

Weathering Hearts

A Short Story by Rose Freya - twitter.com/MewMus

The day began like any other for Angela. Trying to avoid the stress of her dorm life, she'd gotten up early in the morning to go on a run. Hot sunlight beat down on her like a warm hug that reassured her that everything was going to be okay. Pausing for a moment to lean against a wall and empty a pebble from her shoe, she looked up at that celestial body providing such warmth. She squinted for a few brief moments before a strong wind hid its yellow glow behind a cloud. It had been forecast to rain that day, and the clear storm brewing put some extra spring into the tall lady's step as she hurried along her way.

Mary slowly pottered around the storefront, stocking shelves and dusting surfaces. It looked like it was going to be just like every other day working at the corner shop, which was to say dull. It's not that *dull* was a bad thing, because Mary hated surprises and relished in the stability and comfort that came from her mundane position. It had been a large factor in why she had taken the job offer from her grandmother a year back in the first place. The shop was never busy, hidden down a side lane in a pretty untravelled part of town, just around the corner from a large supermarket no less. Most of the regular customers only came in once a week, and the average number on the store counter was just 12, most days, which included Mary herself walking in and out of the store for her breaks. At the same time, the store was at no risk of closing down, having mostly been a passion project for her grandmother, who was more than happy to make a loss, especially if she could support her only grandchild.

A loud clap of thunder suddenly snapped Mary back to reality as she looked out the window, the light patter of rain already dripping down its surface as the previously bright light beaming down the alley was replaced with the deep shadow of storm clouds. Mary shivered as her hair stood on end; she hated the rain and made a point to move her dusting to the back of the store, away from the dreary window.

Angela found herself walking down the street, slightly too tired from her run to be traveling quickly and unfortunately too far away from her dorm to realistically head back now.

Instead, she was looking around for a place to possibly eat or otherwise sit out the storm that was coming. Blinking through the light rain that fell on her face, she took note that there wasn't much around. She didn't normally come out to this side of town, and most of the storefronts seemed to be small businesses, law firms, dry cleaners and the like, nowhere for her to get a bite to eat. The crash of thunder overhead and increased rainfall sparked her into more immediate action though, eyes scanning the environment quickly for the most appropriate shelter. It was then that she spotted it, a small store tucked down an alleyway and almost looking closed from the outside, but she could see someone moving within, so without a moment's hesitation, she hurried through the small and slightly stiff door.

Immediately Angela's senses were filled with the mixed aroma of cleaning products and that old room smell that you would expect from a country cottage and not a suburban shop front. Eyes adjusting to the dimmer lighting inside the store, Angela had to doubletake that it wasn't closed, but sure enough, the lights were on, the open sign flipped the right way, and the shop assistant was up the back cleaning. It was at this moment that she finally caught sight of said assistant. Angela's heart almost skipped a beat: dressed in a very plain shop uniform, complete with a dusty old apron, was one of the prettiest people she had ever seen. There had been many cute girls to cross her path over the years, but she'd never felt herself so immediately smitten before. Faltering in her movements for a moment, Angela made herself busy as if she was very interested in the tinned fruits she stood next to, eyes not leaving their inspection of Mary from across the rows. She was a tan-furred bunny girl, nothing that would be seen normally as typically spectacular, but there was something in how she moved and presented herself that captured Angela's fascination, and she was only able to pull her gaze away, with a blush, once the rabbit bent over and raised her cottontail in the air.

Mary had barely even noticed Angela walk into the store, totally lost in her own thoughts as she checked the expiry dates on the back shelves, sorting through boxes of cookies and setting a couple down next to her after inspecting their labels. Humming softly to herself as she bent down to collect her spoils, standing up and turning to face down the aisle, and almost dropping her collection of confections, she finally took note of Angela. The tall grey wolf had taken the bunny off guard completely, as she had expected one of her more

regular customers. She lingered for a moment, looking over the young, fit and tall lady in her exercise attire, Mary started to blush slightly as she took note of how tightly that fabric clung to her defined muscles from a mix of rain and sweat and quickly excusing herself towards her counter at the back. She tried to focus on her task of ringing up the out of date shortbread as her thoughts lingered on the mysterious new customer that had raised her heart rate.

There was another loud crash of thunder from outside as a howl of wind rushed down the alleyway. It had only been a few minutes, but the sky was now dark and the alley now obscured by the heavy rainfall that battered the shop window. Mary shuddered once again as she looked at it, deciding to occupy her mind with daydreaming and pretending to be busy behind the till, until she stared at Angela again through the cracks in the shelves. *What had brought such a young person out to this side of town?* Mary thought, pondering how the average demographic of the suburb was near retirement age. If she was from the university, she'd gone on quite a long run to get out here. Mary wondered if there was something that she had come looking for, before getting distracted by the bright rainbow of colours the wolf had dyed her hair.

Walking slowly down the aisle, half-looking at the shelves contents, Angela herself had jumped at that more recent sound of thunder. Whilst the wolf didn't mind the rain, she was very glad to have been able to seek shelter from it. Looking around though, the store wasn't very large, and she was going to run out of shelves to pretend to be interested in pretty soon. She paused, holding up a tin of baked beans and slowly turning it over as she thought; surely that cute bunny wouldn't kick her out though. The image of Mary's twitching tail and raised rear ran involuntarily through the wolf's mind as she faltered and accidentally dropped the tin of beans. Embarrassed, she quickly bent down, picked up the tin and placed it back on the shelf before continuing down the aisle with haste. She scolded herself mentally, *This isn't the first cute girl you've been alone with, Specs!*

Mary snapped out of her daydream at Angela's sudden movements, coughing to clear her throat as she stood up straight. A bright flash of light, followed by a very loud crash of thunder that shook the store windows, demanded all of the rabbit's attention. It was starting to look like a typhoon outside, and with some worry, Mary fumbled for the remote

under the store's TV. She changed the input on the old CRT from the single token security camera to the local news channel, slowly turning up its volume as a well-dressed bear on the station crackled into understanding.

"...just a repeat on that prior message, stay indoors. A flash flood warning is in effect for south..." Static interrupted the message. "...please remain inside until the storm front has passed..."

The lights and TV flickered in time with another roar of thunder, this time almost feeling overhead, as Mary couldn't help but cry out a short, panicked squeak. Angela, at this point having moved nearer the counter, first to hear the news and second to possibly attempt to comfort the clearly panicked rabbit, chimed in a sing-song tone, "Hey there." It instantly replaced Mary's fear of the storm with social anxiety. "Is there somewhere I can sit down if we need to wait out this storm?" Angela continued with a warm smile, trying to make eye contact with Mary, who herself had to look away not to blush.

"Y...yeah, just give me a second," responded Mary as she hastily moved towards the back room behind the counter, accidentally walking slightly into the doorframe with a curse as she slipped behind the employee's only door. Angela had to hold back a snigger as the bunny slipped away, choosing to stare over the very dusty magazines at the counter, some dated for more than two years ago. "What an odd place," she mused to herself aloud as Mary came walked back into the room, struggling to carry a white plastic chair, which she placed down with mild effort next to the counter. Looking up at Angela with a smile as she awkwardly shifted in place, she stuttered, "H...here you go," waving her hand over the seat.

Angela, who had leant forward to help the bun lower the chair, accidentally brushed her hand against Mary's, causing both women to quickly recoil in embarrassed silence. After an awkward moment of the two staring unmoving at each other's feet, Angela cleared her throat with a short laugh and sat down. "Thank you..." She paused for a moment, looking into the bunnies eyes for a name, noting their mutual fluster with a coy smile. "M..Mary!!" spluttered out the flustered shop attendant as she moved back behind the counter and fumbled over her checklist. "Thank you, Mary, my name's Angela, though my friends call me

Specs... One hell of a storm, isn't it?" the wolf spoke with confidence and a clear flirting tone, deciding small talk was the answer, as they were stuck here for a while.

Mary, on the other hand quite overwhelmed by the whole situation, quickly picked up her stocklist from behind the counter and moved her way over to the nearest shelves, so that she could talk, but had something else to focus her attention on whilst she did. "Yeah..." she sighed, clearly shy about talking but slightly more confident than her first greeting, "It hasn't rained like this in a few years, but I guess this is what comes the other side of a heatwave?" She let out a forced laugh to try and lighten the situation, though felt immediately more closed as another bout of thunder shook the small store.

"So what's a pretty girl like you doing working in an out of the way hole in the wall like this?" mused Angela, leaning forward in her chair, "I mean... surely this doesn't pay all that well?"

Mary paused for a moment, before laughing under her breath softly, "It doesn't pay the best no... but I like it here, it's quiet, I get a lot of time to think and there is something nice about just having a space that I feel in charge of, you know?" Angela smiled, nodding her head, seeming to have started breaking through Mary's guard a bit.

"Okay, but like... do you get out much? Like, there doesn't really seem to be a lot to do around this side of town," Angela continued, causing Mary to reflect for a moment. It wasn't like she didn't have friends to hang out with, but it had been over a year since she really had, most of her time had been spent in her own company, and she was embarrassed to say that outside of work she hadn't gotten out much at all. Mary obviously taking a little too long to answer, Angela continued, probably as not to pry, "You should come hang out at the campus someday." Mary's ears flicked in response as she finally confirmed that Angela had come all the way from the university, "Oh no... I would have no reason to..." Mary started before Angela cut her off, "Pish posh! You'd fit right in; I'm sure."

Angela's insistence on her visiting raised questions in Mary's mind and she couldn't stop herself from thinking one of them out loud "...And what, hang out with you or something?" She blushed slightly and moved over to a rack of magazines to check them against her inventory as she realised what she asked. "Sure!!" half-cheered Angela in response. "Gotta

beat being cooped up in here all day..." she trailed off before donning a coy smile "...unless you have someone special you gotta get home to."

Her tease caused Mary to fluster so much she knocked over the stand and scattered paper all over the floor. Both girls embarrassed as Mary knelt to pick up magazines, Angela standing to straighten up the stand as the two awkwardly exchanged no words for a few minutes. Once everything had been put back in order, Angela squinted as a ray of light shone through the alley into her eyes. "Looks like the rain has stopped," Mary stated without thinking, causing Angela's heart to sink. She'd wanted to keep talking for some more time, but was now running out of excuses to be in the store anymore. "Yeah..." she sighed, defeated, as she wandered over to the back shelves, picking up a box of shortbread biscuits. "Can I buy these?" she smiled at Mary before stepping over to the counter. Mary smiled warmly back and half-skipped over to the till to do the transaction, the electronic counter struggling as if not used to making a sale, as money exchanged hands and Angela collected her box of treats.

"Well then Mary, thank you for your company," the wolf grinned, making a mocking half-bow as she started towards the door "...you should get out more though." And with that, she was gone, Angela slipping out through the creaking door at the front of the shop and disappearing around the corner before Mary could even process that she had left. A deep pit formed in her stomach that she hadn't said a proper goodbye, the image of her giving that wolf a big hug filling her mind and causing that blush to return to her cheeks. She then sighed with contentment as she continued about her day at the shop, thinking about the lovely company she'd just been graced with. Mary had decided, perhaps she didn't mind the rain.

The next day of work started much the same as every other day, though now Mary had a spring to her step that she'd not felt in a long time. Whilst it had been a brief encounter, the wolf she'd met in the rain the day before stayed firmly in her mind. That good mood having translated into her finishing all of her store chores by early in the morning, it gave her the rest of the day to sit in the plastic chair that was still in front of the counter and read some of the magazines. Laughing to herself at how out of date some of them were, she decided she'd really need to talk to her gran about getting in new ones. A creak came from the front

door as a customer walked into the store, though she was too invested in how to trim a hedgerow to take much notice, until a familiar voice made her jump out of her seat.

"Could I get this, please," sung Angela's voice as she clearly relished having caught Mary off guard. The bun jumped to her feet, clearly flustered, as she tried hard to compose herself. "Y...you!" she started with surprise, looking the wolf up and down. Until that moment Mary hadn't been completely convinced that the meeting yesterday hadn't been a dream, but without a doubt that muscle-bound, tall lady stood before her again, smirking wide with what was certainly a wolfish grin. "Yes, me," cooed Angela, placing a box of shortbread cookies down on the counter and leaning against its edge as she winked at Mary, causing the rabbit to falter a bit as she walked behind the counter to scan the box.

"I thought you could use the company and besides, I decided that this route makes for a nicer run," she paused and motioned to the white chair still beside the counter, "weather permitting."

Mary couldn't help but laugh. It wasn't a great joke, but the genuinely friendly interaction had caught her completely off guard, and Angela wasn't wrong that she really could use the company. "Well thank you for stopping by," Mary managed to stutter out in response, "It was lovely meeting you yesterday." She handed the box over to Angela shyly.

"Oh don't worry, dear. The pleasure was all mine," Angela smirked and took pride in seeing Mary's cheeks start to turn red. She hadn't misremembered: this girl was for sure the cutest she'd seen in person. Not wanting to overwhelm the poor thing on their second meeting, though, she nodded curtly and waved her box of cookies, "I'll come back same time next week; let's catch up, okay, buns?" she smiled, heading towards the door.

"S...Sure thing!" Mary called out in return with genuine enthusiasm, watching Angela walk back down the alleyway, out of sight. For the rest of the day, Mary practically bounced around the store, and she found herself wishing the next week would come sooner.

A few weeks had passed since their first meeting, but true to her word once a week Angela would take the time out of her schedule to run past the store and chat with Mary. Nothing

serious, mostly her just dropping in and talking about her IT degree or some goings-on around campus. Every time, when she was done talking about the day, she'd buy a box of shortbread and smile, saying, "Just this today, bouncy bun." Every time, a smile reached the corners of her mouth as she watched Mary's expression grow all the more flustered. Things continued this way, once a week Angela coming to buy shortbread and Mary waiting eagerly for her to arrive, until one day towards the end of summer.

Mary had been waiting for the entire day for Angela to come to do her usual routine, but she hadn't arrived. The hours ticked on. Mary even placed a box of shortbread next to her in preparation, but nothing. Worry washed through the poor bun as she tried to busy herself cleaning the store, but she couldn't stop her mind wandering with all of the possibilities of what could've happened, each worse than the last. She almost looked dead with worry as her mind had concluded the worst, moving into half an hour before closing. Going through the motions of her wrapping up routine, her hands shook as she kept dropping things, misentering numbers and double reading her words. Never in her life had Mary been so worried about something. She didn't even have Angela's number—hell, they were basically strangers—but her gut heaved at the thought that anything bad had happened to her. It wasn't until Mary had been doing her final sweep of the store, switching off lights, that there came a light knocking at the door of the shop.

Heart jumping, Mary's eyes snapped to the door, and she instinctively called out, "Sorry, we're closed," before the soft, uncharacteristically downbeat voice responded: "I hope you're still open for a chat." Angela was leant against the glass of the shopfront; she looked tired and wasn't wearing her usual exercise attire, instead dressed up with a nice leather jacket and jeans. The bunny couldn't contain her excitement as she nodded and squeaked out a "Just a moment!" before hurriedly finishing the rest of her closing, now with great speed and accuracy. Finally stepping out the door to the shop, she locked its frame and turned around straight into a tight hug.

Angela was hugging her, and Mary's mind took a moment to catch up. She had thought about this moment for a long time, and now it was here. The wolf was holding her close and resting her chin on her shoulder. She could smell the soft rose scent of her fur, feel the warmth in her embrace and marvel at the surprising softness the muscle-bound wolf

possessed. The moment was perfect, and it took her a minute of hugging back before Mary became aware that Angela was crying and shaking.

Holding her friend tighter and choking back tears of her own, Mary mustered her own voice. "You doing okay, Shortbread?" she asked, realising that she'd never called Angela by that name before, but she was not about to take back the nickname. Angela pulled back to arms' reach, hands still on Mary's shoulders as she locked her deep red eyes with Mary's own. "Much better now..." the wolf croaked out, forcing a smile "...You wouldn't be free for dinner, would you?" At this close distance, Mary couldn't ignore Angela's blush and without thinking, responded, "Of course." Angela took Mary by the hand and led her out to the main street, where she motioned to an old but well-kept green car. "You okay to go now?" Angela asked almost with desperation, opening the door for Mary, who, herself so distracted by them holding hands, simply nodded before stepping in through that passenger side door.

Angela's car was cluttered inside but not messy, smelling vaguely of apple cider and fresh bread, with each car seat having a little embroidered cushion on it. Mary settled herself down in the passenger seat, looking at the sticker-covered dashboard. A mix of skating, pride and electronics stickers hid most of the old cracked leather, and the rabbit couldn't help but sink into her seat a little, feeling almost at home. The door to the driver's side opened, and Angela slunk her way into the car with a little difficulty due to her height, sitting down. Mary noticed that her face had grown much calmer and more confident, which relieved her. Clinking of keys were followed by a low rumble as Angela started the car. The soft sound of some jazz radio station crackled over the speakers as the wolf turned and gave Mary a warm smile that nearly melted her heart.

"So what kinda food do you normally eat, Buns?" Angela inquired, her usual confidence and slightly flirty demeanour having made a full return. "Really anything" Mary replied, some level of excitement in her voice as she started to process that she was being taken out for dinner. She stuttered, "I... I don't eat out a lot though... Where would you suggest?"

"Hmmm... OH I KNOW!" Angela slapped her wheel in a eureka moment, smiling as she pulled the car onto the street and started driving back downtown. The drive itself may have only been short, but Mary relished every moment of it, just watching Angela in admiration

as the wolf hummed in time to the piano on the radio, drummed her well-kept fingers to the beat and smiled with admiration at the bun every time she caught her eyes. This was perfect.

Eventually, the car pulled down a busy street of restaurants and shops, slowly coming alive as they prepared for the evening flow of patrons. Mary recognised the area as just down the road from her home, but also as a very expensive collection of eateries, suddenly becoming very aware of her work uniform and how much money this dinner was likely about to cost her. Angela must've noticed the bunny's concerns though, as she looked for a place to park. "Don't worry; you're perfect," she reassured in a surprisingly soft and sweet tone, reversing the car into a free spot next to the sidewalk as the comforting purr of the engine abruptly faded and Angela reached for the parking brake. Mary, who hadn't been paying full attention, felt Angela's warm palm grip over the top of her own hand that had been resting on that brake. She blushed heavily and started to pull away, but the wolf gripped slightly tighter, activating the break whilst holding onto Mary's hand, pulling away once done but not before giving one last squeeze.

The air outside the car was cool. Autumn was definitely on its way as the nights had been growing so cold. Angela stepped around the car and once again took Mary by the hand, this time softly as the wolf stood close and pointed down the street. "We're going just over there, Buns," she chimed and started to lead them down the sidewalk. Normally Mary would've been embarrassed by the situation, still in her work uniform, holding hands and moving by such classy restaurants. But she couldn't think about that right now, she was barely taking in her surroundings as they walked—her focus was just on the softness of Angela's hand and the closeness of her body. Instinctually, she wrapped her other hand around the wolf's arm, holding herself closer to the taller girl's body. Without a word, Angela responded, taking slower steps to allow a closer stride for the two. Fingers spread the rabbit's as they interlocked, the wolf squeezing their grip slightly firmer and causing a crimson blush to spread up through Mary's ears.

Angela led the two down a small alleyway off the main strip, where a canopy of fairy lights had been arranged, making the space seem almost magical as the narrow corridor opened out into a small garden. This took Mary by complete surprise, as she had walked the main

street many times but had never known this clearing was here. Sounds of cars from the nearby road muffled into nothing from the vine padded walls, and the soft trickle of a small fountain in the centre of the space drowned out all other sounds with its white noise. The space was like an oasis of calm away from the bustling streets they'd just left, greenery covering every wall and the twinkle of lights forming a roof like stars, even on a cloudy night like tonight. Connected to the space were three small entryways, connected to the back of the surrounding buildings with their own small businesses. They were stood near an almost abandoned-looking art studio; wrapping around the park was what seemed to be a dance studio; and then finally on the opposite wall to where the two were facing was the glow of a small restaurant, which Mary assumed was their destination. Angela guided the two of them over the cobbled stone, past the fountain and another couple taking in the magic of the hidden space, before the scent of woodfire reached Mary's nose, and they had arrived at their destination.

Standing at the door to greet them was a very burly moose who took up most of the doorway. He almost looked comical, with his bulging arms struggling to be contained by the dress shirt and black apron he wore. His intimidating facade fell away immediately, though, as with a warm smile he gathered some menus and greeted the two with a soft voice, "Welcome to the Garden. Table for two?" his voice almost bordering on singsong as he motioned into the restaurant. Angela nodded curtly, to which he then led the way inside. Mary trailed along behind, having now pulled away from Angela, but she still held her hand firmly. The bunny noted the clientele of the eatery: a mix of tired looking students, some businessmen and a table of builders still in their overalls from a day on the job. She relaxed. Angela was right that no one was going to care about her being in uniform still. Strong smells of the clearly visible pizza oven filled Mary's nose as they reached a back table with two chairs, and the moose motioned for them to take a seat. Finally letting go of each other's hands to sit down, Mary almost felt empty as that soft warmth left her grip, though she was quickly distracted as the server spoke up again with a smile, "My name is Terry; I'll be your server for the day. Any drinks for you two ladies?" He handed each a menu, and Angela responded without missing a beat, "Two Astro Apples, please," before looking to Mary for approval. "You'll love it. Trust me," she insisted, to which the bunny nodded with a smile.

Terry smiled and walked back off to the front, leaving the two in just each other's company again, the soft sound of ambient pop music and the busy open kitchen masking any conversation the two may have from others' ears. Angela seemed intent on reading her menu, for the time being, so Mary busied herself with the same, though she didn't spend long on it when she saw a mushroom and potato pizza and knew that was what she would order. Folding the laminated paper down on the checked tablecloth, she leant on the table to be a little closer again to Angela, who smiled at her from over the menu. "Missed you today," Mary started trying to pry that conversationalist of a wolf out, "...but this is a nice surprise."

Angela placed down her own menu with a slightly pained-looking smile, "Yeah... sorry about that. It's been a busy day." She paused, looking genuinely distressed. "But! I'm glad you took up my offer, this is possibly my favourite place in town," she beamed, now looking happily around the brick-walled restaurant, just in time to see Terry walking back with two seemingly small glasses of deep golden cider, which he placed down on the table delicately. "You both ready to order, or do you need more time?" he politely inquired with that same warm smile. Mary mused that he was almost like an oversized plush come to life. "I'm ready if you are," Angela responded, looking once again into Mary's eyes for validation, to which she nodded. Orders were then exchanged, Mary getting the pizza and Angela ordering some sort of stew, and Terry excused himself once more and left the two staring at each other in silence.

Mary had a hard time initiating conversation and was finding it a little awkward, as Angela usually carried talking by this point. The rabbit looked with concern at her wolf friend, trying to make eye contact but noting that Angela was having a hard time maintaining. A minute more of silence later, in a cautious tone Mary inquired, "...Do you want to talk about it?" She wasn't sure what it was, but the wolf's clear distress back at the store still held concerns for the rabbit. "Maybe later..." Angela spoke with a distinct note of distress, for which Mary now almost immediately regretted asking. "How about you tell me about yourself?" Angela continued in a slightly more cheerful tone, but still mostly melancholy, "I love listening to you talk."

The statement almost caught Mary off guard. It's true that their first meeting was the only time Angela had really asked many questions about her life, but at this point, she felt like she would probably tell her anything. "S...Sure!" she replied with reserved enthusiasm, "Anything you'd like to know in particular? Or do you just want me to talk?" She smiled warmly trying to make it clear that she would do anything she could to make the wolf feel better. The sentiment clearly hit home as Angela's eyes started to tear up slightly, and with a nod of vulnerability that Mary wasn't used to from the wolf, she responded, "Just talking would be perfect." She wiped her face and took a sip of her cider, which Mary noted was in a much larger glass than she had thought.

Mary took a sip of the cider herself and couldn't help but let out a tiny gasp of surprise at its flavour: it was incredibly light but still full of a strong apple flavour that lingered on the tip of her tongue with a crispness in the best possible way. She was in a good mood and was in the company of who she was fast realising her favourite person in the world. There was no way in her head that she could be more comfortable than right now, so she just started pouring out her life to Angela. "Well I was born and raised Mullberton, a small town north of here. I spent most of my childhood on my own, wanting to write stories and help with the family berry farm. We'd often come up to the city to visit my grandparents who live near where I work, and we'd stay in our townhouse, which..." Mary paused and motioned past a wall in a direction out in the suburb "...is just over that way and is where I live now." She took a deep breath and looked over at Angela to see if she was listening. Pleased to see the wolf with a big grin on her face, sipping at her cider and clearly hanging off each word, she continued, "Unfortunately there was a large fire at the farm when I was sixteen. We lost the whole property, as well as my father and grandfather who were there at the time..." She paused, holding back tears for the event. Even though it had been thirteen years ago, she still felt a pit in her stomach at the loss.

Angela reached across the table and grabbed one of her hands with a smile. "You don't need to talk about it," she reassured, but Mary shook her head and forced a smile. "No no, it's okay..." she answered, continuing, "After that, we came to live out here in the city, and I actually quite enjoyed it. Without my grandad around, my grandmother needed help with her businesses, and I ended up taking up a position at the corner shop where I still work now. My mother moved in with her a few years ago as her health hasn't been the best, and

she's always preferred their house. So I've been on my own over this side of town for a little while now." She paused to drink some more of her cider with a sigh, before letting out a genuine laugh, "It's funny, you asked me on the day we met if I get out a lot, and in truth, this is the first thing I've done with a friend in years!" She paused and gripped Angela's hand back with a smile. "I know it may sound silly or something, but... thank you for coming into my life," the bun started to choke up, a different kind of tears welling inside of her. Angela smiled warmly back, responding "I'm glad I met you too."

Terry arrived just at that moment, carrying two plates, which he laid out with that ever-present smile. It forced the two girls to let go of each other's hand and straighten themselves out slightly, which seemed to make the moose's grin wider, much to Mary's embarrassment. The shorter girl took the moment to wipe her eyes as Angela thanked him for the food. A moment later the two were alone again and Mary was staring at the large pizza before her. It was a good thing she was hungry, as it would normally probably feed two. Angela had already started on her stew, from which Mary could smell the wine and pepper from across the table. Picking up a slice of pizza in her hand, the bun started to eat, drooling slightly from a mix of her hunger and just how great the food tasted, possibly the best pizza she'd ever had. "This is amazing!" she exclaimed after her first bite, Angela smiling excitedly in response, "You see? This place is like the best secret in town. The food and drinks are so good and it's always a super chill atmosphere!" A smirk crossed the wolf's muzzle as she took another sip of her cider. "...But it is for sure made better by the company," she directly flirted back with an added wink that made Mary's toes curl and cheeks flush and caused her to almost choke on her next bite of pizza. Nothing but relief washing through her as it was clear Angela was back to her normal energetic and flirty self, Mary leaned back in her chair to enjoy her meal as the wolf continued the conversation.

"I've been living on my own for two years as well," Angela started with a warm, conversational tone, now maintaining eye contact with Mary, "I'm over at a dorm on campus. I'm into my last year of this computer science course, but I'm thinking of turning it into an honours course for another year if I can keep my grades up. I grew up across the country from here, but I did two years of boarding school uptown from here, which is why I decided to try university here. It's honestly been a kinda rough two years. I've made some friends around campus but none in my dorm." Her voice seemed to drop in tone as she

started to seem a bit down again, Mary moving to comfort her, but Angela shook her head and continued.

"It's okay; I do want to talk about it," she said, holding herself together "The dorm is awful. It's filled with frat boys that just view me as a potential lay, and the head of the dorm is an ex-frat boy who clearly doesn't wanna pull up anyone on their bad behaviour." She paused and motioned to her dyed hair, "I maintain this as a statement that I'm super not interested in them, but that's resulted in me being bullied for being gay. It's not uncommon for me to get back from a day of classes to find my room covered in toilet paper, things stolen or my locks broken." Angela paused, clearly looking distressed, both having stopped eating now as Mary looked at her friend with the deepest concern. The look certainly didn't go unnoticed as Angela looked over Mary's soft face.

She really was perfect in her eyes, and unlike any of the other girls she'd flirted with on campus, she was finding it so hard to express her feelings to the bun, even as she found herself so comfortable confessing her troubles. Mary moved to speak and express her concerns, but Angela cut her off, trying to preemptively console that it wasn't so bad, "It's okay though! I keep all my important things in my car, so the dorm is really just somewhere to sleep. I'm only so upset today because some asshat broke my laptop, and I've had to drop two hundred dollars on getting it fixed, which is why I was late today." She sighed, seemingly less upset now that she'd talked things out.

Mary couldn't contain herself now though as she spoke up, "Come live with me." The words escaped her mouth before she'd really thought them through, but it truly felt like the right answer to her. "I live nearby, and you'll for sure be safe. It's a really nice house, and I can cook you meals, and..." she was cut off by Angela who for the first time since they had met looked overwhelmed beyond words. The wolf stood up and with a small bow and hand motion excused herself. "I need the bathroom," she stammered out before shuffling out past a restroom sign, leaving Mary feeling impossibly alone.

Angela had already started crying by the time she had reached the bathroom, glad to find no one inside as she sat in the farthest stall and curled up. Thoughts raced through her head as she started to question why was she crying. At this point she was over the

harassment of the day, and the stress of her upcoming exams wasn't that pressing, as she knew she'd do fine. But yet she was sat here in the bathroom, crying. The offer to stay with Mary had hit hard. Every meeting with the rabbit had honestly felt like a dream to the wolf. This perfect girl who had nothing to do with the dorm or university had grown into a true friend over the last few months. She had found herself growing excited every week to say hello and just spend a few minutes with this person that Angela was fast realising she loved. That's why she hadn't been able to ask her out sooner or make any moves like she normally would've: she had genuinely deep and complex feelings for this rabbit that had so readily agreed to spend time with her. The offer to live with her honestly felt like a dream come true, but she hadn't been honest with Mary at this point. What if she didn't feel the same way? What if she made things worse by accepting such an offer? Really, they barely knew each other. The poor wolf's brain filled with self-doubt as her tears slowly turned into deep sobs, as she thought, what could such a lovely lady see in a mess of a person such as herself.

Mary hadn't moved from the table, slowly eating her pizza and sipping at her cider, filled with concern for Angela and doing mental logistics of things. She could certainly house the wolf with her, there was no problem with that, and sure they didn't know each other very well, but Mary was certain that would be no problem, as Angela had already proven her character in her eyes. The thought of being able to see Angela every day brought the biggest smile to Mary's face. Never in her life had she felt such content joy in spending time with a person, and this evening had only solidified in her mind that she wanted to spend the rest of her life with the wolf. That fact lingered for a moment, its implications and reality settling in. She genuinely couldn't think of her life without Angela anymore; she needed her company; and after the magical experience that had been this night so far, she knew that she wanted to spend as much time as she could with the wolf. Her dear Shortbread whose hand she wanted desperately to hold again, whose embrace she craved, and in a sudden moment of realisation, Mary finally internalised: she *loved* Angela. Determined that the best solution for the both of them was for them to live together, she downed the rest of her cider, ready for the wolf's return.

Wiping down her face with water from the sink, Angela tried to compose herself in the bathroom mirror. She now felt like she may have taken advantage of Mary and that her

affection was likely unrequited. Her dear bun deserved better than what she could offer, and she should really stop leading her on. Patting herself down, she walked shakily back into the warm light of the restaurant and almost broke down in tears again as she saw the warm loving smile of Mary waiting for her. Swallowing deep, she walked back over and sat down. "Mary, look I..." she choked out before the rabbit cut her off, "I want you to live with me." Angela looked stunned and shook her head, but Mary leant forward and continued quickly, "Look, I don't want you living in that dorm situation anymore, I have more than enough space for you, and I really love the idea of seeing you every day!" looking seriously at Angela the whole time.

Angela found herself completely overwhelmed, she was being offered what sounded like a dream and was finding it impossible to maintain composure. Not wanting to have a breakdown and cause a scene, she started to down her own cider while rummaging through her jacket pocket. Mary continued, "Shortbread... I don't know what to say except that since you've come into my life I've felt the best I have... well, ever! And I don't want that feeling to go away..." She trailed off as she watched Angela take out her wallet and place a fifty dollar bill down before starting to stand. "...Please stay with me," Mary choked as tears started flowing down Angela's face as she started to leave.

"...I can't," the wolf managed to stutter before she began to walk away.

Mary, totally lost in the situation, now cried fully. "Please... visit me tomorrow?" she called out weakly, half as a question and half begging, not certain what was going on as Angela slipped out the front door out of sight.

Sat in total shock, tears rolling down her cheeks, now alone in the restaurant, Mary felt the lowest she ever had. After a minute, Terry walked over, the burly moose pulling over an empty chair and sitting down next to the speechless bun, and placed another cider next to her before roughly patting her on the shoulder. "Don't worry, doll," he attempted to comfort, "I'm sure you'll work this out. You're the cutest couple we've had here in some time." He smiled down warmly, picking up the fifty off the table. "This'll cover tonight. Stay as long as you like," he patted Mary on the back once more, before standing up and leaving her be.

Mary's heart ached, but that was the only feeling she could experience right now, she felt hollow and numb, sitting there for another hour as she slowly sipped her cider, somehow hoping beyond hope that Angela would walk back through that door at any moment. But she never did. Eventually standing, Mary started to walk by herself back home. With a deep look of concern, Terry asked if she needed a lift back at the door, but Mary dismissed his offer, bracing herself against the cold night air and walking herself back out through the brightly lit alley and onto the busy street. Her journey home barely registered, as did getting herself ready for bed or the hours spent crying into her pillow as she eventually drifted off to a restless sleep.

The next day began like any other for Mary. She ate a light breakfast, donned her work uniform and walked to the bus stop. She stood there in a daze, the events of the previous night seeming like a bad dream, but the sinking feeling in her gut and pain in her chest told her otherwise. Was that the last time she would see Angela? Her mind worried as the bus pulled up, and she almost forgot to get on. Had she done something wrong? Was the offer to stay too forward? What if she'd misread the wolf's feelings towards her? Everything felt wrong, and as the bus lurched forward on its way, she nearly felt like hurling. Reaching the storefront, she'd almost hoped to see Angela waiting there, but there was nothing but the empty shop front. With a sigh, Mary opened the door and started her day.

Angela hadn't slept that night. She felt awful for what she had done and had immediately regretted her decision to leave. The wolf hadn't even made it back to her dorm, having spent the night in the back seat of her car crying whilst holding a pillow. She couldn't believe that someone so wonderful as Mary could exist, let alone that she would offer so freely an escape from her current situation. She squinted through the sunrise's reflection off her car lid. She had a lecture this morning and decided it was best she readied herself for the day.

Mary found her day hard, miscounting basically every item on her checklist and having to redo inventory a few times. Walking into shelves as she jumped at everyone who walked down the alleyway, but every time she was disappointed that it wasn't Angela. She considered travelling to the university and trying to find her on campus, but it was so large

she doubted she'd find her. There was so much left unsaid, Mary was kicking herself mentally for not being direct the night before and letting Angela know how important she was to her. Even if they didn't live with each other, even if they only said hi once a week to buy shortbread, that would be enough. It was almost hard to breathe as Mary paced nervously around the store, having to sit down as her chest burned with a sharp pain and crying as she muttered under her breath, "I think I loved you," before letting out a gasping sob. She walked over to the door and locked it, flipping the sign to closed. They never got customers today and for now Mary had to manage her emotions. Flicking the TV station over to the local news, she sat in the white plastic chair and listened to the show about an upcoming food festival.

The lecture had been slow and dull. Angela wasn't learning anything new today, though that wasn't helped by the fact that her mind was obsessing over Mary. She couldn't stop thinking about her—that soft tan face which melted her heart with every smile, those big green eyes that looked to her with such excitement and joy when she spoke—and remembering the sheer comfort of her embrace when she needed it most. In her mind, Mary was an angel, and she'd just turned away her support. Why had she done that? Her mind kept repeating the question. There was no real reason except that Angela felt she didn't deserve it, and that feeling wasn't leaving. Despite her confidence in every other aspect of her life, Angela felt for certain that Mary was too good for her. *I'd only hurt her*, she tried to assure herself, but an aching feeling in her heart scolded her back. *You already have hurt her*, it said, *you didn't even have the decency to say goodbye*. A moment of clarity ran through Angela's head, and without thinking, acting on pure instinct, she closed her laptop, buried it in her bag and stood up to leave. The lecture wasn't over, and people stared, but that didn't stop her. She wasn't thinking. Body on autopilot, she walked out of the room and straight down to the street. Dumping her bag in her car before she started walking with purpose along her running route, she headed straight for Mary. Feet carrying her as questions bubbled up in her mind like, *what if she doesn't want to talk to you*, or, *what if she's not even there*, only to be dismissed quickly by a fire in her heart, a fire that drove her legs faster with each step. Before she knew it she was running, running faster than she ever had, her legs hurting, but she didn't care; she had to see her bun. She had to say sorry.

The news station had helped in calming Mary down to the point that she could stand again, making no motions to reopen the store though as she listened to the weather report whilst dusting. "Another flash flood?" she spoke aloud, looking at the weather radar on the dim screen and sighing heavily as she thought to herself, and started to reminisce about Angela and her first meeting. She'd decided now, after the storm cleared up, she'd close early and head to the campus to try and find her. Even if the wolf didn't want to see her, she wanted to confess her feelings. The distant rumble of thunder signaled the first drops of rain, and Mary shivered, moving to the back of the store to finish her checks for the day, so she could close early.

Out on the street, rain had started falling on Angela's face, not that she paid the stray water much mind, racing between pedestrians and taking a shortcut through a park. Others around moved to seek shelter from the oncoming downpour as the sky started to turn dark. The sky rumbled above her and flashed a bright yellow. This was a serious storm, and for a moment it caused the wolf to pause and consider shelter, but she pushed on, muttering to herself, "Not far now," even as legs ached and threatened to give in. She rounded the park edge and onto the main street the store veered off, but there was still a long way to go.

Without thinking, Angela walked straight into a wall—a soft wall of grey-brown fur and muscle—and she took a step back and recognised the waiter from the night before. Terry smiled warmly down at her, passing the red umbrella he carried with him to a much shorter male mouse, who had been holding the moose's hand. "Well hello there, missed saying goodbye to you last night," he spoke with that remarkably soft tone. "You rushing to see her?" he asked with a look that said he wouldn't accept no as an answer. Out of breath, Angela nodded her head before taking a step past him to hurry down the road, but Terry's strong hand on her shoulder stopped the wolf in place. "Don't kill yourself in the rain getting there," he continued as the lights of an expensive-looking white car next to them flashed with the click of its doors unlocking. The mouse stepped into the driver's seat as Terry opened a rear door and motioned for her to get in, "It'll be faster and dryer if you let us take you."

With a look of sheer admiration, Angela hastily climbed into the back seat, followed by Terry, who had to lean forward just to fit. With a smile, the mouse turned back and inquired in a surprisingly deep voice, "Where to, fair maiden?" Angela laughed and told him the address, and he pulled out and started to race down the street. "Thank you..." she started, looking up at Terry, who still continued to smile. "But why?" she asked, still in shock of the good fortune of a ride. The mouse smiled and pointed to a small rainbow wristband Angela had missed before, then to a sticker on the rear window that had two men holding hands, with the words, "I love my boyfriend." Terry smiled and stated simply, "We gotta stick out for each other, right Andy?" The mouse smiled and nodded before running a yellow light, determined to reach their destination with haste.

Mary had started to pack her things. Her heart begged her to leave now, but she knew it would be dangerous in the storm so she just paced around the store. What she was going to say to Angela raced through her mind; a myriad of words crossed her mind to try and explain her feelings, but only three stuck in her mind. A loud crash of thunder grabbed the rabbit's attention as she noted the rainfall was hard enough again to make the alleyway a blurred wall of dark grey. She could swear there was a figure out in the rain, but surely not, especially with the wind picking up. No one would be crazy enough to be out in it. Then came the knock on the old glass door. A wrapping of furred fist on the glass as someone on the other side was attempting to get in but couldn't. Mary hastily unlocked the door and with the combined effort of the two, they opened it, water flowing into the front of the store from a small puddle outside. The rabbit barely registered who it was until she closed and secured the door once again, turning to see a water-drenched Angela stood there with a face filled with mixed emotions.

Without thinking, Mary hurried out the back of the store to grab a towel, handing it to the wolf before freezing up as they both stared at each other. Neither wanted to say the first words, but unspoken conversation passed between the two as they maintained eye contact. Both, just so happy to see the other in that moment, stood shivering as another bolt of lightning lit the sky. "Mary, look, I'm so sorry about last night. I was just so overwhelmed, and I was struggling to..." Angela started blurting out, tears streaming down her cheeks as Mary cut her off with a soft statement, "You came back." The words carried a mix of disbelief and sheer joy. Angela couldn't hold herself back anymore, stepping forward

and grasping Mary tightly. "Of course I did, bouncy bun," she sobbed into the rabbit's shoulder before continuing, "I wanted to say yes last night. I wanted with all my heart to come live with you, but I felt you may not feel the same way about me." Mary's grip tightened at Angela's words, crying herself now and squeaking out her own response, "And how do you feel about me, Shortbread?" She took a half-step back to meet eyes once more, gripping the wolf's hands tightly.

"I love you." Angela spoke with the most certainty that she'd felt about a statement in her life. Mary's heart skipped a beat as, without thinking, she jumped forward, hugging Angela tightly and causing them to both topple to the floor with a soft thud. Mary leant forward and, not realising what she was doing until she'd done it, kissed Angela right on her lips. She held the kiss for a long moment before she pulled away with the greatest feeling of content, finally cooing back...

"I love you too."