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IV - Revelations

Zig Zag sat in her car. She was leaning back and listening to music on the stereo, while letting her thoughts wander. The streets were almost empty anyway. Everyone was at work, after all. She wasn't even entirely sure why she was doing this, but Gabrielle had said her roomie was familiar with the studios products, yet she apparently wouldn't even consider having a physical relationship with anyone. It had piqued Zig Zag's curiosity, especially since Gabrielle was such an extreme extrovert. From her descriptions, it sounded like the fur she was living with was her diametrical opposite in every way, and Zig Zag couldn't help being intrigued. She'd heard of furs taking inspiration from her tapes before. Quite frequently, in fact. But she'd never heard of someone voluntarily *celibate* who used them as a sort of outlet for dreams and fantasies.

Moreover, Gabrielle was clearly protective of her friend. Very much so, in fact. That got Zig Zag's interest as well. She prided herself on being a remarkable judge of character, and the bronco struck her as someone who was fiercely independent, mouthy to the point of actively seeking conflicts, and who was, probably, a little bit self centered. Yet, whoever this mysterious roomie was...she managed to bring out Gabrielle's maternal instincts in full force. She simply *had* to see who this fur was.

Yet...she couldn't help feeling awkward about this. Gabrielle was at her first day of work, after all. It seemed a bit early to start taking a private interest in who the bronco lived with. Conversely, Zig Zag had always been interested in her employees. They were

important to her, and so was their well being. She nodded, just a little, to herself, and pulled the car over to the curb. That was why she was here. Because Jean mattered to Gabrielle, and because Gabrielle mattered to her, on account of being her employee. Someone who evidently meant that much to Gabrielle was someone she had to know at least a little about, so she'd be able to talk to the bronco about her if the issue ever came up.

It wasn't being nosy, she told herself. It was just being professionally interested in her employees.

Somehow, it didn't really convince her as she stepped out of her car. She looked around. She rarely came to this part of town. It wasn't a place where she knew a lot of furs. Mostly commuters in low paid jobs and students lived here. Neither group were ones that she saw terribly often at the studio. She took her sunglasses out of her chest pocket and smoothed down her suit to get rid of the crease from having sat in the drivers seat. It wasn't a bad neighborhood, she noticed. It wasn't fancy, but it was clean. She noticed a bakery at the nearest corner.

"LeBrun's Boulangerie...hmm..." she said to herself as she walked down there. Either this fur really *was* French, or he was trying some smart marketing stunt.

She got a few stares along the way, from passersby. It brought a smile to her face and she swayed just a little more in her step as a result. Being recognized was quite normal for her. She'd never exactly been incognito; the stripes took care of that. Entering the bakery, she took a moment to sniff the scent of the fresh bread. An elderly gray fox was placing a rack of French loafs in the holders on the wall behind the counter. He turned around and smiled, warmly.

"Bonjour, Mademoiselle..." he said, in what Zig Zag had to admit sounded convincingly like native French.

The skunk nodded to the baker and pondered a moment. "You bake from the bottom up, don't you?" she asked.

The fox nodded. "I do," he said with a proud smile. "I wouldn't use pre-mixed dough if it meant the difference between closing this shop and staying in business. I have standards. It's about pride in my work," he said.

Zig Zag couldn't help musing a little. "Well, at least we have something in common there, sir."

"Oh? You are in the food industry too?" the fox asked.

"No...no I can't say I am. I'm in entertainment," she said "But I take pride in my work as well."

"Good for you. Tres bon! Never sell out. You should be proud of who you are and what you do," the fox said with a big smile "Now...how may I help such a beautiful young femme?"

Zig Zag felt flattered. Mostly because it was clear from the fox's tone of voice that he wasn't trying, and because he clearly didn't know who she was. At the same time that particular compliment always struck her as hard to stomach. She bit it down this time.

"I could use something with some bite to it. You know...bread with attitude," Zig Zag said, grinning.

The fox nodded and took down a long loaf of bread, wrapping it up. "Then this won't disappoint you, M'nselle," he said.

"Does it have attitude?"

"It jumps up and bites you if you don't keep it chained. Have a rolled up newspaper at paw, M'nselle," the fox said and winked as he gave Zig Zag the loaf.

The skunk laughed softly and paid, then headed out and down the street towards the apartment building that matched the number on the slip of paper she had gotten from Gabrielle. She looked up at the building for a moment.

"Well, here goes nothing. Somehow I doubt Gabrielle is going to take offense," she mumbled and went inside.

She checked the registry at the bottom of the stairs and found what she was looking for.

"Gabrielle Ryder and Jean....erhhh...oh...well, I should've asked the fox at the bakery then," she said with a shrug, and headed up the stairs.

She knocked on the door at the second floor, and suddenly realized she wasn't even sure if Jean would be home. Let alone what she was going to *say*. For a moment, she pondered leaving, until she heard a voice through the door.

"Yes? How may I help you?" it said. It was muffled.

There was a spyglass in the door. Zig Zag figured she was being looked at and stood up straight to let the one on the other side of the door see her. The response was prompt. A loud gasp came through the door and something apparently got toppled over, crashing to the floor.

"Oh *bugger*...one moment. I just managed to overturn the umbrella stand. Hang on..." the voice said.

Zig Zag waited, patiently. Slightly amused, if nothing else. About thirty seconds and a lot of frantic scabbling from the other side of the door later, she heard the shutter being pushed away. The door opened. She was looking at a gray vixen in her early to mid twenties. She'd been right. The family resemblance to the baker was quite clear if one knew what to look for.

"Please, come on in. I mean...Gabrielle isn't here. Isn't she...supposed to be..." Jean said, sounding confused.

"Gabrielle is at the studio, being shown around by everyone else. I'm here to find out who *you* are," Zig Zag said and stepped into the hallway.

"M...me?" Jean asked and blinked in confusion.

Zig Zag took a moment to look at the vixen. She didn't look like much. Not that she was unattractive, just rather ordinary. The haunted, almost desperate look in her eyes was one that Zig Zag knew only too well however. It was the look of someone constantly ready to apologize for breathing and existing. It was the standard look of someone with absolutely no self-confidence of any kind. For a moment, Zig Zag wondered whatever could've done that to the young femme in front of her. Then she pushed that thought aside, almost getting angry at herself. She reminded herself that she at least knew where such things could come from. But she wasn't going to hazard a guess at the reason just yet.

"Yes...you. Mind if I call you Jean? Gabrielle has mentioned you both times I've talked to her," Zig Zag said.

Jean blinked again. "I...hope she...I mean..." she began and put her paws to her temples, "I'm sorry, I'm just not sure what to do when furs talk about me. And...and I didn't really expect a celebrity in my hallway...and...and..."

Zig Zag broke in. She quickly realized she had to, or the vixen was going to collapse in front of her very eyes. Something was really wrong, and it was obvious. When Jean

looked back up, Zig Zag noticed that the look in her eyes had changed from panic to sadness and longing. A sort of desperation for something unachievable. But she couldn't figure out what was going through the vixen's head.

"Well, let's go to the living room then? If you don't expect a celebrity in your hallway, then maybe in there?" she said with a wide grin, trying to disarm the already awkward situation.

"Sure...definitely," Jean said, relieved that the conversation was being moved on. "Can I get you a cup of tea, perhaps? Coffee?" she asked.

"Whatever you're having, if you're having anything, is just fine," Zig Zag responded.

Somehow, the skunk felt, she had convinced herself that this was going to be interesting. It probably was, but she hadn't counted on finding herself in the same room as someone who felt like she was on the constant verge of a complete breakdown. Yet Jean seemed to honestly have a problem. It practically reeked out of the vixen that this was genuine, and not an act to angle for sympathy. Zig Zag followed Jean into the living room and took a seat on the couch. The vixen headed into the kitchen to make a cup of tea.

Zig Zag massaged the bridge of her nose and crossed her legs.

"What have you gotten yourself into this time?" she asked herself, very lowly.

It took a few minutes before Jean came back in.

"I have to apologize..." she said. She was looking a lot more together. "You just caught me somewhat off guard. I just came home from a therapy session. Those...well...they leave me a wreck," she admitted.

Zig Zag ahh'd and smiled a bit. "Well, I'm sorry for the inconvenience then. If it's really a bad time I could come back at a later day?" she asked.

There was just something about Jean that *screamed* 'Protect me' to the high heavens. Zig Zag felt like saying something harsh to the vixen would amount to kicking a small, defenseless creature. Normally, she'd have fled at the first sign of that. It was annoying to be around furs like that. But as she sat there, she also realized that the reason it was usually annoying was that it wasn't real or genuine. This was.

She realized she was still holding the bread, and put it down on the table. Jean looked at it for a long time and sighed.

"I see you've visited my father's shop," she said, quietly.

"I did...but I didn't know he was your father. Gabrielle just gave me the address, not your last name. I didn't realize until I saw your name on the registry down by the entrance," Zig Zag answered. "You don't sound too thrilled?"

"My father and I...well...we're not on talking terms," Jean said and made a face.

Zig Zag nodded. "I see. Well, I admit I came here because I'm curious about something that Gabrielle said."

Little by little, Zig Zag realized she was relaxing. That her shoulders had been so tight that they'd started aching. It confused her. She didn't normally feel ill at ease around anyone for any reason. But that was mostly because everyone else was busy with their opinions about her, which left her more or less free to make up her own mind about furs. This time, she realized she was talking to someone whom she had to treat like a rotten egg. If she bumped Jean too hard, she'd break and the result would be pretty hard to cope with.

Jean poured a cup of tea for both herself and Zig Zag and nodded. "What did she say?" she asked.

Zig Zag grinned again, flashing a pair of rows of sharp teeth. "Well...she said you were familiar with my work..." she began.

Jean nodded, staring at the teeth. "I am...but I wouldn't think you paid personal house-calls to everyone who happens to know about your movies? I mean...you'd never have time for anything else. My *goodness*, you have sharp teeth..." she answered.

"It's so I can better eat you," Zig Zag said. It was a casual remark, and one that she'd used a hundred times before with nothing but giggles as a result.

She was caught completely off guard by Jean's reaction as a result. The vixens paws started to shake so hard most of her tea was spilt onto the table and over her paws. Despite the liquid being scalding hot, she didn't seem to notice. She just stared at Zig Zag, eyes wide open in an expression of pure horror.

Zig Zag blinked. "I...am sorry. I think maybe coming was a really bad idea, anyway," she said, gently taking Jean's cup out of her paws and putting it on the table.

Jean didn't stop shaking. Or staring.

Zig Zag mostly wanted to run out the door by now. She felt like she was on completely alien ground.

"This is like walking through a *minefield*..." she said, quietly.

She tried to get Jean to relax a little, just holding the vixens paws, feeling like she was seriously in over her head.

"Please, I don't mean to upset you. Gabrielle is very protective of you, but...considering how straight forward she is, I thought it was a little odd. She didn't strike me as the naturally protective type. And she did say you knew my work but...that while you watched the tapes, you didn't...well...how was it again..." she said, trying to get the conversation back to something reasonably safe.

Jean nodded, closing her eyes. She breathed deeply and rhythmically, calming down.

"I'm sorry. You're not used to how I react. Please don't be offended. I can't really control most of it," Jean said, quietly, after a while.

Zig Zag nodded. She reckoned she'd better try the direct, honest approach to why she was here. She sincerely wondered why, herself.

"She said you dreamt and fantasized but you don't actually have a sex-life. I suppose I was curious as to why someone would do *that*. I mean, I'm sure you're not the only one...but Gabrielle mentioned it, and besides, she clearly cares for you a great deal. And since *I* take a lot of interest in my employees..." she shrugged. She stopped her explanation and shook her head slightly, looking at the vixen next to her. "Honestly, though, I have to admit, I don't know what compelled me to come over here."

Jean nodded, swallowing again. She tried to stay calm, and beckoned for Zig Zag to continue.

The skunk did, keeping her voice low and reassuring. "I think it has to do with Gabrielle being the sort of fur who leaves an impression and *frankly* I think I was wondering who could leave an impression on *her*. We've tried every dirty comment in the business at the studio...or well...perhaps not every one, but at least some of the ones that generally make even hardened furs snicker and giggle. And she just...keeps a straight face through all of it, and even comes up with retorts," she said, smiling crookedly. "I asked her if anything at all could make her giggle inanely and her answer was if I tickled her just above her hooves, she'd do so. I don't impress easily, but for a newcomer to the

business, she's really got an attitude. I should've said all this at the start, but I am not used to having to sneak around in conversations."

Jean listened, quietly, nodding a few times. Then she actually managed a little smile.

"I see..." she just said "Well, Gabby is special to me. She's...warm, gentle, kind, protective. I mean...she makes me feel safe, you know? Like nothing can really hurt me if she's there. I mean, it says everything about her that she sleeps next to me every night without getting nauseous. And incidentally...she's correct. I occasionally watch some of your tapes. Generally some of your older ones. I dream a bit when I do so. I imagine."

Zig Zag felt her internal weirdness-alarm go off again. Everything had seemed fine again, and then Jean made such a comment. But she did it with a completely blank face. She actually meant it. The skunk hrm'd and looked up and down the vixen.

"You know...take it from someone who really *knows* what she's talking about here. You're not ugly. True, I've seen better looking furs but the fact of the matter is, I think it's usually only skin deep. A lot of them cheat too. Make-up makes a lot of difference, dear. But there's nothing wrong with your looks," she said with a shrug.

Jean smiled...but sadly. "Thank you. It's nice of you to say," she said, quietly.

Zig Zag sighed. "I'm being quite honest here. I don't know you...I have nothing to lose in saying the truth, y'know. Honestly, there's nothing at all wrong with how you look."

Jean shook her head. "You're wrong. There is," she said, quietly. The tone in her voice had changed. She sounded tired and like she was giving in to something.

"All right? Mind pointing out what it is you think is so terrible? I mean...humor me. I can't see it, but evidently, it's pretty obvious to you."

"Of course it is. I have to see myself naked every time I take a shower..." Jean said and pulled her paws free of Zig Zag's, pulling her legs up in front of her and hiding her forehead on her knees.

"Erhhhh...all right. So it's something I can't see..." Zig Zag said. In the back of her head a little voice was screaming at her to shut up and stop digging deeper while she still could. But she didn't hear it.

"Not unless I were to strip naked and believe me I'll spare you the experience."

Zig Zag crossed her arms over her chest. "Jean, I think I can say with absolute certainty that unless your fur is really bright pink with purple polka dots you can't possibly have anything I haven't seen quite a few times before," she said, evenly but not unkindly.

Jean actually giggled. "Oh...you've seen it quite a few times before," she said. Her voice was still bitter. "I'd go so far as to say you've probably seen it in about eighty or ninety percent of your movies."

Zig Zag blinked. She felt like someone had just hit her over the head with a two-by-four.

"Oh bugger," she mumbled, blinking again in surprise.

"Oh, I can promise you, I haven't done that in *years*," Jean answered, angrily. The hostility was clearly turned on herself, though.

Zig Zag just nodded. "So that's what you're in therapy for? You know...I've been sitting here for what...twenty minutes now? Right next to you on the couch, and I didn't know you...and Gabrielle certainly didn't tell me *that* detail about you. And I hadn't guessed. I really hadn't guessed."

Jean looked up over the top of her knees. "Really?"

Zig Zag held up two fingers as if taking an oath and crossed her heart, without a word.

"Thank you. I don't think I've ever gotten that big a compliment in my entire life," Jean said. A measure of relief was creeping into her voice. "I can probably live on that one for the next three months if not longer."

Zig Zag smiled and reached over, patting Jean's cheek. "If that's the best compliment you've ever gotten, I'll have to tell Gabrielle to try harder."

Jean shrugged. "She compliments me every day. In small ways, usually, and she's really good at it, too. But it's sort of different with you..."

"Why's that?" Zig Zag asked.

"Because, frankly, you've made a living out of providing stimuli for the sexuality of others, and if *you* didn't notice...well...that's big. At least, to me it is."

Zig Zag could feel the tension drift out of the room rapidly. All the awkwardness was dissipating. All the fear seeping away. The truth was on the table, and it was obvious that Jean was able to relax because she didn't have to hide anything.

"You know..." Zig Zag pondered "...you're relaxing now. I don't feel like I'm constantly about to say or do something that'll make you crumble. Have you ever considered being more open about your situation?"

Jean shrugged. "Been there, done that, got the black eyes. Femmes are generally very accepting. Males tend to want to punch my lights out. To them...I'm the ultimate traitor."

Zig Zag blinked. "Pardon me for sounding stupid here, but...why?"

"Think about it..." Jean said with a slight, weary little smile "...I'm trying to get rid of what they usually consider their most precious, prized possession."

Zig Zag giggled and covered her mouth.

"Sorry, hadn't thought of it that way. I guess you're right," she said. "But...I take it this is why you're not on talking terms with your parents either?"

Jean nodded. She ran a paw through her hair and cleared her throat.

"That is putting it mildly. I could tell you what they reacted like..."

"I think I can imagine...but by all means, please, tell me?" Zig Zag said and leaned back in her seat.

"I'll spare you the whole story. I don't want to bore you to death, either. But suffice it to say I've always had this...nagging feeling that I wasn't quite built right, y'know? That something was fundamentally wrong with me. I was fourteen when I realized what was wrong exactly. Going through your teens with that knowledge isn't particularly easy, let me tell you that," Jean began...

Zig Zag nodded. That made sense. Her own childhood had been a nightmare for entirely different reasons, but that did not subtract from what Jean had gone through.

"It wasn't easy for me to deal with this. I kept telling myself I'd grow out of it and I'd be fine, soon enough. I'd probably end up having...I don't know...a couple of kids, nice house, two cars and a good job. A completely *ordinary* life. But I didn't grow out of it and it just got worse and worse. I tried killing myself, several times. Serious attempts. I didn't want to be here anymore because I couldn't deal with it all. I mean...the thing that goes through your mind in that situation is a combination of 'They can all see it. They all know it!' and 'You can't let anyone find out because you'll be an outcast. Someone who's entirely alone, without any friends at all'. You imagine your friends turning their backs

on you. Your family. Everyone. Anyway...after I moved out, it really started going downhill for me. Fast. Eventually, I realized I had three choices. Pretend the problem didn't exist. Acknowledge it existed and never act on it...or act on it. I stopped listening to my own fears and I acted. Got a hold of a doctor and explained the whole thing and I started therapy and all. It's costing me most of my money but if I don't I'm really going to lose my mind."

Zig Zag stayed quiet. Just listening. It was a bit like watching a dam collapse under pressure. Jean spoke so fast she nearly fell over her own words at times. But Zig Zag paid attention. The vixen obviously needed an audience. Someone who would listen without judging. Someone apart from Gabrielle.

"I had to tell my parents sooner or later, didn't I?" Jean asked.

"Erhm...I'd say that's a given. I mean, if you'd suddenly come home and said "Hi mom, hi dad, guess what *I* did today..." you'd probably cause them both to have heart attacks if you hadn't warned them about it."

Jean nodded and couldn't help smiling.

"True. Well, I did tell them. I tried to do it quietly. It went really badly. My mother looked at me across the table in the kitchen like I was some sort of monster. My father was crying and telling me to stop hurting them, over and over again. Then my mother decided to ask me if I preferred males or femmes. I mean...what kind of stupid question is that? What does *that* have to do with anything?"

"Don't tell me...your mother is a homophobe on top of things?" Zig Zag asked.

"Actually, she's so broadminded when it comes to that, that she can tie her mind under her chin and wear it as a summer hat. She just can't deal with *this*. And fate would have it that I come home and tell her that she *has* to deal with it, in some way. Anyway, she asked and I didn't want any more panic so...I lied and told them I liked femmes," Jean went on.

"Ohh....I see..." Zig Zag began.

"I'm not sure you do...sorry to be so abrupt. The point is...it's a lie because I'm not into *anything*. I can't *bear* having that kind of intimate relationships with anyone because it involves having to deal with...gahhh...well, you know. And at the same time, I really, really wish...hope...that one day I'll be able to feel wanted too, you know. So I just dream...and fantasize. And that's where your movies came into the picture. Some of

them were really nicely made. I liked those. I wondered what it was like...you know..." Jean said and blushed, looking back down.

Zig Zag made a face. To her, living a life in voluntary celibacy seemed almost incomprehensible in the first place. But at the same time, what Jean said made some sort of terrible, awful sense. She stayed quiet and kept listening though.

"My mother reacted by leaning forward, anyway...when I said that. All the way into my face, just a couple of inches from my nose. She was snarling at me...showing incisors and everything. "Do you really think there's a femme anywhere on this planet who'd be caught *dead* in a PLAGUEPIT, with a *freak* like you?!" she asked me. I mean...my own *mother* said that," Jean began to shake again, looking like she was feeling sick to her stomach.

Zig Zag realized her jaw had dropped. "*Please* tell me you just made that up? No...no, forget it. I know you didn't, but...good grief. What was she *thinking*?"

"I don't know what she was thinking. Or if she was thinking at all," Jean said and sighed. "Anyway...I got up and put my key on the table. And then I left. I haven't been home since. My mother refuses to talk about me or to me. She insists that nothing has changed. She lives in a fantasy. My father constantly tries to convince me that I'm making some sort of terrible mistake and that I'll die horribly when someone does something terrible to me, or at least live an absolutely miserable, terrible life afterwards, as opposed to the absolutely wonderful, perfect life I had lived before," Jean said, sarcasm dripping from her last words.

Zig Zag shrugged. "Sounds to me, kid, like you're better off without them."

"I know I am. Problem is they don't think so. So I have to deal with them badgering me, no offense to badgers, at every opportunity."

Zig Zag nodded. She leaned back in her seat. Yesterday, she'd been sitting quietly in her office, minding her own business. Then the door had opened and a bronco had stepped in. Now she was sitting in that very same bronco's apartment, talking to her roomie. She always guarded her own privacy fiercely. But she did have a knack for getting other furs to open up around her. This time, however, she realized she'd probably set a new record. It didn't feel bad. Jean was nice enough...just deeply troubled. She intended to put Gabrielle up against a wall and have a serious little conversation with her sometime soon, though. She felt blindsided, but she was well aware that Gabrielle couldn't be blamed. Strictly speaking, she hadn't kept anything hidden.

Gabrielle would definitely be an interesting new employee to have around.

"Jean...could I get another cup of tea?" she asked.

Jean nodded and smiled, before pouring another cup of tea for them both...