

It's the Little Choices

Part Four

Commission - April 2021

"Hey-hey, baby. Morning time. Come on, *wakey-wakey...*"

Whaa- Why- But the giraffes... They were dancing...

I blink up sleepily into Liz's smiling face, only slowly becoming aware of the lightening world around me. I'm tucked into bed, warm and safe, my red hair frizzy and tousled around my face. "Uhh- morning- Liz..." I stretch tentatively, reveling in the comforting sensation of the heavy blankets around me. And then I realize that beneath the covers, I'm hugging Stompy the elephant close to my chest. *Ooh, he's so nice and cuddly...*

"Time for breakfast, honey," Liz is saying, and I squeak out a tiny protest. "Aww, but- but it's so nice in bed..." "I know, baby, I know," she beams gently, her fingers running through my hair in a vain attempt to smooth it. "But I've got breakfast ready for us, okay? And we've got your favorite cereal, too! Do you think you and Stompy can help me eat it all up?"

Well, with that delightful silliness I can't help but smile back even as I struggle up into a sitting position. "Fine, fine," I admit, even as I feel a giggle slipping past my lips. "Okay, I'll get up. But it better be yummy!"

I don't exactly know how or why Liz puts up with my silliness sometimes. But judging by that smile on her face as I pad after her into the dining room, she must not mind *too* much.

"So what's going on today?" she queries over breakfast, sipping at her coffee meditatively. "Got any big things planned?" "Mo, mot weally" I mumble through my mouthful of choco-puffs, before I remember and hurriedly gulp it down. *No talking with my mouth full.* "No, not really," I clarify with a sigh. "Just the usual grind. Teller duty all morning, and our weekly meeting sometime this afternoon." "Hey, that's fine, right?" Liz enthuses, reaching over and filling my cup with a second serving of juice. "And it's Friday, too – so don't you get to dress casual?"

Dang, I'd almost forgotten – but yes. "Why don't we find something fun for you to wear, huh? Just a little extra something to spice up the day?" I haven't ever thought much about the whole casual Friday thing before, but I can't deny that Liz's enthusiasm is rubbing off. And once breakfast is finished and I head into the bedroom to throw on something more presentable than a nightgown

covered with cute kitties, I find myself drawn more and more to the idea. *Sure, why not? Something a little fun? Exciting? Cute?*

Those amazing shoes I found a few weeks ago may be just the ticket.

"Of course you should wear them!" Liz exclaims upon seeing them in my hands. "So much more fun than boring pumps, right?" I frown, scrutinizing my two options. On the one hand, there's my normal beige pumps – their heel low enough to be tolerable for the entire day, but still elegant and grownup. And then there's the new tennis shoes: a gorgeous shade of bubble-gum pink, with pastel beads strung on the laces, stars appliquéd on the sides, and best of all, white soles that light up and flash in a way that just makes me want to dance and giggle. I can't explain why, of course, but they're just so... pretty!

The sober, mature choice? Or the fun and pretty pair? One voice in my head is telling me to stick with the tried and true, boring option. But stronger comes a different voice, almost like that of a real person, or something from a dream. *It's so fun, so good to be cute... and young... and adorable. Relax... be yourself. Remember how much fun it was to be a kid. It feels to be sweet and little and carefree again, to let go...*

The pumps don't stand a chance.

Not that I don't have second thoughts later in the day, of course. I do feel a wave of self-consciousness ripple through me as I step out of my car and make my way up the sidewalk to the employees entrance, and my face reddens as I see the security guard nod and grin with a downward glance. *They're just shoes*, I mentally repeat to steady myself. *Nobody ought to care, and customers will never notice anyway. Just shoes. Just shoes. Just shoes...*

Priti, being the loud and effusive sweetheart she is, is wild about them. "Oh my god, it's like you've got your own personal rave going on down there!" she exclaims. "Those totally rock! Where did you say you got them, hun?" Manny is similarly impressed. "Girl, those are *amazing*," he tells me, toying with his earring as he glances me up and down approvingly. "I *love* them for you, it's such a great look, you know?"

Well, I don't think of myself as particularly dependent on other folks' opinions. But I can't deny that it feels great to hear such compliments. *The sun is shining, and I've got pretty shoes, and it's Friday, and these customers are going to be super happy that I'm helping them...*

And then, shortly after lunch, it all comes screeching to a halt. For Barb comes past the counter with a scowl on her characteristically dour face. "What's the idea, Fiona?" she sniffs, glancing down disapprovingly. "What are you, five years old? Those things are hopelessly juvenile, you know..." I try not to flinch even as I feel the smile evaporating from my face. "Um, I dunno," I falter, dropping my gaze in sudden embarrassment. "I just- you know, for casual Friday- and I thought they were fun-"

"Well, *I* think they're stupid," Barb retorts, even as she prepares to sweep back toward her office. "And *so* tacky. But I guess we're each entitled to our own opinions, aren't we? Oh, and don't forget – meeting at 3." With that, she clicks off, leaving me staring after her with red cheeks and a sinking heart.

Hopelessly juvenile. Stupid. Tacky. Just words. But oh, how they sting.

"I'm never wearing them again," I blurt to Liz that evening, wrenching the now-hated shoes from my feet and tossing them fiercely into the closet. "I was an absolute *idiot* to think- to wear them to work. Barb said- she said- And now they're gonna hate me, and they're never gonna promote me, and- and-"

"Fiona. Fiona! Hey!" Liz's hands are on my shoulders, strong and firm and inexpressibly comforting amid the chaos of emotions sweeping through me. And then I feel myself crumbling, my face contorting into ugly sobs. *My- my pretty shoes- they hated them-*

Once the first storm of tears subsides, leaving me shaken and spent, Liz's voice murmurs in my ear. "Fiona, shh. Listen to me, okay? They're just shoes. Pretty shoes. Shoes that *you* like, and that *I* like, and that *lots* of people like. Just because one person was an ass about them doesn't mean anything, you know. All it means is that they're just that – an ass." She wipes tenderly at my eyes and fishes out a handkerchief for my dripping nose. "Come on, sweetie. Do you really want to live your life just so nasty old Barb approves? Hmm?"

"Noo," I mumble, blowing my nose inelegantly and blinking sheepishly at the damp patch my tears have left on Liz's blouse. "I guess not..." "Of course not," she affirms, wiping a stray tear from my cheek. "You're *you*, honey, and *you* like things that are different from the things Barb likes. Remember, it's none of her business what you wear, just like it's not our business what she wears. Okay?" I nod silently, and she continues with an affectionate arm around my shoulder. "Besides,

didn't you say other folks really liked them?"

"Yeah, I guess," I mumble shamefacedly. "Or at least they said they did. But-" "See? There you go!" Liz exclaims with a smile. "They're cool shoes, and lots of people think so too. So don't let one nasty grouch ruin your entire day, all right?" "Okay," I concede reluctantly. "But just- Just tell me, Liz. You don't think I'm-" My voice quivers despite myself. "I'm... stupid? Or juvenile?"

"Honey, you are *perfect* just as you are," she breathes with utter conviction. And as she enfolds me in her arms, I find myself drawing a shuddering breath of relief. *It's okay. Liz loves me. She doesn't think my shoes are silly.* And somehow, even if I did tell her about those thoughts I've been having lately – you know, that little voice in my head that's reminding me how wonderful it is to be a kid – somehow I don't think she'd judge me one bit.

We really are an odd couple, I reflect that evening as I snuggle closer on the couch to my sweetheart. Liz is so lovely and strong and elegant, sitting there in her pretty pantsuit and sipping at her second glass of wine. And me? Well, maybe I'm just silly. But after my outburst earlier I needed something relaxing, something comforting, something... happy. Something more calming than wine or Netflix or even sex. And honestly, I don't know anything happier or more relaxing than to be sitting right here in my kitty nightgown with Stompy nestled beside me, sipping now and then at the nice big cup of warm milk Liz brought me, and decorating my blocky little video game house.

Yeah, I know. If Barb thought my shoes were juvenile, she'd probably have a cow over what I'm doing right now. But she's not here, and I am. It's just me and Liz, and we're the ones who get to decide what we do to relax. She relaxes with wine – and I do too sometimes, I promise. But tonight, it's about warm milk and cuddles and games. It's my choice. And I'm entitled to it.

Now where shall I put these cute flowers?