

< Chapter Four >

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Monica had to snap herself out of it. She wasn't going to let today's date be as awkward for Brandon as yesterday's had been for her! The wolf had gotten her fill of oddities at the museum so she hoped she wouldn't make an oddity of herself today. That meant she needed to stay in the present and now let herself become mired in old memories.

"I don't want to keep you out too late on a school night, Brandon." She told them after they stepped out of the restaurant. She was hugging tight to his arm so the young donkey could feel all her affection. Monica didn't give a damn if her employees saw her tail wagging behind her as they left.

"I'm a big kid, Monica." He laughed. She felt him tighten his arm so he tugged her elbow into his side. He was trying, and she smiled. That hand was resting in his pocket though! Perhaps that was her fault for not snatching it when they'd first stood up to leave.

"I know that, but it would be awfully poor of me to hurt your schedule. I want my boyfriend to graduate, right?" She pointed out, and she rocked her hip into his playfully. He nodded and gave a big, but very bashful smile. He was blushing and she could tell she was making him nervous. The wolf slipped her hand down and grabbed his wrist. His hand was plucked from its pocket and she slipped hers in with his so they were nicely palm to palm.

"Relax." She told him, and made sure her smile was nice and easy, and her returned it with one of his own. She continued by discussing their options out loud. "On a Sunday night around here there isn't much to do besides go to a few of the bars. They have some really nice ones since we're so close to the beach. A lot of people come here even on a Sunday."

"Bars?" He asked her, and she nodded and rocked her hip back into his for fun.

"Of course! I'd like to brag about The Fine Rind's bar, but that's not really what we're known for. If you want to experience a bit of the night life you can go to somewhere like The Red Morocco or Sunset Strip. Sunset Strip is named after the Hollywood Sunset. They've got all kinds of Hollywood memorabilia decorating it. It's pretty nice, but it's been forever since I've been there though. I usually go to the Dapper Dane when I want a drink, but I don't think you'd want to go there!"

She laughed at that last one. The Dapper Dane was the gay bar she'd been directed to by her brother, Austin. He was as gay as she was a workaholic. She always enjoyed going there since it gave her some peace of mind. Being able to sit and enjoy a nice brandy without having random men trying to buy you drinks was nice. She remembered having a fair few girlfriends that loved the attention, but when Monica wanted to drink she often wanted solitude to go with it.

"What? I mean why?" He asked her with confusion.

"It's a gay bar. They'd be all over you, Brandy." She said, and then noticed she'd called him Brandy. That was a girls name! It was also her drink of choice... She'd just now noticed that. "Brandon! I'm sorry! I was thinking of what I always order."

Monica hoped she'd covered up her mistake. He was still looking a bit confused.

"What's the matter?" She asked.

"I'm 19, Monica. I can't go to a bar." He told her, and she for a brief moment went slack jaw, then caught herself and sighed. Brandon was nineteen. She was dating a nineteen year old boy that couldn't drink legally in all fifty states of America. The wolf huffed once, but more at herself than at Brandon's age.

"That was my mistake. I got caught up in trying to think about things that were fun around here. And it's too early for any of that anyway!" She squeezed his hand and changed the topic to them finding a cab. Monica was making a mental sprint through her roster of known places for somewhere they could kill time, but she was struggling. Monica hadn't dated in so long that she didn't know how to! She took him to lunch, and that was the limit of her skill.

She never went out. Monica never did anything. Sure, she went to The Dapper Dane maybe once a week or so. Rest of the time she just went home and cooked for herself and maybe had a glass of her own stock of alcohol. And errands. She did her errands whenever they came up. Her life was so... empty. She pulled out her phone and started to check for an Uber.

"It's ok. Maybe we can just walk around and stuff?" He suggested, but she shook her head. She was still think, think, thinking. What's something Brandon would enjoy? Sex. That was too forward! He's an artist! Was there anything art related she could remember? A thought began as a spark and grew brighter, and then she smiled.

"No, I got it!" She ignored his suggestion and stopped them both. They were on the sidewalk and church goers were sidestepping around them as they made their way to and from the surrounding stores and food joints. "There's this little shopping center I ride by all the time and it has a..."

Monica struggled to describe it.

"It's like a little mom and pop art store. Maybe you'd like to go there? I'm sure they have some neat stuff!" She encouraged him with a squeeze on the hand. He smiled and agreed. She turned her attention back to her phone and finished securing that Uber. She took him again by the arm and had them both walk the street. They had plenty of time and she scheduled the Uber to arrive to pick them up at a bus stop further down the road. The timing would work out if they paced themselves. It was good fortune for her that this part of town had a lot of drivers.

She did her best to keep Brandon's attention while they sat at the bus stop until a white SUV pulled up. She'd picked the option most convenient to get them to where they were going. The interior of the luxury SUV was nice, and she shrugged off the fact that she was probably going to be paying out the butt to get them to going. That's what she gets for trying to grab an uber on such short notice.

The driver tried making small talk, but Monica mostly dismissed him and instead held a conversation with Brandon whom she noticed had been a bit more polite to their driver. She tried to amend her own attitude as they road, but the trip wasn't that long of one. When they reached their stop she swiped her card and gave the guy a bigger than necessary tip since she'd been kind of rude.

"I can help you pay for some of that tab, Monica." Brandon told her, but she leaned in and kissed his cheek instead.

"It was my idea to come here, Brandon." She reminded him, and took his arm again. "I'll let you get the tab next time, ok?"

He smiled and nodded, then she tugged him along down the sidewalk. They were maybe a few blocks from her apartment. She lived in a nice enough place to have a little shopping district nearby. If you didn't mind walking and toting a few bags along the way you could save a lot of money on fairs and gas just be hoofing it everywhere.

But truth be told she'd not been here in a long while. Most of her groceries weren't things she could pick up in the stores right local to

her. She went to a Whole Foods that was between her and the Fine Rind, and then a Target further beyond that.

"Hmm." She hummed out loud as they walked past the shops. Monica was seeing store after store on this side of the street, and plenty on the other. It was mostly women's apparel. There was a barber shop across the street. Hair stylist further down. Maternity apparel...

"What's up?" He asked.

"Looking for the art store." She told him. Monica stopped them both in front of the maternity apparel store and looked up at its sign. She didn't remember there being a store like this. The wolf looked back across the street and scanned the signs. She turned again and scanned the signs on her side of the street. She sighed, and tugged him along and into the maternity store they walked. Brandon was flushing red when she freed up his arm to approach the cashier.

"Excuse me. Wasn't there an art store here on this street?" Monica asked the elderly fox behind the counter.

"They moved location, dear. We're in their lot now." She replied, and Monica tapped the counter with her fingers with frustration.

"Ok! Well, thank you very much, ma'am. This is what I get for not coming here often enough." She told the lady with a laugh, and the older woman joined her.

"Well, we do good business here, deary. If you and your husband ever need anything we'll be here waiting!" The fox told them both and Monica laughed and took Brandon back by the arm and led him out.

"So much for the art store and I doubt you want to go clothes shopping!" She laughed it off. This was a huge wasted effort. Now they were further from the beach. They could have at least walked around and she'd have been able to show off the area to him better like he'd suggested before. Too late for that now, but there would still be other chances for that!

"Is there other stuff around here?" He asked, and she looked over at him and saw he was still blushing. Monica suspected he was still dwelling on being called her husband. The wolf smiled and planted a kiss on his cheek. She wanted to see him blush.

"Not really. Nothing that I think we'd enjoy doing. People mostly just live around here and then you have this little shopping area." She twirled her finger around to gesture at the surrounding area. "But we're actually close to my apartment! We can hang out there until it's time for you to head back home?"

He opened his mouth, but looked even more flushed. He nodded at her.

"I mean, yeah, if there isn't anything else around. I don't see why not, Monica." He told her. She could feel he was getting more nervous, but maybe that would disappear once they were inside and could sit and relax. Monica tugged him along for the slow walk to her apartment.

It gave her a chance to show off the surroundings though! She lived in a nice area and she was pretty happy with it. It wasn't too noisy and a most of the people didn't have kids. A lot of couples in their 40's and over with children having grown too old to still be with their parents. The thought of kids lingered and she remembered her age was 29. A slowly closing window, that was.

"That over there is sort of a new complex they built recently. They finished it middle of last year and I think it's barely filled half its units. I bet prices are probably through the ceiling." She commented and pointed at the large build across the street. It was a three story complex with maybe 20 units spread out across a block or so. The lot was previously a series of homes but had been rapidly demolished and had apartments erected in their place.

"Like how much?" He asked.

"Mmm. Knowing this area they're probably something over thirty five hundred. Maybe more. It's just because they're so new." She told him, and Brandon seemed to go pale at the numbers. She hugged his arm to her and rocked her hip into his.

"Well, come on!" She urged them both onward and kept up their conversation with her doing most of the talking. Monica was enjoying the weather and having her young man in toe alongside her. "And here we are!"

The wolf turned them down a new sidewalk and on in they went. Brandon was now getting to see the complex Monica had called home for the past two years. It was a nice pretty eggshell set of buildings with tile shingles in all manner of earth tones. It had a Spanish quality to the aesthetic. She walked Brandon down the front drive and through the open gate.

"You live here?" He asked her, and she laughed.

"Yes, Brandon. For about two years or so." She answered and led him to her building. She was on the first floor. Unit 202. Brandon fidgeted nervously while she unlocked her door and led him inside. She was quick to remove her shoes and put her keys and wallet away in the clay bowl she kept on the kitchen counter. Her decorative jar of spare change was resting next to it, which was over half full now. She mostly used her debit card, but when she would go drinking she'd pay in cash, and ended up taking home a lot of change as the months came and went. Monica began dumping her change in a jar in hopes she could one day dump it into one of those coin machines that count it for you. She was curious how much an old pickle jar could be worth when you fill it with coins.

"You have a really nice home, Monica." He whispered. She caught him standing just inside the doorway with his eyes looking around. Her apartment wasn't very large. For how much she paid every month to live here she was getting a one bedroom that leaned toward the nice side. Besides her bedroom she had a nicely sized master bath and a full sized kitchen adjacent to her living room with enough open space on the kitchen side for her to set up a small breakfast table. It was perfect for a single well to-do wolf like herself, or maybe a loving couple if neither of them were hoarders.

"Thank you!" She turned to him and leaned against him to kiss his cheek. He was visibly flushed. Her boyfriend was getting awfully nervous just like when they'd first started meeting up for coffee and she smiled at him warmly and patted his shoulders. "Go sit, you don't have to stand."

"Oh, ok." He fidgeted and moved deeper into the living room. Monica popped the clasp on a bracelet she'd been wearing and slipped it off her wrist.

"Let me go put this away, and I'll be right back. You can tell Alexa to turn the tv on or play music if you want." She told him and then went to her bedroom. Monica dropped her bracelet onto her dresser and started removing her other jewelry. She'd forgotten how much she'd put on this morning when she was getting ready. A ring, her nicest earrings, and then her favorite necklace. She gently removed the necklace and put it down easy on the dresser. It was a delicate silver chain with a set of five black pearls. She thought it looked great against the white of her fur.

When she went back into the living room Brandon was sitting with his hands in his lap looking like he was trapped in the principal's office at school. She giggled and Brandon watched her with curiosity. The wolf came to sit next to him and made sure they were close. It was time for them both to relax and enjoy each other's company! Brandon hadn't made any effort to turn anything on.

"Alexa, play my cooking playlist." Monica said aloud and music then began to play. The sound of classical piano began to roll over them both. It was her preference to cook to the sound of piano. She'd put together a playlist of her favorite pieces from several different composers.

"I've never used an Alexa before." He said then, and she leaned against him.

"Neither had I up until a few months ago. I think it's pretty neat." She told him. "So when do you think I'll get to see that poster of yours again?"

He was looking at her living room. Her idea of decorating was austere, but she did have some nice style about her domain. All her furniture was dark wood with subtle reds mixed with earth tones for their fabric. The carpet was eggshell with the lightest tan you could imagine for walls. Her ceiling fan had soft light bulbs that bounced light off the walls and ceilings and gave the room a rich warm glow. It was very cozy, and she crossed her legs so that the leg on top could brush up against Brandon's knee.

"Um, well, I think I'm getting close to finishing it. I've been kinda working on it a little, then stopping. Sleep on it, you know?" He said. His eyes were wandering around her living room and she looked down and saw his hands were clasped in his lap. Monica bit her lip once and gently exhaled.

"So I don't get any sneak peaks, then?" She asked and smiled at him. He glanced her way and opened his mouth, but hesitated.

"I mean, I guess I could save out an image of it and send it to you." He finally told her and she opened her mouth to reply, but then took her turn to hesitate. It was hardly late at all, and she was coming to the realization she had little to do in her apartment! Most of their conversations had been about his classes, or her cooking. Art, food, coffee, his college...

She hardly watched television. Monica got home and would browse the internet for recipes, then cook the ones she thought she could copy and improve. She spent so much time in her kitchen, and when she was out of the house she was either having a drink or browsing for ingredients at the store. This wolf did not have a wide variety of hobbies!

And Brandon was in college. He took multiple classes, and did not have a job. What did he do when he wasn't working on assignments or in class? He was nineteen... Internet and video games? She hadn't played a game since she was a little girl, and even then it wasn't her games it was her brothers when she'd get bored and steal it from him since she was the older sibling.

"I'd like that, but only if you think it's something you're ready to share, ok?" She told him, then leaned against him harder and kissed his cheek slowly. He smiled, but flushed harder. Brandon looked so nervous! It was like whatever ice she'd been breaking since meeting him was freezing right back up and in the back of her mind it frustrated her!

"O-ok." He replied. Very sheepishly he turned his head toward her and his nose hovered ever closer to hers. Monica smiled and kissed him. He didn't know what to do so she went slow. Unlike in The Fine Rind where she kept their kiss brief and more discrete she felt no need to do the same here in her own home.

Her tongue slipped free and she felt his teeth at the tip of her tongue. Her boyfriend tasted like citrus and mint. Her cooking and his toothpaste no doubt. She grinned as her boyfriend reached up and caught her arms as she leaned further over him. The wolf pressed her tongue into his mouth and slowly guided him through the kiss as his hands trembled over her arms. She pressed a palm to his chest and felt his heart racing beneath her fingers.

Monica knew she'd need to sit him down so they can expand their topics of conversation. She'd need to learn more about what he loved to do, and what he'd like to do. A broke college student probably didn't get to do all the things he wished he could, but Monica was here now and she'd help fix that.

She broke the kiss and dipped her head low and nuzzled him under his chin and buried her nose into his collar bone. He wasn't wearing any cologne, but she could smell the subtle aroma of a stick of deodorant. The wolf grinned and wondered what sort of cologne he'd pick out for himself. Even without it she thought he smelled rather nice. A masculine smell that didn't care that its owner was a nervous young man caught in a wolf's clutches.

"M-Monica." He panted her name, and she remembered a few things. She knew where this interaction was going, and that she was not prepared for letting her boyfriend taking her to bed without some kind of protection. She nipped at his fur playfully and let one hand drift low and she planted it gently over his crotch. Monica knew how to use her mouth.

She growled softly and shut her eyes to rub herself against him as his hands started trembling more and more with excitement as her hand rubbed slow circles over his zipper. She tried to cup him in her palm, and her hand felt the nice lump of flesh hidden behind all the fabric and stitching. Her own heart was beating faster. It had been so long! He didn't feel small in her hand, but she wasn't sure if he was getting hard yet.

"Monica!" His hands squeezed her arms and she felt him try to push, and she pulled herself back to open her eyes and look at Brandon. His eyes were wide like saucers and the trembling of excitement she thought she'd felt made her blood suddenly run cold. He was shaking and looking in every direction but her like he was frightened.

"Brandon?" She whispered. He opened his mouth, and his nerves stopped him from speaking with a stutter. Monica watched him swallow.

"I-I don't know what to d-do." His voice cracked. Colder. So cold, Monica felt so cold, and she yanked her hand away from his lap and leaned away. His hands left her arms and returned to his crotch to cover himself.

"I- Brandon, I didn't know." She told him, and he struggled with a reply that wasn't forthcoming. She started to panic. Monica didn't think he'd be a virgin. Why didn't she think he might be a virgin? He was nineteen, and he didn't know what to do!

"I'm sorry." He apologized, and she could hear shame in his voice, and her blood froze. She started shaking her head and her panic worsened.

"No, no, no, Brandon." She started telling him, and she reached out to touch his arm. She could feel the tension. "Don't be sorry!"

He stuttered something in reply, but all that came out was shame. Her boyfriend didn't know what to say and he was struggling to explain himself, and she didn't know what to do. Monica didn't know what to say!

All she wanted was for the relationship to work. She wanted a boyfriend, and Brandon... She'd gone too fast. How long had they been dating? A day? It hadn't even been 24 hours yet, Monica! How long had they even been meeting for coffee? She was panicking.

"I'm sorry, Brandon." She tried to say calmly, and reached her hand out to grab his hand, but stopped. She didn't want to reach for his crotch. Her hand moved to his shoulder and he sucked in a breath of air and she

felt a stab of pain in her chest. She just wanted this to work! "We can go slower, I didn't know you hadn't..."

Brandon looked down at the carpet.

"Why do you even like me?" His voice sounded hurt. Her ears fell flat.

"What?" She asked.

"You're, like," he started, and stopped, started again, "You're perfect, Monica."

Monica's thoughts stalled. She was still trying to put that together while he kept going and her thoughts could only fall silent as she listened.

"Y-you're in charge of this cool restaurant, and you live in this expensive place. Y-you could date anybody, Monica. I'm not anybody. Like, I don't understand! I couldn't even get anyone to reply to me when I tried the app." His voice sounded full of pain now and she felt her skin go pale as her fur. He couldn't get a single reply? She replied! She had answered him!

"I replied!" She insisted and squeezed his shoulder. Monica didn't even make him wait. She saw his message on her phone when she was at the bar! She'd seen his message when she was at the bar... When she was drinking. She'd replied because she was buzzed and didn't care. Her throat started to hurt.

"Why?" He asked. Her lip trembled. She couldn't tell him the truth. Monica couldn't. What in God's name had she done? Had he been feeling this way this entire time? Not knowing why she had stepped down to his level to greet him. All his nervousness and anxiety all because he was with someone who would have ignored him like he didn't exist. How many men did she pass by every day without even looking? She pressed her hand to her face and felt the tremor in her fingers.

"Because I..." She tried starting, but the lump in her throat kept hurting her. The truth was like poison in her throat. Monica just wanted to spend time with Brandon! She wanted to be with him and enjoy his company! Keep him close and have him. Have him in her life. She was lonely! "I don't want to alone anymore, Brandon."

Her eyes were wet. She wasn't lying. She just hadn't put words to it before. Monica worked, and worked, and worked. You can't stop and think when you're always moving. Brandon had made her stop. He made her think. She'd replied to him for all the wrong reasons, but after that he'd touched her! She wanted more of him! His face told her he didn't know what to say.

"I haven't gotten any other messages on the app, Brandon. Just you. I- I made it really hard for people to see me in the search." She tried to explain. It was true! "You matched me so I replied! I wanted to see who you were!"

He lifted his hands and rubbed his face like he was trying to hide his face and she grabbed his wrists and pulled them down. "Brandon."

"I'm sorry." His voice broke, and her heart with it. "I think I should go."

Monica couldn't think of anything to say to stop him. Brandon shifted and started to stand. She stood and caught his shoulders and hugged him. If she tried to say anything the lump in her throat would have come out as a sob. Very slowly he hugged her back, but it was the hug of frightened boy and he quickly pulled away. She had to let him.

"I'm sorry." He said weakly and made for the door. Why wasn't she saying anything? Her mouth opened, but she couldn't think! She followed him to the door, but stopped at the entryway when he passed through and vanished. The door was shut in front of her and her apartment was silent except the piano in the background. The warm light of her living room didn't help save her from the chill threatening to strangle her.

Monica turned around and leaned her back against the door and slid herself down to the floor. Her breathing behind she shake and she drew her knees up to her chest and buried herself in her hands. The sharp pain in her throat finally came loose along with her tears. What had she done?

Monday morning came and came to an awful start. She'd not eaten the night before, and she'd barely managed an hour or two of fitful sleep.

The wolf arrived to work at the same time that she always did. She had delegated the duty of actually opening the restaurant for business to her employees. She may have been the owner and operator but she didn't micromanage every single task. Her real passion was cooking. She had other employees to help deal with the menial tasks she didn't like doing, like payroll.

She didn't care if anyone in the kitchen noticed how quiet she was, or how rude. Every little action she took wasn't enough to wipe away the memories from yesterday. She kept thinking it over in her mind, running through every word, trying to piece together the mess. Every now and then she'd have to stop and swallow. Swallow, then breathe nice and slow. Focus on the meal she was helping prepare. Body language and hand gestures were helping her not have to talk. There were moments she knew her voice would betray her if she spoke.

"Good morning, Chiefy." Matt came on Mondays about an two hours after opening. Monica may not have opened the Fine Rind, but she was the manager on duty in the earliest hours until Matt or one of her other managers came in.

She only nodded at him in greeting, and he must have noticed her mood. There wasn't much Matt didn't notice. He had a keen eye.

"Kitchen in good shape this morning?" He asked her curiously, searching. Monica knew he was probing.

"Everything is fine." She replied, and move away to bring a plate of pancakes and eggs to a tray for it to be sent out to the customer. She snapped her fingers and got a waitress' attention.

"Good to hear, Chief." He replied and she could feel his eyes watching her. Everyone's eyes were watching her all morning. She felt the pressure all over her. Monica knew that most of them were aware she'd had a date yesterday. What were they thinking now? Were they whispering to each other about her and Brandon? About why she was acting like this now? The lump in her throat came back.

"Ma'am, we're running low on cremer." Wendy, one of her cooks, told her. She gave her a look. Another item to be ordered and stocked. "And we need--"

"Just make a list, Wendy." She cut the young girl off sharply.

"Yes, ma'am." The cat replied and retreated. Monica had snapped at her. She sighed and swallowed. As she moved about the kitchen she saw Matt coming and going from the front and to the kitchen. He was going through his routine and watching customers and helping staff.

Over the next hour and a half she snapped at her cooks more. It was getting harder for her to do it. Just working, and even cooking, wasn't

enough to bury yesterday. She hadn't even thought about what tomorrow would bring, or the day after, and the one after that. Monica was just reeling. A state of free fall where she had nothing under her feet to tell her where she was.

"Hey, Chiefy." Matt came up to her when she'd finished a breakfast sandwich and passed it off on a plate to be sent out. She tugged off her plastic gloves and turned to him.

"Yes, Matt?" She asked. He was going to ask about why she was acting the way she was. Everyone knew something was wrong. She was wearing it like a winter coat in summer.

"Mind me chatting with you in your office real quick?" He asked real low.

"Is it work related?" She asked him back flatly.

"Maybe half and half?" The terrier told her, and she couldn't hide her expression. She inhaled quiet and let it and shook her head.

"Then no." her reply.

"You've been snapping at everybody, Monica." He started, and she opened her mouth to tell him to stop. "Everybody is worried about you."

She shut her own mouth and inhaled again and turned away from the terrier. She started walking toward her office. Her feet were making the decision more than she was. Matt followed her back and she opened her office door and stepped in, then Matt shut it behind him.

"How was yesterday?" He asked her. "You aren't looking too good today."

"I'm fine." She told him and clasped her hands in front of her to rub a thumb into her palm. Matt replied with a grim smile and shook his head.

"You don't look it." He told her. She wanted to glare at him, but that would require eye contact, and she didn't want to look a man in the eyes. She exhaled instead. Her office was uncomfortably silent with the door shut.

"I want you to drop it, Matt. It's no one's business but mine." She raised her voice and managed to make it to the end before the lump in her

throat could stop her. The terrier visibly hesitated, and Monica could see his lips tighten. It was his turn to exhale.

"Are -you- ok, Monica?" He said very low. "Nothing happened to you yesterday?"

She stopped herself and eyed him with frustration. She shook her head.

"What? Just drop it, Matt." She replied-

"Some of the girls are worried about you, Monica. They just want to be sure their boss is safe." Matt exhaled and now he look more awkward and out of place than she'd ever seen him be. They wanted to know if she was safe? From what? From Brandon! The lump came back hard. All Brandon had done was flee her apartment because she tried pushing him somewhere he wasn't ready to go, and all because she'd been-

Her at the bar-

He didn't know how she could ever like him. The lump in her throat swelled and burned hot until it exploded.

"He didn't do anything!" She shouted, and Matt lifted his hands up defensively. "What I did was fuck up, Matt!"

"Ok, ok." He replied, but she couldn't stop.

"I fucked up! I fucked it up!" She started to feel tears bead up and her hands flew to her face. She clamped her teeth together and inhaled hard to stop herself before the lump and the tears could choke her. Monica couldn't bring herself to show her face in front of Matt. He was a man, and that reminded her of Brandon. She breathed deep while her teeth clenched tighter to hold it all in.

"Monica, go home." He told her. "We're running a tight ship. Take the rest of the day off. Christ, take off whatever you need to take off, Chief."

She pulled her hands off her face and ran her fingers through her hair. She couldn't look at him. Monica nodded quickly without saying anything.

"I'm going to let the worried parties know you're ok. Just clean up and sneak out the back. I'll keep the rumors from starting." Matt kept going. "Just text me sometime today if you coming in tomorrow or not. Get yourself back together for us, ok?"

Monica nodded again and turned away to find her chair. She sagged into it and put her elbows on the desk. Matt took that as his opportunity to leave, and he shut the door behind her. Monica felt the tears flow again, but she remained quiet the entire time until finally it stopped. Her fur was a mess. She would go home.

She found a makeup compact in her desk and looked at herself. She was a mess alright. A few minutes later she'd managed to clean her fur up enough to make it not obvious she'd been crying, but her eyes were still red. Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

Monica was reluctant to pull it out. She hadn't gotten any messages all day, and now she knew it would probably be Matt. She checked it. Matt was telling her that she didn't need to worry about managers being on duty. All shifts were covered. She exhaled. The Fine Rind was a tight ship just like he'd said.

The wolf slowly gathered the handful of things she usually kept with her, then silently made her exit out the employee exit in the back. No one bothered her on her way out.

Her phone was silent the rest of the day. Monica wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. For the first time in years she didn't feel like cooking for herself. The thought of drinking entered her mind, but she knew if she did that then she wouldn't stop at one glass and she was clinging to the illusion that she would be in for work the next morning. As the minutes became hours the idea of her putting in a full Tuesday grew more and more distant.

She ordered a pizza and had it schedule for an evening delivery. She had leftovers in her fridge she could eat for a late lunch.

At least the lump in her throat had faded away. She could sit on her couch and breath a little better. Monica could try and think.

Brandon hadn't texted her at all, but why would he? Yesterday was... a day. A messed up day. She wasn't even that distressed about him being a virgin. It didn't bother her now that she knew. The wolf knew that that could be fixed by going at whatever pace Brandon sit for them. That was fine. Monica could be patient. She wasn't going to worry about that part of their relationship. If they still had one.

She exhaled and slumped into the cushions while she let herself stare into the black of her television screen. She could see her reflection in the glass. Monica looked like shit. She felt like shit. Was there anything she could do to convince him she was earnest in her affection? Could she convince herself that she wasn't just fixating on him because that's the sort of person she was.

Monica had fixated on her small business. Obsessed over it. It destroyed her previous relationship. Had she done near the same thing to Brandon? Started seeing him on a whim only to fixate on making the relationship work just like her business? Work herself to the bone until Brandon and her had become a stunning little item? She wiped a hand over her fur and sighed.

She did want to make the relationship work, but she'd gotten fixated. Monica had pushed fast. It didn't matter how much of that Brandon had been responsible for. Wasn't she the older person here? The experienced partner? She should have known better than to rush into something with a nineteen year old. He came away having bitten off more than he could chew. Excited that this older, amazing, perfect, woman had decided to lower herself to his level. Just some nobody college student. It never really occurred to her that he might be anxious about how different they were. The reflection in the tv reminded her she was very different indeed.

And she'd even worn all that jewelry, too. Several hundred dollars worth of metal and mineral. She cupped her face in her hands and exhaled hard. She had to get up and move around. Monica looked in her closet. Did she own any plain outfits? Even a simple tee? She had blouses, skirts, dress pants, formal jackets, business casual, scarves, cardigans. The wolf counted three pairs of jeans, but they were all designer brand. What did Brandon always wear? Probably something cheap. If he had something nice it would have been bought with his mother's money.

Every time they'd ever met she was dressed nicer, and she knew damn well how she looked in a mirror. Professional, classy, well put together. It was a special look she'd worked damn hard to cultivate over the last several years. She wanted to present herself as her ideal, and make reality match the vision. How intimidated had Brandon been this whole time?

Had she been sober she'd have ignored his message on PickyPairing. She shut her closet and wandered into the kitchen to check the leftovers that would become her lunch. She'd need to cook fresh rice, she decided. Her phone buzzed over on the counter next to where she left her keys. Monica didn't check it until she'd had the rice in the pot and cooking.

"I'm really really sorry about yesterday, Monica! I freaked out and said a bunch of stuff. I humiliated myself and put you through all that. I shouldn't have acted like that when you haven't done anything wrong this whole time. I just freaked out and didn't know what to do and it all just came spilling out. I'm so sorry, Monica! I really am and I just want to see you again. I hope you still want me, but I know I messed up. Please give me a chance, Monica." Monica finished reading his text and had to sit down at the breakfast table. He was acting like he thought she'd break up with him. Like she had broken up with him. She ran her hands over her face a few times and took in some deep breaths.

This wasn't his fault. Exhale.

He still wanted her even after yesterday. Inhale.

She wiped her eyes and looked down at her phone where it rested on the table. She let out the held breath. Monica reread his message a couple more times. The wolf pinched her lips together in a tight smile that grew until she felt her eyes getting wet again. She lowered a shaky hand to her phone. He still wanted her.

"Do you want to get coffee tomorrow?" She replied.

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