean next to him as if to ask if she was ready. Again, she nodded and smiled. A

little nervously, perhaps, but Esteban understood why. It wasn't likely to be a very comfortable or pleasant trip home.

He reached over and gave the vixen's knee a squeeze, to reassure her. She put her paw over his and held on for a few moments.

"Let's get going," she said, quietly. "There's a long way to go and it'd be best to clear the city limits before rush-hour."

Esteban nodded. Jean had a very good point. New York during rush-hour was something he'd pay gold to avoid. He turned the key in the ignition and the engine purred into action. The wolf smiled and looked over his shoulder to double-check, then pulled away from the curb. Getting out of the city was going to be the first real challenge but at least New York had a wonderfully linear layout. At least downtown. Once they cleared that area, things would get a little more complicated.

"Are you hungree, chica? Thirstee? Should we make an earlee stop to get you sometheeng, before we get underway?" he asked and looked at the vixen next to him.

Jean shook her head with a little smile. "You're so considerate," she said and leaned her head back on the neck-rest. "It's okay. I have two waterbottles in my shoulderbag. I thought I'd make sure to have one for each of us, just so we can clear the city without having to stop. The sooner we get out of New York, the better..."

Esteban nodded again. Once more, he had to agree with the vixen. He didn't want to stay any longer than he had to. Columbus was easily big enough for him. New York was just ridiculous, and he'd spent enough time there already. He didn't really understand how Malcolm and Timothy thrived there.

"Not a beeg ceetee girl, eh Chica?" he grinned.

"Not that big at least," Jean said and closed her eyes for a moment.

They drove on in silence. For a long time, neither of them spoke. It was the first time they were really alone for several weeks, after all. Even though no other furs had been present in the room at the hospital, there were plenty milling around in the hallway right outside. They hadn't *really* been alone. Jean was tired. She felt like she could do with a nap, and no doubt, she'd snooze a bit while driving. Esteban concentrated on the traffic. It was hard enough to navigate and avoid getting rear ended at the same time. New York traffic wasn't to his liking.

After a long time, he looked sidelong at Jean again and smiled. He reached over and brushed the back of his knuckles over her cheek a few times in a gentle caress. "I love you," he said, quietly.

Jean reached up and brushed her fingers over Esteban's, looking at him. She looked happy. Honestly...truly happy. "I love you too," she murmured and turned her head to kiss the wolf's fingers.

Esteban felt like his heart skipped a few beats. They'd said those words to each other often enough but for some reason, this situation was different. It felt extra good this time. Jean had come out of surgery...through the worst challenge she was likely to ever face...and they were stronger for it, as a couple.

Again, he fell quiet and concentrated on driving. Street after street passed by. The worst of downtown traffic was cleared and put behind them. A couple of times, he'd pull over to check a roadmap, to make sure he was going the right way. Suburbia was coming up ahead. Jean had dozed off, sleeping a little in the seat next to him. Once in a while, he'd look at her and smile. She looked so peaceful. It was better to let her sleep. The day had probably taken a toll on her so far.

Minutes turned into hours. Esteban was starting to think he'd never get out of New York. He'd turned the wrong way more times than he cared to count. Then...it happened. He turned a corner around, expecting to see yet another long row of bungalows and family-houses.

Instead, open interstate met his eyes, down a ramp. He stopped for a moment, checking on the roadmap again to make sure it was the right ramp for him to go down. Jean stirred next to him and opened her eyes.

"Hmm..." she mumbled and blinked sleep out of her eyes. "How long have I been out for?"

"A while," he answered. He packed away the map. It was the right ramp. First try, too.

Jean smiled and looked at him. A languid, content smile, too. "So what now?" she asked.

"Now we go home, chica," Esteban answered, looking like that smile was threatening to melt his spine.

Jean nodded. "There's just one thing we *have* to do before you go down there," she said and nodded towards the interstate. "Otherwise we won't get a chance for hours."

"Ohh...I see..." he said and nodded. "Maybe that's a good idea."

Jean laughed softly and shook her head. "No silly...not that," she giggled and reached over. She took a gentle hold of Esteban's T-shirt at the scruff of his neck and pulled him over towards her.

If he hadn't been sitting on his tail, Esteban would've been wagging it. For the half minute the kiss lasted, he was the happiest wolf in the world. There was no world outside the car.

Finally, Jean let him go and sat back in her seat. Esteban kept looking at her for a long, long moment. He reached out and brushed a lock of stray hair out of her face, smiling to himself. She met his eyes, still with that happy smile on her face.

A long moment passed like that. Neither of them spoke a word for maybe a minute or more.

Finally, Esteban broke the silence.

"I never stopped falleeng, Chica..." he whispered.

Then he looked back to the road and turned away from the curb again, going down the ramp to the interstate.

Down the road...ahead of him...all the world lay wide open.