

< Chapter Three >

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"Matt." Monica tapped her manager on the shoulder. The boston terrier was a stout built man ten years her senior, but was her manager for the early shift at the restaurant five days out of seven. He was very good at managing her staff during peak hours on a weekend.

"Yep, chiefy?" He gave her his full attention. The reality that he'd been in the military right after he gotten his highschool diploma showed in his manner, and also showed why he was never visibly stressed out even when the volume of patrons was at their highest. The terrier had seen worse in the various countries the ARMY had shipped him to over the course of his eight years in the service.

"I've got a young gentleman coming in for lunch and I want you to make sure you have a table for two reserved for him when he gets here." The wolf explained and she could then see one of the terrier's brows lift with curiosity like he was channeling Nimoy's spirit. It was very rare that Monica made special requests for seating when someone she knew was set to arrive. Her trick was to just tell them to come by at certain hours when they weren't as busy. It was a good way to bring in extra patrons when they were slower. Easier on the staff, too.

"Yes, Matt?" She asked him. She didn't let her tone betray her. Monica wasn't in the mood to be hassled by her manager about bringing in boys for a lunch date. He smiled and shook his head. He was old enough to know she was a big girl that did her own thing whatever it might happen to be.

"This young guy got a name and face?" He asked, then added. "I'll update the girls and make sure there's a table waiting for him."

"Brandon. He's a brown donkey." The wolf said and then thought to add his age. "Late teens."

Both of the terrier's brows lifted then as he struggled to withhold his smile. She scowled at him. They were in the kitchen and none of the cooks were minding them very much. The Sunday rush was slowly building up to the apex of their peak hours and everyone was trying to shuffle food and drinks out the doors as fast as possible to make way for the inevitable flood of orders that would start to hit them a little after 12.

Monica liked to assume that San Furnando was a relatively secular city, but with its population being something to the tune roughly four million people it meant that even on a Sunday in SanFur you'd still get a sizeable rush of people right after church let out from their sermons.

The wolf knew of at least two major Catholic churches that were in her area and her kitchen was kept busy on Sundays for it. It was good God fearing money that helped pad the accounts and collectors at bay.

"Robbing the cradle there, chiefy?" He asked. She scowled even more at him.

"He's of age, Matt. Don't harass me." She told him and he shrugged in defeat but didn't let the smile fade.

"I'll get the girls to keep a look out and there'll be a table for two a waitin'." He told her, and she gave him a curt nod and waved him away so he could get back to his work. She exhaled. She was letting herself get very up tight about her new boyfriend coming for lunch. Monica shouldn't be complaining. She was the one for up and volunteered this, after all.

She made herself busy by going through the kitchen and catching up with her cooks and reviewing orders that were coming and going. Even though she was the owner she still maintained a strong presence in her kitchen. It was -her- kitchen, after all. Monica Blackwater ran a good restaurant due to her particular nature. The wolf helped complete an order and sent it off with one of her waitresses.

Her phone buzzed in her back pocket and she slyly shifted through the kitchen to see what the rest of her cooks were preparing, then made her way quietly to her office when the coast was clear. She felt awkward going to check her messages. She was the big boss wolf and she would normally check her messages whenever and wherever she pleased, but today she was feeling sheepish about it given the context of the day's affairs.

The text was from Matt. He was letting her know that a table was reserved for her and Brandon and to let him know if she wanted anything else done in preparation. She sent back a reply letting the terrier know that he just needed to get Brandon seated and then to let her know that he'd shown up. She figured Brandon would text her anyway so she'd likely already be aware he'd arrived.

She sat down behind her desk and actually fidgeted there. The wolf left her phone to rest on the desktop and she had to run her hands over her face several times to set herself straight. Another quick rub over the face smoothed her white fur back down flat. She fished a makeup compact out of a desk drawer and checked her hair. It was fine.

Brandon didn't have any classes today. It was Sunday. She thought that maybe she could take the rest of the day off after lunch and she and

Brandon could just... enjoy the day. The entire day. She took in a long slow breath. She exhaled it back just as slowly.

The wolf's hands went back up and she ran her fingers through her hair several times to primp herself. What was she doing? Everything was fine. Inhale. Exhale.

She wasn't even on the pill! Elbows met desk and her cheeks came to rest in her palms while she groaned with her cellphone sitting quietly between her elbows. Monica hadn't expected things to move this fast and she was not in any way equipped for a relationship. A quiet whisper in her loins told her she wanted to consummate a relationship sooner rather than later, and it was a sensation she had learned to ignore a long time ago. She couldn't really ignore it anymore! Not that she wanted to either. Now that she and Brandon had uttered the words that they were now a thing there was little left in her to hold off mother nature's instincts. It was all right there tapping at the glass of her mind and the more idle she became the louder the tapping got.

The wolf looked down at her phone and saw the faint reflection of her white face on the darkened screen. If she spent the rest of the day with him that would probably light a fire in her crotch that her new young man would have to vigorously extinguish.

She was mature enough to admit that she knew her limits and her weaknesses. He was a sweet young man that probably would turn out to have stronger will power than she did. Will power to control himself, that is. Brandon seemed the type to have his loins thoroughly girded if not by his nature then by his upbringing.

He'd be way too innocent to own condoms for their date today, but then again... Horny teenagers will do as they will do. Brandon could very well have a big box of them in his dormitory for all she knew. And they do give out the free ones on campus, too. As she continued to think on sex and condoms she got all the more frustrated. Monica hadn't gotten laid with anything other than her hand in quite a while. She was probably pretty rusty at taking a dick. He was an equine, too. Wolves were known to be above the national average 'down there', and she was of course built to handle it as nature willed. A donkey would give her a good run for her money though, or so she felt comfortable in assuming.

She sighed, then tried to empty her thoughts to gain a little peace of mind. She needed to worry less, and look forward to more.

Her phone interrupted her efforts with a buzz. She swiped it to check her messages and saw that it was from Brandon. Her heart skipped and she reflexively leaned back in her office chair before tilting back forward

to hastily type a reply. She sped her finger across her screen to tell him she was excited to have lunch with him. After she'd sent it she felt embarrassed.

"Me, too!" He replied and she let her finger hover over the phone as she thought of what to say. She pulled her hand back and leaned into her chair and watched her phone until the screen shut itself off. She leaned back close and woke her phone up, then stopped herself from sending anything. She could just wait until they were sitting together to tell him she wanted to spend the day with him.

She exhaled a breath she was not aware she'd been holding. Another text appeared in her notifications. It was Matt telling her that 'a young gentleman has arrived to sweep you off your feet, Your Majesty'. Monica frowned. Her reply to Matt was a curt 'Don't be a smartass.'

The wolf stood, tucked her phone back into her back pocket, and then exited her office with her expression forced to appear even and calm. Matt stepped through the door and into the kitchen and she broke her calm and frowned at him.

"He's at table six. I didn't know if you wanted to wait his table or not so I thought I'd let you decide." The terrier had a notepad in his hand and held it out to her. She snatched it and stole his pen from his shirt pocket.

"I'm going to smack you right to the moon, Alice." She muttered as she stepped past and out the door into the dining area with Matt saying in the distance 'Pow!'. She had almost thirty tables in her restaurant plus a bar, which had about twenty seats, and then there was the outside seating that was always popular with customers. She had the room to cater to a large boisterous crowd. Table six was the third table away from the front door, and there the young donkey sat with his back towards her.

She quietly moved through the tables. Monica naturally counted the tables with patrons and instinctively smiled. Another good business day. The wolf stopped just behind Brandon and looked over his shoulder. He sat, dressed in a nice pair of khakis and a red polo shirt, in the middle of the bench with his phone resting on the table in front of him. He'd already been served a glass of water.

Monica twirled the pen around in her hand and clicked the button. She had her smile ready for her boyfriend when he turned to see her standing there.

"Hi!" His face was all alight and she touched a hand to his shoulder to keep him from standing.

"Since you're in my restaurant I thought I'd take your order." She told him.

"Oh? Cool!" Brandon laughed, and it was the warmest thing she'd heard all day. "I haven't even looked at the menu yet."

The wolf let her hand linger on his shoulder, then let go and slowly stepped around the table and sat herself down in front of him. They kept their menus in a wooden rack on the table next to the wall. She reached over and handed him one. She had the menu memorized so of course she didn't retrieve one for herself.

"Order whatever you want. My treat." The wolf replied, and watched him open his mouth to offer a rebuttal. He stopped, and looked awkward about it. Of course he would. Brandon had no doubt been raised to be a bit old fashioned.

"What do you recommend?" He asked instead. Instead of giving him an answer she sat the notepad down in front of her and propped her elbows on the table so she could rest her chin on her hands. She extended a leg out under the table and rubbed her ankle against his shin. He looked up at her and she could see him blush under his fur.

"Thank you for coming." She said quietly. He nodded, and she smiled more at how bashful he was looking all of a sudden. Monica really wanted to take the day off just to get him to open up more. Open up a whole hell of a lot more! He was doing pretty well for himself though if he had managed to get a wolf like her to think this hard about a young art student.

"I really wanted to come, Monica." He smiled at her, and she considered thinking up pet names for each of them so they wouldn't have to use each others given names all the time. It'd be cute. Monica could call him... She thought a bit and couldn't find a word that fit him yet. She wondered what he'd want to call her? Her smile broadened at the mystery of it.

"I think you could take a look at our burger selection. They're the most popular item. We also have a really good salad menu if you're thinking about eating healthy. A lot of people also seem to enjoy the pasta menu." She pointed out and reached over to his menu and started pointing out items to him. She briefly caught in the corner of her eye more than one of her employees looking over at her table. She very patiently looked their way. Matt was among them and looking smug. She gave one glare and all of them but Matt scattered like cockroaches into different

directions. Matt smiled at her and visible chuckled before finally retreating to do his damn job. Monica looked back and was thankful that Brandon was thumbing his lower lip in deep thought as he looked over the menu. He hadn't seen her glare at her employees.

"For some reason I thought it'd be more expensive to eat here." he said aloud. She lifted her eyebrows. One trip to Google would tell anyone that her restaurant wasn't attempting to alienate customers with its prices. Monica didn't believe that just because she was operating in California that it meant that she had to do as Apple did and charge extra just for her brand name. Monica was proud of her restaurant and felt it was one of the best places to eat in San Fernando, but she wasn't about to let her ego inflate along with her prices. She smiled over at the donkey.

"Why is that?" She asked out of genuine curiosity. Her restaurant was called The Fine Rind. When she first got her shop started up she had a handful of items on the menu and one of them was a watermelon dessert. It had been really challenging to keep watermelon on hand since her food hut was so small. Her answer was to buy up fresh watermelon, then slice it up and pulverize the meat into pure juice. The juice by itself was easy to refrigerate.

Talk about a good base to use for cooking. Monica cooked up some mixed drinks that were both alcoholic and non that used the watermelon juice as a base. The dessert she made was a watermelon pudding. Fortunately pudding was a dish you could make in advance and it stored easily. She couldn't very well ask patrons to sit and wait on fresh pudding to chill in her fridge. That dessert had become a fairly popular choice and she often heard customers say they'd never even heard of making pudding from watermelon before. That always put a smile on her face when someone walked away knowing that her restaurant had something unique on offer. If they ever wanted another helping then they knew just where to go. A lot of her dishes were like that. Unique flavors that fast food and franchise chains would struggle to emulate, and all at a price that wouldn't frighten anyone away.

Brandon looked up at her and it seemed like he was blushing some more. She laughed and leaned a little lower to the table and asked him again.

"Come on, why?" She repeated with a bright smile at him. He sighed and let his eyes fall back down to the menu.

"You're really... kinda fancy, Monica." He said, and her smile began to explode across her lips to her eyes. "I thought you had; like, a Gordon Ramsay kinda restaurant."

And she started laughing like a melody and Brandon blushed even more. She forced her eyes open and covered her mouth. It was then she noticed she had patrons turning their heads and she began to feel embarrassment creep up on her and she stifled her laughter and gave a good look at the bewildered boyfriend sitting across from her.

She rested her hands under her chin.

"So me being 'fancy' makes you think I yell at my employees?" She asked, still smiling. Brandon leaned back in his seat and shook his head in a panic.

"No, no! He was just all I could think of! I didn't think that at all!" He defended himself fiercely through the veil of red blush tinting the brown of his fur nice and rosy. If the table had been more narrow she'd have reached across the table-

"Lean forward, Brandon." She told him, and he looked confused for a moment. "Lean forward!"

Still looking confused Monica watched him sit up straighter and he leaned forward. The wolf leaned herself forward to close the gap between them and Monica took the opportunity then to quickly lift her middle and index finger to her lips and she kissed them. Before the young man could dodge she put her hand out and touched his lips with the fingertips she'd just kissed.

"I'm happy you think I'm sophisticated." She told him, and he slowly sat back neatly in his seat in stunned silence. The wolf returned her elbows to the table and clasped her hands together so she could go back to propping her chin on her knuckles. "But I don't yell at my employees."

He nodded, and she thought he looked sufficiently cute with that bashful look on his face. She would wipe that bashfully away in due time, but for now she'd savor the look he had on him. Her boyfriend wore embarrassment well. Monica's boyfriend. She felt warmer thinking it.

"So what will you be having?" She asked him. He looked back down at the menu.

"Can I pick something cheaper?" He asked shyly. Monica sighed, but couldn't help her smile. The wolf could give him this much. Her boyfriend would eventually learn that she wouldn't snap at him for accepting generous offers from the wolf that was now his woman. She had to mull that over. In her mind she was trying to think of herself as his woman,

but then again it wouldn't feel right to just let it be that way just because she said it was so. Monica would feel better if Brandon... made her his woman with his actions rather than her word alone. The wolf's word was good, but her own upbringing taught her that actions spoke louder. It was cliché, but she still found truth in the adage. She needed to give Brandon the opportunity to make it happen, and she felt her thighs rub together before she knew she was doing it.

"You can order anything you'd like!" She encouraged him. He ran his finger down the menu and seemed to settle on a salad. Monica watched his fingertip rest close to the Tropical Harvest. It was just a salad with fruit. It was her most expensive salad, but considering some of her other menu items it wasn't too bad a price. There were more expensive burgers listed on the menu so maybe Brandon thought he was making a compromise?

"I've never had a salad like this before." he told her.

"Want to try it?" She smiled. He smiled back and nodded to her. She clicked her pen and wrote down the order. "And what to drink?"

"Just water is fine, Monica." He said, and she managed to hold back another sigh. She pretended he was on a diet and left his order at just the salad. She put down her usual order she got for herself. It was a cheeseburger she'd have to exercise away later when she went jogging. Monica always made her own meals when she ate at the Fine Rind so she'd be doing the exact same today. Except today it would be her cooking for two!

It might be weird for her to abandon Brandon at the table, but at the same time it would be her making him lunch. It was a crossroads! The wolf clicked her pen closed once her decision was made final.

"Ok! Let me go and get this started for us. I promise it won't be too long, Brandon." She said. Monica really wanted them both to figure out good petnames. Referring to each other constantly by their given names would feel too formal for a dating pair!

"You're not going to have someone else do it?" he asked with a look of surprise. She giggled as she stood up from the table and stepped back around to his side. Monica leaned down tried to give him a kiss, but he squirmed with indecision and she got her lips on his cheeks. She pulled away and eyed him firmly, but with a smile. Brandon looked embarrassed and apologetic and leaned back toward her with his chin tilting up and lips out.



He simply did not know how to kiss to save his life! Her boyfriend looked so silly with his lips out and Monica lifted a hand to grab his chin and directed him right where she wanted him. Their lips touched. It was a light kiss, and she wouldn't have tried for anything more than that in public. Brandon wouldn't have known what to do with how embarrassed he was. She'd have him fixed of that in due time.

"I'll be back soon." She whispered and made sure that when she turned it was with a pivot on her heel so her tail would swish and brush past him. A careful survey of the restaurant told her few patrons seemed to care that she was paying special attention to Brandon.

When she stepped into the kitchen she got a few looks from her cooks, and Matt was patrolling with a grin on his dumb face.

"You stop that." She pointed at him as she walked by. He hadn't said a word to her yet, but the look he had was one of mischief. She didn't like mischief being in her restaurant, and especially her kitchen, when she was to be the victim of it!

"Aye, chiefy." He chuckled and went about his duties.

Monica made extra notes on the order and tore it off the pad and pinned it up along with the others so the other cooks would have some idea of what she was up to.

"Jimmy, I've got this order, but can you go and round up the ingredients for the salad, please?" She said to one of the younger cooks. He gave her a quick 'yep' and scurried off the fridge where they stored a lot of their perishables. While he was doing that she retrieved meat for her cheeseburger and found herself a spot at the grill.

She worked fast and had the ground meat seasoned the way she liked it and had it sizzling away. Jimmy had returned with the items for Brandon's salad and she shooed the fox away to get back to the other orders in the queue. While she prepared the salad she eyed the burger and stepped from workstation to workstation to prepare both their meals while weaving through the kitchen as her other cooks went about their work to keep customers happy and fed.

"What are you two drinking?" Matt came up behind her and rapped his knuckles against her shoulders.

"Water for him. Mango tea for me." She said, and Matt nodded and moved on to presumably fix her drink to save her some time. A quick eye to survey

the kitchen and she could tell that business was going to be good once again. Sundays were so reliable around lunchtime!

"Got a bunch of fries finished, ma'am." Theresa told her. The younger feline cook had just prepared a order of two burgers and was filling their plates with fries. Her restaurant served hand cut fries with a combination of seasonings. Nothing too fancy. Just salt and pepper with paprika to give it color. The fact they used fresh potatoes that they sliced up themselves is what helped make the fries better. None of that processed crap like you get at a lot of other places.

It was more expensive this way, but they were able to keep the prices on the food lower by capitalizing on the fact that their customers liked to buy desserts and alcohol, which they could always make money off of. If there was anything truly expensive on their menu it was their specialty drinks and desserts. It was easy to make those more pricey if you dressed them up correctly. No one questions why the exotic drink is a dollar or two extra, but they will notice if the burger is. The wolf often scrolled through online reviews for The Fine Rind and tried paying close attention to any complaints she thought were valid or if there was a pattern of anything that people seemed to enjoy or get upset by. She'd adjusted her prices a few times as a result of her dutiful surveillance.

Monica put the finishing touches on her and Brandon's meals and put them on a tray to deliver to their table. It was her good fortune that both of their orders weren't time consuming ones to make. One of her waitresses asked if she could run the order out to the table for her, but Monica waved her away. She could serve her own meal if she needed to, and it would let Brandon see the effort she was going through to serve him food even if he didn't have the chance to watch her prepare it. Monica lifted the platter of food over her shoulder and shifted her weight to keep it balanced. Before reaching the kitchen doors she grabbed with a free hand one of the folding trays they used to sit their serving platters on.

The wolf made sure the platter was balanced on her hand before stepping out through the double doors. As she navigated the tables she saw that Matt was standing next to her and Brandon's table like he was talking to her boyfriend. That just wouldn't do! Matt was surely doing or saying something to embarrass her. More mischief from the chief of mischief himself. He was just that sort of man.

Brandon saw her coming and smiled at her. Matt stepped aside and made room for her to serve herself and her boyfriend. Monica prayed she could pop the tray open despite her lack of recent practice with it. She gave a flick of the wrist and let one side of the tray snap free so the fabric straps snapped taut as the tray folded open. She kept an easy smile as she rotated around and brought the platter low until it came to rest on the serving tray.

"So you do remember how to wait tables!" Matt proclaimed with a laugh. Monica turned and gave him a glare, then lost the grim look and smiled before she looked at Brandon.

"I hope my manager here hasn't ruined your appetite!" She said. Brandon quickly shook his head.

"No! He was telling me you didn't wait tables very often anymore." Her boyfriend said. She really wanted Matt to scram. The wolf took the plate with Brandon's salad and sat in it front of him, then put her own plate in front of where she'd soon be sitting.

"Well, it is true I don't personally serve my customers very often anymore." She added, then sat down with the tray and platter still next to the table. She put her elbows on the table and laced her fingers together under her chin as she looked up to the watching terrier. "Mind taking those back to the kitchen for me, Matt?"

"Not a problem, Miss Monica." He chuckled and gave Brandon a polite nod before taking both the platter and tray away.

"He's nice. So he's a manager?" Brandon asked. She sighed.

"My best and most irritating." She replied, and Brandon looked curiously at her. She unlaced her fingers and waved it away. "My employees find ways to amuse each other and Matt's way is to see how much of my fur he can bristle."

The donkey laughed and looked down at his salad with a gave another curious look. She lifted a french fry and bit off half of it while she watched him examine his Tropical Harvest. The fries were fresh and crisp with the bite of salt and pepper providing flavor atop of the heat of the fry. The crunch of her potatoes would soon be joined by the crunch from the fresh lettuce in Brandon's salad.

"You do eat salads don't you, Brandon?" She asked him to clarify. Monica wore a smile when he looked up at her.

"I kind of expected there to be less fruit." He said, and to that she had to laughed. He'd picked the fruitiest salad she had on offer. She watched him take up his fork and begin to eat. Monica finished her fry and continued to pay more attention to him eating his salad than she did her own dish. She didn't need to enjoy her meal so much as Brandon needed to enjoy his.

The wolf was feeling something familiar as he took his first few bites. Monica hadn't expected this sudden rush of... need. She wanted him to enjoy her cooking! How long had it been since she last needed validation from her partner? Years. It had been years now.

Monica continued to watch, and he tried to make small talk with her about the meal. He complimented her, and she went through the motions of humbly accepting the praise, but inwardly she hid all her enthusiasm. He was smiling while he ate it! If he enjoyed this menu item she couldn't wait to drag him home and let him watch her make something special in her own kitchen!

And now her mind kept distracting her. Distractions, distractions! The wolf had done well by making her boyfriend a fresh meal, but she'd also wasted all that time in the kitchen instead of being with him at the table. Their time was limited today.

When they both finished eating they would talk a little more, then it would get awkward, and then they would go their separate ways. That's kind of how some dates went. She'd seen those dates play out in this very restaurant dozens of times but always as an observer and not a participant. It was so much easier to just watch two strangers flounder and flail about as they tried to court one another. For Monica it was now her turn to feel herself flail even though she felt she was hiding her little anxieties well. She'd developed a good poker face over her years as owner and operator in the food industry.

But that's not how she wanted this date to go! She'd enjoyed yesterday at the museum, and she wanted to enjoy today, too! Monica had to end their lunch date strong and drag Brandon off somewhere else. She tried to eat her cheeseburger without messing up the thin layer of lipstick she'd put on for the occasion.

Monica asked him about how school was going, and he naturally began to tell her about some of the things he'd working on. He updated her that his billboard project was coming along well, and she told him she was happy for him and that she'd like to see it when it's finished. Brandon bragged that he'd love to show her how 'awesome' it was. He'd apparently managed to find a high resolution photo of Marty McFly to use on the billboard.

She tried to concentrate on him, but she was such a distracted wolf at the moment and Monica hoped it didn't show in her manner. As she listened to him talk about his artwork she knew she couldn't take him anywhere that would keep them out late. He had classes in the morning and she of

course had her job here. That'd wasn't going to keep her from figuring out what they could do, though.

At no point was she going to let him jeopardize his education on account of 'a girl'. That tired cliché wasn't happening with the two of them. She let him continue to talk about his art in between bites of veggies and fruits while she tried to listen and pay attention between bites of her own meal. Her eyes were moving constantly from her meal and his eyes and she hoped the attention she was giving him would lure him into thinking she was enraptured by him.

In a way she was, but not quite in the way he might have expected.

Her restaurant wasn't going to be standing in her way this time. She had ruined one relationship already with it. But if she was being really honest she didn't fully regret focusing more on The Fine Rind than she did her ex boyfriend, but there were reasons aplenty for why she quit using Facebook and social media a long time ago. Well, she helped manage the restaurant's social media pages, but she didn't keep anything for herself personally.

Lance had been a good boyfriend, and now he was someone's good husband. Monica didn't know why his name came up in her mind all of a sudden, and now she felt dour for it. Lots of bad memories were stuck to that name like glue. She had the misfortune of learning a long time ago that stress can induce muscle spasms. Usually around the eyes. She had that, and sometimes she'd get snappy. The wolf would blow up over something petty. Venting pressure in whatever direction it could flow.

Her ex had finally had enough after almost a year of trying to pull Monica away from working an almost constant 7 day shift. She worked herself to the bone. It was all she did. Even when she got home every meal she made was an expensive grocery affair where she would try out new recipes. Lance couldn't handle that their shared meals, as few and far between as they often were, were really just extensions to her job. He was left more as a tester for new dishes. He didn't want to be a test dummy for her restaurant anymore.

He threw down an ultimatum one day. She had to back up from her business and actually make an effort at being in a relationship with him, or he'd walk. She blew up at him, made several unfair accusations, and then he walked just like he'd threatened. It was over.

A short while after he'd collected the handful of things that were his in her apartment she found something he'd overlooked. Monica tried to remember what it was, but couldn't. But she did remember that when she searched for his number in her phone to tell him she'd found it that she

discovered two months had gone by. Two full months and it felt like there breakup had only just happened. It was like the passage of time for her had gone off the rails and flowed at a different pace for her than it did for everyone else. She'd doubled down on her work after he'd left her and just... worked.

She knew he'd gotten married because of Facebook. People posting updates and photos. Everyone she knew on there had lives. Jobs, too, of course. But they had actual lives that reached beyond their careers. It was only a little over a year after they'd split and Lance had found someone new, was engaged, moving on completely from the workaholic ex he'd left behind. Everyone else was moving on. Most of the people she had connections with she didn't really know anymore.

Are you really friends with someone that you haven't seen in two years? Three? Never talked, and hardly knew them even when you saw them because you spent so much time studying at culinary school, and then running the snack shack at the beach, then starting a small business, growing it larger, hiring people, firing people, preparing meals, opening the store, and closing it every day.

Monica suddenly felt a deep hurt in her.

"Are you ok, Monica?" Brandon asked, and she looked up from her plate. She'd been eating like a slow but steady machine while he'd been talking. He looked concerned for her, and she felt another pang of hurt. She nodded and smiled for him to cover up the skeletons she'd unearthed by accident.

"Yeah!" She replied. His utensils were laid to rest on his plate. Brandon had eaten the whole thing. That was good, she thought. He must have liked it. "Do you want to do something after we're done? I'd like to take the rest of the day off if you want to do something."

Monica was afraid now. She'd let her mind zig zag through old news and it painted a picture on her face that an artist like Brandon could probably read. He smiled at her despite whatever he'd seen on her face.

"Sure! I've got the rest of day for stuff. We can go do whatever you'd like!" He said and put some energy in his voice. She softened her smile and stretched her leg back out to his. Her ankle rubbed the inside of his shin and she felt him bring his legs together to catch her foot with both legs. Good boy, she thought. That's how a young man plays boyfriend. He catches the girl.

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