



SHOULD WE TAKE A CHANCE  
ON LOVE OR RETURN TO THE  
SAFETY OF FRIENDSHIP?

# CALCULATED

*Chaos*

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

MIA MONROE

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## Blurb

A weekend of discovery unlocks feelings I didn't expect. Should we take a chance on love or return to the safety of friendship?

I'm a steady and responsible guy. I'm predictable, reliable... Exciting, right? I guess some people might call it a rut. And by 'some people,' I mean my friends and family. On the eve of my fortieth birthday, they stage an intervention. Traitors.

Led by my carefree best friend, Axel, I'm pushed into having fun (shudder), but I try to enjoy the experience for him. It's all innocent enough until my purely platonic feelings for Axel start to feel like something decidedly more romantic. Which is weird since I've known the guy for thirty years... Did I mention we're both straight? At least, I thought we were.

A discovery like this requires thoughtful planning. My reputation for being the reasonable one might help us navigate our new reality. Life might've been flipped upside down, but I'm the one to rein it in before I make a mistake I can't fix. Will a little calculated chaos help me figure things out, or will I go rogue and lose everything that matters?

Calculated Chaos is a brand new, high heat, low angst, **contemporary** MM romance from Mia Monroe, featuring two childhood best friends, a weekend of debauchery, double bi-awakening, opposites attracting, friends and family who meddle just the right amount, and an unexpected love decades in the making.



# Chapter One

HOLLISTER

“Are you seriously staging an intervention right now?”

That’s how the Friday before my birthday began. Me being forced out of my office by Sara, my assistant, my best friend, Axel, there to pick me up, and my living room filled with well-meaning friends and family.

“Intervention is such a harsh word,” my mom says, smiling.

“But an accurate one,” Sara says. “I’ve cleared your calendar through Tuesday morning.”

I cross my arms and huff like a brat while I sit on the couch, cornered by almost everyone who means anything to me.

“And I’ve got the itinerary all planned,” Axel says, winking.

“Oh great. I’ll be in prison or the ER by Tuesday.”

Axel chuckles. “If we do it right, yeah.”

My mom doesn’t even have the decency to look alarmed. “I’m sure you’ll be fine. You need to have some fun, Hollister. We’re worried about you.”

“Definitely worried, kid,” my stepdad, Jameson, says.

I scoff. “Worried? Don’t you guys think you’re being a little overdramatic?”

“No,” they all say at the same time. Even my sweet grams chimes in.

“When I was your age,” she begins, but then screws up her face. “Bad example, but the world is different now. You should be out there dating and having adventures. Not tied to your desk.”

“I have a lot of responsibility. Dad has—”

“Your father is hardly the example you should follow,” my mom says, cutting me off while Grams nods. “He has three failed marriages under his belt, high blood pressure, a borderline drinking problem, and a lot of fractured relationships with family and friends to show for all his hard work. Is that really where you want to be in another twenty years?”

Her words sting, but they’re true. His absence from the room is noticeable. In fact, except for meetings and passing in the hallway, I rarely see the guy. To him, I’m just another employee, despite my efforts to build something with him.

“No,” I answer my mom’s question. “But the audit I’m working on is due in three weeks.”

“And one weekend off isn’t going to affect you,” Axel says. “I heard you’re way ahead of schedule.”

I shoot Sara a look, mouthing “traitor” at her. She smiles sweetly.

“Besides,” Axel says, plopping down beside me. “You only turn forty once. I let you get away with a quiet dinner ten years ago. This year, we’re doing it my way.”

“Your way always leads to chaos.”

Axel smiles, mischief dancing in his eyes. “Good chaos. At least I’m not dragging you to Vegas. Just trust me.”

“Famous last words,” I grumble, but nod, already knowing I’m outnumbered. “Fine. I give in. I’ll spend the weekend not working.”

Axel chuckles. “Oh, you’re doing a lot more than not working. I won’t be sharing details in present company.”

“I appreciate that,” my mom says, standing and laughing. She walks over to me, squeezing my shoulder. “Have some fun, Hollister. Life is long and dull enough as it is. You’re too young to just throw in the towel.”

“Make hay while the sun shines,” Grams says as Jameson helps her up from her chair. “One day you’ll be old and all you’ll have are memories. Remember that every time you turn down free time for the office.”

“Wise words, Grandma Josie,” Axel says, hugging her.

She reaches up to pinch his cheek, and I smile like I do every time I see my tiny, four-foot-ten grandma gushing over my six-foot-two best friend. Axel kisses her forehead and she blushes like a schoolgirl.

I stand as everyone heads for the door. Jameson claps my shoulder on the way out with a smile and that look I’ve come to love and always wished I could get from my bio dad. It’s an expression of caring, of affection.

Mom kisses and hugs me, and as she heads for the door, Sara wraps her arms around me, squeezing tightly as she smacks a lip gloss-covered kiss to my cheek.

“Forgive me?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

She laughs and I smile. “See you *Tuesday*,” she says. “Happy birthday.”

“Thanks, Sara.”

Once everyone is gone and it’s just me and Axel, my best friend spins on his heel with a shit-eating grin a mile wide.

“The clothes I picked out for you are on your bed. We have an hour before dinner, so you need to hustle.”

“Dinner?”

“Uh, yeah,” he says. “Birthday weekend fun starts now.”

“Goody,” I mumble.

“You complain now, but by Tuesday I’m gonna be your favorite person.”

“You already are. I like you even more when you just let me be a pathetic homebody.”

Axel shakes his head. “Come on, Holl. Just let me do this for you. If you hate everything we do, I promise I’ll never plan another birthday for you again.”

I cock my head with narrowed eyes. Axel has been planning *something*, whether big or small, for every birthday since we met, which was at the ripe old ages of nine and ten. He’s only four months younger than me, but I’m like an old man compared to his exuberance for life. We’ve always been opposites, but somehow we just work.

“Okay,” Axel says with a sheepish grin. “I won’t plan anything major.”

“Fine.”

He throws his arms around me and kisses my cheek before shoving me toward my bedroom. My affectionate, outgoing, always happy best friend cackles as he leaves me, and I just shake my head. The most I’ve done for a birthday of his is a dinner reservation, but how do you meet someone at his level? Anything I planned would pale in comparison. Meanwhile, he stages an intervention and has a whole weekend planned. I’m damn lucky to have the guy in my life.

In my bedroom I find an outfit laid out that looks like something someone who is definitely not me would wear. Like maybe a tattoo artist. Or hell, even a guy in a band. Does Axel really think I’m wearing *skinny* jeans?

Huffing, I undress, peeling out of my sensible button-down and khaki pants. I decide on a quick shower to freshen up and hopefully find some sense of adventure for whatever Axel has up his sleeve.

While the water heats, I brush my teeth and stare at my reflection. I do look tired, and much older than my almost-forty years. Axel still looks like a guy in his early thirties. Maybe everyone’s right and I am getting old before my time.

I'm told I'm a good-looking guy, but it's hard to see right now with my overgrown brown hair and the bags under my eyes. It doesn't help that I live with a guy who looks like he should be in a men's fitness magazine. He isn't overly muscular, but he's fit. He's trendy in how he dresses and wears his black hair cut short on the sides and long on top, hanging perfectly in his face. He has tattoos and with his dark olive complexion and style sense, he always attracts attention. He should be cocky as fuck, but he's the most genuine, down-to-earth guy I've ever met.

Even his mind is brilliant, which he downplays and attributes to timing and luck. His app development company blew up, and he sold it for millions just two years ago. Meanwhile, I've been slaving away at the same desk in the same department for the last five years with only two raises in that time.

I sigh heavily as I step into the shower. I'm an accountant. My mind doesn't work like his. It's all zeros and ones for me. More than once since we became friends, I've wondered why he sticks around, but he insists I'm the balance he needs in his life. I guess he's the fun I need in mine. Fuck only knows how boring I would be without him pushing me from time to time.

Because of him I've traveled to places I would have never thought to go. I've eaten exotic foods, gotten high, and dated women way out of my league simply because he set it up. We've been by each other's side through every up and down, and the least I can do is give him my all this weekend.

After I'm done showering and drying off, I shimmy, and I do mean *shimmy*, into the tightest jeans ever created. They have tears carefully placed along the legs down to the knees. I've never understood the concept of paying money for jeans that are already torn.

I grab the black shirt and tug it over my head. It's partly mesh, exposing my skinny chest. I'm not so sure about this.

There's a knock on my door before Axel barrels in, a wide grin on his face. He's dressed in a similar outfit, but he definitely fills it out far better than I do.

“Wear these,” he says, thrusting his favorite pair of black boots at me.

I take them, sitting on the bed as I pull them on. “Are you sure I don’t look ridiculous?”

“I would never let you look ridiculous, Holl. You look awesome. Can I style your hair for you?”

“Yeah.”

“Sweet.” He’s in my bathroom and back in a flash, holding my brush and hair gel.

“I need a haircut,” I complain while he drags gel through my damp, wavy hair.

“Nah, this is good.” Just a few minutes later, he smiles. “Nice. Go check yourself out.”

I stand, walking with some trepidation to the bathroom, but I’m pleasantly surprised when I see myself. I look... kind of good. Instead of the bushy waves I usually sport, he’s styled my hair into something purposely messy. Not too shabby, even if I do have to stand next to a model all night.

“We should go,” Axel calls out. “Traffic is a beast in the city.”

I shrink a little hearing that we’re going into New Onyx. I guess I knew on some level. It’s not like there’s a thriving nightlife in the suburbs, but the energy of the city overwhelms me.

I find Axel in the living room, standing by the front door and holding my phone out to me. “I ordered a car and they just got here. Ready for this?”

Blowing out a breath, I nod. “As ready as I’m gonna be.”

Axel wraps an arm around my shoulders as I reach him, leading me outside. “Don’t be scared. It’s gonna be epic. Forty is gonna be the best year yet. I can feel it.”

“If you say so.”

“I say so.” Axel winks. “Oh, the things I have planned for you.”

I follow him to the car, losing the battle to fight back a smile. Axel really is the best friend a guy could have. All I have to do is follow his lead. I can handle this.



## Chapter Two

I've never been so fucking nervous in my life.

My plan to shake things up for Hollister is either going to be epic or end in disaster, and even with as long as I've known the guy, I can't predict which one is most likely. Holl likes museums and art galleries, live jazz and symphonies. He likes operas, for fuck's sake. Instead, he's getting nightclubs and exposure therapy to things he actively avoids.

When his mom and stepdad approached me with concerns about the direction he's headed, I knew I had to step up and push him—no, *shove* him—out of his comfort zone. He needs to see that there's life outside the office and it can be fun.

But as we finish dinner at one of the trendiest restaurants in the city that I snagged a reservation for by sweet talking a gal I dated for two weeks, I'm getting nervous. I can feel the tension pouring off Holl.

“Did you like your meal?” I ask, hoping to loosen him up.

“Yeah, actually,” Holl says, nodding. “It was intimidating at first though.”

“New experiences can be like that, but I'm here.”

“I know.”

He glances around the restaurant for a moment, taking in the dim lighting and silk material swooping from the ceiling. Tiny chandeliers dot the room we're in, but it's all contrasted

with stone walls and wood floors. Like someone carved a fancy restaurant out of a cave.

“Are my folks really worried about me?” he asks after a bit.

“Not worried,” I lie. “More like concerned.”

“Those are synonyms, Ax.”

I chuckle. “Okay, yeah, a little. You know how sensitive your mom is about your dad’s choices. She just doesn’t want that for you.”

“Yeah, but I’m not him.”

I fix him with a hard look and he exhales, slumping in his chair.

“Ugh. You’re right. When did this happen to me?”

“Slowly. It sneaks up when you’re too busy or tired to notice.”

Hollister nods, sipping his wine, then staring at the remaining crimson liquid as he swirls it in his glass. Silence lingers between us for several minutes while the cacophony of sounds around us plays out. I know Hollister though, almost better than I know myself, and I know he’s looking back on his choices.

Our server comes and I pay the astronomical bill. I still think about how different life was growing up, where budget was king, whenever I toss down the black credit card or rain cash on a hard-working server. We’ll probably have to hit up a food truck or a taco joint later. This was an experience, but not a filling one. Still, at least he liked it. I’d know if he was just saying shit to please me. All that matters is that Hollister has a great weekend.

“Fuck,” Hollister finally mutters, blowing out a long breath. “Talk about tunnel vision. I don’t even *like* my dad, and I’m morphing into him.”

“No.” I grab his hand where it’s resting on the table between us. “You’re not like him in any way that counts,

you've just lost your way a little bit. But, dude, you know you're not like him."

"I'm divorced."

"Once. I'm divorced too. Shit happens. That's not a reflection of your character. What is, is not learning from our mistakes, which we both have. We were young and dumb and pussy whipped."

I expect Holl to laugh, but he cringes instead. "I should've confessed a long time ago, but I felt too stupid."

"Confessed what?"

He drags his eyes up to meet my gaze, his face turning red as he squirms in his seat. "I married Rebecca because she wanted to get married, and because..." Hollister pauses again, shaking his head like he's about to tell me where the body is buried. "Because you got married. Fuck."

I tilt my head, completely confused. "What?"

"I felt left behind. I missed hanging out and all the time together, so I figured I might as well do it too. Then at least maybe we could hang out as couples instead of me being a weird third wheel."

"Fuck," I whisper. "I had no idea. You said you loved Rebecca."

"I did. In a way. Or maybe I just thought I should. There wasn't a damn thing wrong with her. She was sweet, funny, sexy." He rubs his forehead. "But what she really wanted, I couldn't give her. She wanted the white picket fence, the dog, and two-point-five kids. I thought I could do it, you know? I had the career, I bought the house. We looked at dogs and talked about ending protected sex. You know the rest."

I nod. The rest. Rebecca becoming increasingly bitter over Hollister's lack of decision-making about kids and pressuring him to make more money so she could quit working. His building resentment that he was pushed into a lifestyle he wasn't ready for yet.

"Shit, Holl. We were young. It's not your fault."

“Yeah, I guess.”

“Why did you keep that from me? We tell each other everything. Not gonna lie, man, that kind of stings.”

He cringes again. “I was embarrassed, especially when your marriage was going great. Your business was blowing up. You were on top of the world. I didn’t want to be the black cloud you worried about.”

Sitting back in my chair, I reflect on that time. Was I so damn clueless that I didn’t see my best friend suffering so much?

“Yeah well, I didn’t do much better, did I? I ended up divorced too. And why? Because I ignored Britt. She said I spent too much time at work, and she was right. I did.”

“She wasn’t patient enough to wait for the payoff.”

“Worse. She didn’t have faith that I would get here.” I lean closer. “Does that make us bad people? We were in our early twenties and we had no damn business getting married yet. We fell for the trap so many people do. But it worked out. Both of them found nice guys to marry and have kids with. You and I... Well, we’re happy, right?”

“If I was happy, would I be the subject of an intervention?” He smiles, taking some of the seriousness of his words away. “I’m glad this happened. I needed to see where I was going wrong. I’ve spent almost twenty years chasing my dad’s approval, just to find myself still without it. Instead of focusing on finding a relationship, I bury myself in work.”

“Hey, man, this is what I’m here for. I’ve always got your back, no matter what. You know that, right?”

“Of course, and same.”

“I know. So why don’t we get out of here and go break some hearts?”

Hollister grins. “I promise I’m going to do my best to have fun this weekend. I appreciate you.”

“I love you, man. This is just a rough patch. We’ll get through it together.”

“I love you too.” He smiles, his mood visibly lifting. “Let’s do this.”

## Chapter Three

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## HOLLISTER

Word to the wise. When you give Axel Penniston carte blanche on planning, he's going to take it to the limit.

I knew this, and I need it, but my legs are literally shaking as the car pulls up in front of a downtown nightclub. Pretty people crowd the sidewalk waiting to get in, and every time the door opens, bass-heavy music spills out. I'm extremely out of my element. My social skills are equal to a raccoon's, which is to say, pathetic. Sometimes I scream when faced with strangers. Internally, but still.

Chuckling, Axel grips my shoulder. "Relax. We aren't going to that one. We're going to that one." He points to the quiet, nondescript building next to the club.

"Oh."

We exit the car and cross the street toward the black brick building. It has really cool Gothic sconces by the door, which is huge, made of wood and metal with rivets and chain work around the frame. Two men in black suits stand out front a few steps from a car valet. There are no people waiting to get in and no loud music shaking the walls. I can't imagine Axel brought me to a jazz club, but bless him if he did.

Axel confidently swaggers up to the two men who intimidate the fuck out of me with their muscles and hard looks, but nothing scares Axel. I wish I could be more like that.



He flashes his bright smile at the first man. “We should be on the list. Axel Penniston and Hollister Burke.”

The man glances down at his clipboard, then smiles as his whole demeanor morphs into a more welcoming one. “Welcome to Chaos. You’ll be greeted inside.”

The other man opens the door, gesturing for us to enter. As we step inside, I find it odd that this quiet club is called Chaos when the one next to it is where all the noise is happening.

Walking into the foyer is akin to what I think entering an old Gothic mansion would be like, with wood walls and black velvet furniture, a candelabra hanging from the ceiling, and splashes of deep red. A vampire mansion, if you will.

Right away, a woman steps out from behind velvet curtains, her face lighting up when she sees us. “Axel and Hollister?”

“That’s us,” Axel says.

“Wonderful. Welcome. I see you purchased the VIP experience.”

“Yep,” Axel answers. “We’re celebrating Hollister’s birthday.”

The woman smiles, taking me in. She has hair so blond it looks white under the lights, and she’s wearing a full-body latex bodysuit, complete with platform boots. She’s pretty in an intense way, and there’s a small thought in my mind that I should probably be attracted to her. I imagine most men are. I wonder if Axel is.

“Well, you’re in for an amazing time then,” she says. “My name is Sinister.” She winks at me. “You’ll check in with me after your experience is over, but your guide for the evening is Maxwell. He’s our best, so you’re in good hands.”

We have a guide for a nightclub? I am so confused right now. Sinister—interesting name—pours us two glasses of champagne and hands Axel a stack of papers.

“Quick NDA and the rules of the club. I’ll give you a few minutes to look them over and sign.”

Then she's gone through the curtains again. Axel sits on the velvet loveseat, his attention on the paperwork.

"Uh, Ax?"

"Nope," he says. "Just trust." He glances up, smiling. "It's advertised as a unique sensory experience for the discerning man."

"And I fit that description how?"

Axel snorts a laugh, ignoring my question.

I sip my champagne, my mind filled with all kinds of questions. "It's not a strip club, right?"

He laughs. "No."

"Okay."

A minute later, he pushes the clipboard toward me. "Sign the NDA at the bottom. I guess they get celebs and shit here sometimes."

"Ah, okay." I sign it, not bothering to read it. Axel did, so good enough for me.

On cue, Sinister appears with a man beside her. He's dressed in a suit similar to the men out front, except his suit is tight and deep red. He has a head of wild black curls, big brown eyes, and a very welcoming smile. He's also wearing very high heels and bright red lipstick.

"Gentlemen," Sinister says, "this is Maxwell."

Maxwell bows slightly. "I'm happy to be at your service this evening," he says. His voice is soft and with a soft lisp. "Ready to get started?"

"We are," Axel says, gripping my shoulders from behind and pushing me gently forward.

Maxwell opens a door and the entire mood changes. There is indeed a club here, with music playing and bodies writhing together on a dance floor. The music is not what I'd expect though, with its pulsing electronic beats, sexy bass, and zero words. It's dimly lit, as expected, and I swear I can feel the hypnotic thrum of the music in my soul.

“Are you guys a couple?” Maxwell asks as he leads us around the dance floor.

“A couple? Uh, no,” Axel answers. “Just best friends.”

“Oh, how fun,” Maxwell says. “You must be very close then.”

Axel gives me a confused look. I just shrug.

“Yeah, we’re close,” Axel answers. “We’ve been friends for thirty years.”

“Nice.” He smiles then leads us down a hallway where we stop in front of a wood wall. Not sure why we’re getting a tour of a hallway, but whatever. “Obviously,” Maxwell continues, “that was the main part of the club. Guests can visit that area if attending with a member, but no part of the club is open to the general public.”

We both nod. I gasp, stepping back a little as Maxwell presses a panel on the wall and it slides open to reveal an elevator.

“This part of the club is members and paid VIP guests only.” His smile grows. “This is where the magic happens. Are you ready to be blown away?”

“We are,” Axel says, nodding.

“Sure. Yeah,” I answer.

Maxwell smiles, putting his hand on my arm. “Don’t be nervous. This is the safest place you could possibly be. We pride ourselves on what we’ve created here. Come on.”

We step onto the elevator with Maxwell, only going up one floor before the doors open and my jaw drops. The space up here can only be described as luxurious. Sensual. Definitely inviting. There are a few tables with chairs, but the majority of the seating in the room is huge, fluffy pillows. Various groups of people lounge around on them.

My eye catches on a couple near us. The man looks to be older, maybe in his sixties, with a tailored suit on and salt-and-pepper hair. There’s a petite woman draped over him, clad in a pink sequined mini dress, her long legs curled up so she can fit

in his lap. She turns her head to gaze at us and I realize quickly that person is not a woman. At least I don't think so.

“This is the lounge,” Maxwell explains. “It's meant for making connections, if you wish, or just relaxing before or after a scene.”

“Um, a scene?” I ask.

“Oh yes, a scene. As part of your package, you get twenty minutes in the dungeon.”

“Dungeon?” I repeat, slightly panicked as I shift my gaze to Axel. He smiles and shrugs.

“Maxwell, what is this place?” I ask.

He tilts his head. “You don't know, darling? It's a kink club.”

## Chapter Four

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Yep. I'm dying tonight. Cause of death? Mortifying my best friend. Hollister looks like he wishes he could climb out of his skin as he twists around to face me with narrowed eyes.

"Kink club?" he questions through gritted teeth. "Why did you think I would like this?" he angry-whispers at me.

"New experiences," I answer calmly. "That's all. You don't have to do anything."

"Do you guys need a minute?" Maxwell asks.

"Yes, we do, Maxwell," Hollister says, huffing a breath and putting distance between us.

I give Maxwell my best 'fake it till you make it' smile. "Long story short, he's in a rut. My job is to fix it. I'm pushing him a little."

"Good luck with that," Maxwell says, his tone full of sarcasm.

"It'll be fine."

I approach my best friend, bracing for his usual overreaction to new things until the logical side of his brain has time to accept it as a good thing.

"Holl?"

"A kink club, Ax? I know as much about kink as I know about... I don't know, quantum physics."

“No one is born knowing about quantum physics. They learn it.”

He hits me with an ‘are you kidding me right now’ look. “Please tell me what you hope I’ll gain from this experience.”

“Nothing but exposure to something different. Maybe we’ll both benefit. How do you know whether you like something if you’ve never done it? Remember when we tried sushi? You thought it would gross you out, but you found stuff you really like.”

He glares at me. “This is not at all similar to trying a new food.”

“It kind of is.”

Holl blows out another breath, walking in a small circle with his arms crossed protectively over his chest. “No one is spanking me.”

Holding back a laugh, I reply, “I’m sure limits and desires will be discussed.” I give him my best sheepish smile. “You only live once, Holl. If we hate it, we cross it off the list of things to do.”

Another second passes before he drops his arms. “I’m nervous.”

“I’ll be with you the whole time.”

“How much did you pay for this?”

“Can’t remember.” I grin. “Doesn’t matter.”

“Fine, but you owe me a night at the museum.” He huffs. “Let’s get it over with.”

“That’s the spirit.” I chuckle, wrapping my arm around his shoulders and pressing a kiss to his temple. “You never know. It might unlock your freak side.”

“I would be truly impressed to find out I have one.”

Me too, but I don’t say that part out loud. Hollister is my person. He gets and accepts me on a level no one else ever has, and it’s mutual. I get him. Without a little shove from me now and then, the guy would never leave the house except for

work. Over the years, we've talked about all the things he thinks are cool but not for him. Well, this weekend is about trying those things out. Step one, breaking out of his relationship and sex rut.

Holl practically stomps over to Maxwell, forcing a tight smile to his face. "Okay, Maxwell. Show us the dungeon."

Maxwell smiles, gazing at my friend like a lion at its prey. Too bad Holl is too clueless to notice when he's caught someone's attention, male or female.

"Oh, we do love a virgin," Maxwell says, dragging his hand down Hollister's arm.

Hollister sputters. "I'm not a virgin."

Maxwell chuckles. "To the dungeon, darling. Follow me."

Maxwell walks ahead of us, leaving Hollister dumbfounded for a second until he feels me beside him.

"I think he's got eyes for you," I whisper.

Hollister's brow scrunches up. "Why on earth would you say that?"

"Because he's low-key flirting."

"I'm sure he's just doing his job. It is a sex club, after all."

"Okay, Holl, but he's not flirting with me."

Hollister only responds by blowing out a breath to get his hair off his forehead. He's adorable when he's flustered. It's so funny to me that he isn't aware that he's attractive. I've watched countless women and a few guys over the years try to get his attention, but he's either not interested or focused on something else.

Maybe being in an environment like this one will open up that part of him so he can find love. He deserves it. I'll just conveniently ignore my own hang-ups about pursuing love and relationships. I'm not even sure what's holding me back.

Maxwell leads us down a long, dark hallway lit by medieval-looking sconces until he stops at a large metal door.



“You can’t get in unless accompanied by a staff member or with a password if you’re a member.”

He rings the buzzer on the door and a literal window in the door opens. A man peers out with dark eyes, gazing at me and Hollister.

“Hey, Maxwell.”

“We have VIP guests for the evening,” Maxwell says.

The man nods and the door buzzes open. Two large men pull the doors open and Maxwell leads us through like he’s some kind of royalty. He carries himself like he is.

Right away, it’s obvious we’ve entered a different part of the club. There’s heavy rock music playing but it’s not too loud. It looks like a haunted house maybe, all dark furniture and black walls with a massive chandelier in the middle. On both sides of the hall are rooms with doors. Maxwell leads us to the end room.

“This is where I leave you,” he says, opening the door and gesturing for us to enter. “Make yourselves comfortable. Your dungeon master will be in shortly.”

“Thank you,” I say.

Maxwell’s smile is predatory as he nods at me but fixes his gaze on Hollister. “Have fun tonight.” He steps closer to my friend, leaning in toward his ear. “Remember, you can be whoever you want in here.” He winks and leaves.

“See?” I ask.

“See what?” Hollister asks, his eyes moving around the unfamiliar items in the room.

I just shake my head. “Nothing, Holl.”

He moves to a lounge chair and sits on it, primly almost, like he’s afraid to touch anything. Chuckling, I join him. “It’s just a demonstration, okay? Don’t get nervous.”

Hollister nods, rubbing his hands on his thighs. “Okay. I can handle this.”

The door opens just seconds later, and a man enters the space, dressed in a harness and leather pants. He's wearing platform boots, his skin covered in glitter and tattoos. He has a thick beard, a head of dark red hair, and a septum piercing. He smiles, and it's oddly comforting on such a brute of a man.

"Hollister and Axel," the man says in greeting. "I'm Blaze and I'll be your dungeon master for the next twenty minutes."

Hollister trembles beside me. "Uh, hi. There aren't any women masters? Like, uh, what are they called? A dominatrix?"

Blaze's eyes go wide before he chuckles. "Uh, no. Why would we have women masters?"

"Why wouldn't you?" Hollister asks. "Don't people have preferences?"

Blaze steps toward us, kneeling down so he can meet Hollister where he's sitting. "Well, babe, men who come to gay clubs pretty much already have their preferences figured out."

My eyes go wide. Gay club? Oh shit. Oh shit. Hollister is going to murder me. It was a good ride. RIP me. Fuck.

## Chapter Five

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## HOLLISTER

As if this night couldn't get any weirder, I find out that not only did Axel arrange for me to attend a sex club, he picked a gay one to boot. He's a dead man when we get out of here.

"We, uh, we didn't know that, Blaze," Axel says, stumbling over his words.

"How?" Blaze asks. "A club for gentlemen with discerning tastes?"

"That could be, um, for straight men too."

"You didn't read the disclosures?"

"I did. It talked about consent and safe sex practices and confidentially. It never once said it was for men only."

"Yeah, actually it does," Blaze says, standing and putting space between us and him. "Paragraph four discusses our accommodations for trans men and outlines that no female identifying persons are allowed here, but that they can visit our sister club, Midnight Rose."

"I see," I mutter. "Well, we're very sorry to waste your time, Blaze, but neither me nor my friend are gay."

Blaze shrugs. "Doesn't mean you can't experience the dungeon. It's not like sex was on the table. You see..." His words trail off as he pulls a whip off the wall, dragging it slowly over his palm. "Domination and submission aren't always tied to sex. It's an emotional need. A part of you that needs to be fed and nurtured. You might even enjoy it more

without the pressure of arousal. You've got eighteen more minutes with me. Why not give it a try?"

Axel shifts uncomfortably beside me. I'm sure he's waiting for me to blow up, but something about Blaze's words hit a part of me that resonates.

"You know what? Sure. Let's do it."

"What?" Axel says, nearly shrieking. "You want to stay?"

"Why not? We're here. You paid for it. Blaze seems like a..." I glance at the intimidating man. "Nice guy. Sort of. It's a new experience, like you said."

"Great," Blaze says, not waiting for Axel to reply. He offers his hand to me and I take it, allowing him to lead me across the space to a large wooden X. "This is a Saint Andrew's Cross. I'll start by securing your wrists and ankles to it so you can get a feel for what restraint is like."

"Yeah, okay."

I watch as he wipes it down with some kind of cloth, disinfectant, I assume given the scent of alcohol and bleach, and then he grins, looking me up and down. I'm really second guessing my decision to stay right about now.

"Face forward," Blaze says, offering me his hand to help me step up onto the ledge where the cross sits.

"And this is for pleasure, not torture?" I ask, taking his hand.

Blaze chuckles darkly. "It's a fine line."

I shoot Axel a look. He looks like he's about to vomit. I can't be that mad at the guy. Details were never his strong suit, and his intentions are always good.

Once I'm actually standing on the wooden platform at the base of the cross, Blaze stands behind me, his body so close I can feel the heat radiating off him. Slowly, but deftly, he takes my arms and lifts them to strap me to the upper portion of the cross, before kneeling and doing the same to both my ankles.

As he tightens the leather strap around my left ankle, I gasp from the sense of restraint spreading through me. I'm a self-admitted control freak, and this is not cool. I can't just run or break away from anything he does to me.

My chest tightens and I break out in a sweat, breathing harder as panic sets in, but then Axel is there in front of me, his warm, different colored eyes, one blue and one hazel, calming me immediately.

"You're totally safe, Holl," he whispers. "I'm here, remember? You know I would never let anything bad happen to you. Breathe. I got you."

Nodding, I inhale and exhale slowly a couple of times while my heartbeat returns to normal. "Thanks."

"Of course."

Blaze appears beside Axel, his face creased with concern. "You want to stop?"

I shake my head, fueled by some foreign need deep inside me. "No. I just needed a minute. I'm good."

He searches my face then nods. "Good time to talk about safewords. Anytime you play, you should have one. It needs to be a word that you can remember under duress and not easily confused with words typically used during intense pleasure. 'Stop' isn't as good as something random. You can also start with the basic stoplight system: red, yellow, green. Make sense?"

"Yeah."

"Can you give me a word now? Remember, if you say the word, I'll stop immediately."

I scan my brain through the haze of overstimulation and nod as one comes to the front. "Broccoli."

Blaze grins. "Broccoli?"

"I hate it."

"That works." He glances at Axel. "Would you feel better with your friend watching where he can see your face or from

behind?”

My brow crinkles for a second. “Um... behind.”

Axel nods, returning to his seat on the other side of me. Blaze moves so close to me his breath warms my face.

“This is just a demonstration, Hollister. I won’t inflict any real pain or push you to a place you don’t want to go or aren’t ready for.”

“Got it.”

“Good. Now relax as best you can.”

I blow out another breath and nod. “I’m ready.”

I hear more than see as Blaze walks away, his heavy boots clomping on the concrete floor. Knowing Axel is close by helps me stay calm, but my legs are still shaking. My normal instinct to run from anything new or different is strong, pushing at me to say my safeword before anything even starts, but there’s another deeper, more primal part of me that keeps me planted where I’m at.

The sound of leather smacking against flesh reaches me and my heart rate kicks up just a touch. Blaze steps in front of me, holding a red object in his hand. It has a black handle with long strips of red leather hanging from it. He’s also wearing a mask now, with only his eyes, nose, and mouth showing.

“Anonymous play can make it easier in the beginning,” Blaze explains. “I also thought it might help since we’re both guys.”

I nod, but my throat is too dry to speak.

“This is a flogger,” Blaze continues. “The leather is very soft. It won’t hurt you.” He brushes the leather against my fingers. “See? Soft.”

Blaze steps behind me again, and the next sensation is a soft swat against my ass with the flogger. It almost feels like nothing through my clothing, and it only takes a second for my traitorous mind to imagine what it feels like on bare skin. Does it sting? I bet it stings, but there must be something pleasurable about that, or why would people do it?

“Are...” I pause to clear my throat. “Are people usually naked during this?”

Blaze chuckles, as if he knows exactly what’s happening in my head. “Naked or various levels of nudity.” He smacks my arm with the flogger, giving me a taste of what it would feel like on my ass, and a whole-body shiver runs through me. “It’s nice, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.”

“But maybe you’d like something with a little more bite to it.”

He’s gone before I can react to that statement. When he returns, I hear muffled conversation between him and Axel, and my chest tightens again, but this time, it’s not an unpleasant tightening. It’s... excitement more than fear.

Blaze swats me again, and this time, I feel it more acutely through my clothes. He appears in front of me, holding a long stick that appears to be made of leather too. “This is a riding crop.” Blaze slaps the crop hard on his palm, and I gasp. “Yeah,” he says, his voice rumbling deep. “That’s how it would sound on your skin.”

He’s gone again, but it’s only a moment before he swats me with it a second time. My brain is in chaos as my body reacts, my cock swelling slightly and my mouth dry as cotton. I don’t even know what to think.

Blaze presses into me from behind, his massive body easily covering mine, and as he whispers, his breath tickles my ear. “In this position, you could be fucked.”

“Bu-but I’m not gay.”

He chuckles. “A woman with a good strap-on could handle it too. Anal isn’t only for gay men.”

“Right.”

“I take it you’re a virgin.”

“No. Just because I don’t know much about bondage—”

“Relax, Hollister. I meant anal virgin.”



“Oh. Yes.” I know my cheeks are red since they feel like they’ve been set on fire.

“You’re missing out. Gonna flip you around now.”

I nod, exhaling slowly as Blaze removes my restraints. As he flips me around and I meet Axel’s eyes, my breath catches at his expression. He looks... turned on. I’ve seen that expression only a few times in his life and usually in the middle of some inappropriate activity he dragged me into. Like the time he took me to see a movie that was all about sex in public. That wasn’t uncomfortable getting a boner in the movie theater. Or the time he invited his girlfriend over and she brought a friend, and then several bottles of wine later, the two women proceeded to put on a show for us on the living room floor. I was both appalled and enthralled by their sexual freedom.

Not for the first time, a flicker of envy seizes my chest. I’ve always admired how Axel just does what he wants and isn’t afraid to experience something foreign or push himself out of his comfort zone. He doesn’t give a fuck about what other people think of him. He lives for himself.

And then there’s me. I sigh as Blaze works on my ankle restraints. I don’t even like to try new food, much less engage in anything unusual physically. Maybe that’s the part of me that made me stay for this demonstration. The part trying to get to the surface that I keep pushing down. What would happen if I let it all the way out?

Blaze is talking about floggers and crops again, but I’m distant now, lost in my thoughts about it all. That is until Blaze’s mouth moves over my growing bulge, his breath hot through the material of my jeans.

I gasp, looking down at him. He smiles up at me with a shit-eating grin. “Obviously, you can see what the front facing position is good for.”

“Yeah.”

“Also used for edging and CBT.”

“What’s CBT?” Axel asks.

“Cock and ball torture,” Blaze answers. “A little advanced for you two.”

“Why would someone want that?” I ask.

“To *feel* something,” Blaze says, his voice softening. “We all want to feel alive. Sometimes the world can beat us down, make us numb. BDSM is a way to push the numbness away and remember who you are beyond what the world told you to be.” He cups my chin while pressing against me. I can feel the bulge of his cock pushing into mine, and a shiver runs down my back. “And sometimes, we discover parts of ourselves that we didn’t know existed.”

I nod, swallowing hard. Blaze releases my chin, stepping off the cross and undoing my restraints.

He turns to Axel. “Want to give it a try?”

“Hell yeah,” Axel says, not hesitating to get to his feet at all.

I step down with shaky legs and an ocean of feelings about what I just experienced.

“Can I try that?” Axel asks, pointing to something that looks kind of like one of those barrel things gymnasts use.

Blaze chuckles. “You sure can, my friend.”

I settle into a chair, shifting around to avoid attention on the semi-hard erection in my too tight jeans. What’s got me aroused? A new experience? The restraint? Blaze? I shake my head, rubbing my wrist where the slight indentation from the cuff still lingers.

I don’t know the answer, but I do know I want to find out.

## Chapter Six

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## AXEL

Not gonna lie, watching my very uptight best friend get his ass smacked by a dude that looks like he can bench press cars has me keyed up. I almost couldn't stand waiting for it to be my turn, and part of me wishes I could just go all in. Take off my clothes and let Blaze show me the way. What the fuck?

“Straddle the bench, my friend,” Blaze says, gesturing to the large black apparatus.

I climb on it, getting situated, but knowing right away what some of the appeal is as my growing erection smashes into the hard leather.

Blaze does his speech again, talking about different toys and uses for the bench, but I realize something right away as the crop smacks across my clothed ass again. It makes my skin crawl with a desperate need to take control of the situation. I don't want to receive the smack. I want to deliver it. Well, fuck.

“Uh, Blaze?”

“Yes?”

“Time out? Got a question.”

“What's up?” he asks, kneeling in front of me.

“I think I'm on the wrong side of this.”

His smile grows. “I had a feeling. Want to try it the other way?”

“Yeah.”

Blaze helps me up, and I catch Hollister’s confused expression.

“Didn’t like it?” he asks.

“I think I’d rather be the Dom,” I answer.

Hollister’s face flushes. “Yeah, that actually makes sense.”

Does it?

“Do you want to try with each other?” Blaze asks. “Or if that’s too weird, give me a few minutes to find a sub for you.”

Hollister shakes his head. “I don’t want another stranger, uh, person here.”

Blaze nods, his eyes focused on my friend in a way that makes the hair stand up on the back of my neck. Is he hot for Holl? I guess he is kind of submissive, and that’s obviously Blaze’s thing.

“Yeah, no problem,” Blaze says. “So...?”

His question hangs in the air. Can I hit Hollister in a sexual way, even if it’s just to get experience? Would he let me?

“I’ll be your... um... w-whatever,” Hollister says, stuttering over his words.

“Sub,” Blaze supplies. “Play partner works too.” He offers a comforting smile. “Remember, guys, this is a benign experience. It’s not sexual. It doesn’t have to mean anything outside of these walls.”

We both nod. Hollister stands, shaking his shoulders, then he shifts his eyes to me, silently pleading with me to help him through this. I’ve seen the look a thousand times.

“I got you, Holl,” I whisper.

He exhales, walking over to the bench and climbing on without saying a word. Blaze walks me through the restraints, and I’m well aware of Hollister’s shaky breaths and soft gasps every time I secure the bindings. I think I unexpectedly helped us each find a new kink. Go figure.

Blaze pulls my attention back as he explains how to position Hollister, or whoever my play partner is, for full effect, and my mind unhelpfully offers a visual of my best friend, naked and splayed over this bench, ready to accept whatever happens to him.

I cough at the unexpected image.

“You okay?” Blaze asks.

“Yep. Tickle in my throat.” I smile, even though I’m uncomfortably warm.

“There are flat ones that are similar,” Blaze explains. “Easier, in my opinion, for more varieties of sex.” He pulls on a rope above Hollister’s back, lifting him slightly. “From this position, blow jobs are good.”

Hollister, cheeks red and lips parted, gazes up at me, breathing through it. He looks kind of... peaceful. Huh.

“Is it uncomfortable?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No.”

“Want to give him a few swats?” Blaze asks, handing me the crop.

I look to Holl for the answer, and he nods, flicking his tongue over his lips.

Taking the crop from Blaze, I run it over my palm a few times while trying to switch the image of Hollister out for a woman, any woman, but it’s not happening. Fine. I can do this. Me and Holl do everything together. Why not practice before either of us tries the real thing? Am I thinking of trying the real thing? Damn.

“I’m gonna do it now, Holl.”

He nods, blowing out a breath just as I crack the rod across his ass. He gasps, then hangs his head. I can hear Blaze check in with him, see them discussing, but I can’t move, too struck by the heat spreading through my chest and down my legs.

“He’s good,” Blaze says. “One more.”

I nod, almost on autopilot as I lift the crop and smack it on his ass again. I imagine for a moment the sound it would make on flesh, the pained moan that would escape the person's lips, the mark it would leave behind. How the fuck am I almost forty years old and I never realized this might be a thing I'm into?

"Uh, one more?" Hollister asks, his voice weak. "Please?"

With wide eyes, I snap my head up to look at Blaze, who's standing near Hollister's face with a sly smirk on his lips. He nods, gesturing for me to do what Holl asked me to do.

"Uh..." I murmur.

"A little harder," Hollister mumbles.

I stare at Hollister's ass while I contemplate using the crop again. His legs tremble but his knees are resting on pads to keep him stable.

"Do you want me to take over?" Blaze offers, and for some reason my stomach twists unpleasantly.

"I got it." I clear my throat, raising the crop, and with a deep exhale smack it hard on the fleshiest part of Hollister's ass.

Hollister gasps, then moans as his body slumps over the bench. I drop the crop and hurry in front of him, dropping to my knees and lifting his face with my fingers under his chin. "Are you okay?"

A dopey, relaxed smile spreads across his features. "Never better."

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After we thank Blaze and leave the dungeon, Maxwell is waiting to show us the rest of the club, which includes a sauna, Jacuzzi, and rooms where you can hook up privately or be watched by an audience. There's a higher floor with a stage where they have exhibitions and training sessions and a few more private play rooms.

Both of us are quiet the rest of the tour, thanking Maxwell and accepting the membership brochures before we step outside again. The sudden rush of cooler air and music is startling against my heated skin.

I text the driver to bring the car, and as we stand on the sidewalk waiting, it feels like one of us should say something but neither of us do. I had plans for after this—a trip to the sex store, a decadent dessert at the city's best bakery that's open all night, and a final stop at a jazz club just to bring a smile to his face, but I know him well, and he's done. So am I, to be honest.

The car pulls up a minute or two later and we climb in, still silent. He's not freaking out, which is almost more concerning. Hollister's typical reaction to things he doesn't understand is panic attacks and hysterics, but he's oddly quiet, calm even.

I steal a glance at him to find him staring out the window, chewing on his bottom lip. I guess I just need to give him space. He found out he's probably a sub tonight and I found out the opposite. I'm wondering if there were clues I never paid attention to before. The only tangible thing I remember is that wild girl I dated years ago—Stacy. She was always trying something crazy and I agreed to let her handcuff me to the bed. The loss of control was an instant boner killer. But damn, that was, like, five years ago and I've never thought of it until now.

I've never once thought it would be fun to tie someone up or smack them other than some playful spanking during sex that the woman asked for. Never considered sex toys or furniture.

But I can't deny how my body reacted to what we did tonight. Pretty sure Hollister is going through the same thing.

When we pull up in front of our house thirty minutes later, I have to nudge Hollister to break him from his trance. He looks at me, confused, before nodding when he sees where we are.

We enter the house, still locked in silence, and hover in the entryway, facing each other wordlessly. After what feels like



forever, Hollister finally speaks.

“Uh, so um...” He exhales, dragging a hand through his hair. “Tonight was different.”

“Yeah.” I slide my hands into my front pockets. “For me too.”

Hollister nods. “I think I just want to go to bed.”

“No problem. I hope it was okay.”

He smiles, unraveling part of the tension in my chest. “It was good. Interesting. The night ended earlier than I thought it would.”

“I figured that was enough stimulation. You’re not mad about the whole gay thing, right?”

“I’m not mad about anything.”

“Good.” I open my arms to him. We always hug goodnight. Or, mostly I force a hug on him.

He chuckles, stepping forward to allow me to squeeze him and lift him off the ground. Normally I kiss his cheek or forehead, but something about that seems like too much tonight, given the weight of what happened earlier.

“Night, Ax.”

“Night, Holl.”

I watch him disappear down the hall before hauling ass to the kitchen, where I guzzle several glasses of water. Everything feels off center. Untethered. Like I lost my balance somehow. This night was supposed to be about exposing Hollister to new things, so why do I feel like the one who discovered something about himself?

I stumble down the hall to my room, kicking off my shoes and falling into bed fully clothed, my body still tingling from the thrill of the crop in my hand. The knowledge that Hollister’s safety and pleasure was in my control left me lightheaded. Am I a Dom? I think there’s only one way to find out, and that scares the hell out of me.

# Chapter Seven

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HOLLISTER

“Rise and shine, twinkle toes.”

Groaning, I pull the blankets over my head. “No.”

The mattress dips beside me and then Axel is tugging the blankets off my head, reaching under them to tickle me. He knows I hate being tickled.

“Ax,” I grumble. “Why so early?”

“Because it’s not early,” he says close to my ear. “It’s almost ten and we have things to do today.”

“Ten?” I bolt upright. “Why’d you let me sleep so long?”

“Because you obviously needed it and it’s your birthday weekend.” He grins, gesturing to the mug of coffee on my nightstand. “Got you something you need for this morning.” He lifts a small gift-wrapped package from the bed. “Open it.”

Smiling as all my tension melts, I take the package and gently tear at the wrapping paper. It’s a book I’ve had my eye on for weeks, but wouldn’t let myself get. I’ve been known to lose days inside a good book, and I have too much going on at work for that.

“Thanks, Ax.” I clear my throat, which is suddenly clogged with affection. “You just get me, don’t you?”

“Sure do. Take an hour to read and enjoy your coffee. Then dress casually and meet me in the living room.”

“Got it.”

Axel reaches up, mussing my hair. The morning sunlight peeking through the crack in my curtains catches his eyes just right. Girls always go wild when they figure out his eyes are different colors. It's just one more thing that makes Axel unique.

He leaves my room without another word. I lift my mug and take a sip, closing my eyes for a moment as the hot liquid warms my throat. The events of last night rush back, making my tummy swirl.

I don't know what to make of it. It was all so... stimulating. Which I guess is the point, but I didn't expect to have any kind of reaction to it. Does Axel see something in me that I don't? He's always had a way of getting to the parts I keep tucked away, but this was... well, unexpected, to put it mildly.

I allow my thoughts to drift, replaying my sexual history, searching it for clues that I enjoy being restrained, but nothing comes to me. Probably because it's never once come up. I've never met a woman who wanted to do anything more than your standard vanilla positions.

Sex is... just something people do, I suppose. It's never been high on my list of needs, but then, why would it be? I can get the job done alone without all the hassle. First dates, awkward mornings, getting to know each other (cringe), and the inevitable 'this isn't working' talk. I'm not exactly excited to go through that routine again.

But there's always been this niggle at the back of my mind that maybe I'm missing something. Other guys act like fucking is equivalent to breathing. They talk about pussy like there's nothing better on the planet, which, in my experience, just isn't the case. I mean, it's nice—warm, soft, all good things—but it doesn't consume my thoughts. I don't even watch porn. So fake.

Not for the first time, I question whether something about me is different from other men. Sipping my coffee, I let the memories I always shove away come back.

All the times I avoided making out with girls at parties while my friends couldn't wait.

How long it took me to lose my virginity when everyone else was way ahead of me.

The disappointment I felt when it finally did happen and it wasn't as life-changing as I'd hoped.

The detachment I feel when guys talk about women and sex and all the stuff they go on about.

I mean, it's not like I don't have a sex drive or feel aroused. I do. Often. I just don't go out of my way for it. I don't *need* it the way it seems other guys do. Maybe that's why I've always been comfortable with Axel. While he's certainly more sexually active than I am, he doesn't have a one-track mind. He has lots of interests and fits dating in when he feels like it.

But this is the one topic we don't discuss very much. He knows everything about me, but not that I feel so apathetic towards sex with other people. Jerking off once a week is enough for me. Is that normal?

Then there's what happened last night. Normally, new environments close me off, but there was something intriguing about it all. I was drawn to it, and I can't lie to myself and say I wasn't turned on by the restraints. It was like meeting a new part of myself.

Now to decide what I want to do about it.

Thirty minutes later, new book forgotten for now, I venture into the living room dressed in khakis and a white polo shirt. Axel is sitting on the couch with what looks like a book on his lap. I pause in the hallway, watching him unseen and realizing that I'm seeing him in a new light after last night. He's not only my sweet, kind of dopey but super smart friend. He's protective and strong. He's curious and has a dominant energy I never really noticed before.

"Hey, Ax."

He turns his head, his face lighting up with a smile. "Come here."

I walk over and take a seat next to him. He hands me the small brown notebook.

“I was thinking about this when we all decided we had to intervene for your birthday,” Axel explains, his tone soft and careful. “I know you well and I know that jumping blindly into things is uncomfortable, so it means a lot that you trusted me to guide you last night.”

“I’ve always trusted you, Ax.”

“I know.” He blows out a breath. “A couple of weeks ago I found this podcast about taking risks and pushing out of your comfort zone. I’ve been feeling kind of stuck since I sold my company, and I don’t really know what to do next now that I’m not motivated by money.”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“Yeah, so anyway, they had this journal for sale. I bought two on impulse but then just kind of sat on them. It finally dawned on me that this is the right time to give you yours.”

I open the leather-bound book and peer inside. As I flip through pages, I see questions prompting me to think about how to take risks, push my limits, explore my imagination.

“I figured it could be good for both of us. Maybe we can help each other,” Axel says.

“Yeah, this is... cool. I like it.”

Axel smiles, gripping my shoulder. “Maybe with some planning, it would be easier.”

I nod, still flipping pages. It gives me ideas right away. I liked how I felt last night. I liked being pushed. “Definitely.”

“Good. Well, we have brunch and then an afternoon of things you hate.”

I chuckle. “Sounds perfect.”

# Chapter Eight

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## AXEL

Driving to the brunch venue, I struggle to keep my attention on the road and not my thoughts. Last night shifted something in me. I set it up expecting to give Hollister a little push to get back in the dating scene. He's such a good guy. He's thoughtful and attentive. He can even be funny. He'd make a great partner for someone.

Turns out the evening had more impact on me than I intended. I honestly thought it was gonna be kind of funny and we'd laugh through the whole thing like teenagers in a sex ed class, but yeah, there wasn't any laughing.

My skin still tingles when I remember the feel of the leather crop in my hand and the way it lit me up when I swatted Hollister with it. A shiver works its way down my spine when memories of Holl's whimpering pleas for "more" and "harder" flash in my mind.

A loud honk from the car behind me startles me back into the moment. The light's green, so I drive forward.

"You okay?" Hollister asks.

"Yeah." I chuckle. "Totally fine."

"Good."

Fuck. I don't even remember driving to this point. Better check in before the weekend ends in the ER.

"Is it about last night?" Holl asks a few seconds later. "You're distracted."



“Oh, um, yeah, kind of. I realized I, um, might have some tendencies I wasn’t aware of.”

Hollister laughs, nodding his head, but doesn’t say much else. I spot the venue sign and get in the left lane to make the turn, thankful for the distraction. I talk to Holl about everything, but I’m not ready to talk about this.

I don’t know how to tackle the fact that I was turned on by the scene. Turned on by seeing my best friend strapped down and waiting for *me* to give him what he needed. Fucking jealous when Blaze offered to take the crop from me and handle Hollister, and worse, the disorienting emotions that ran through me watching Blaze handle Hollister in the first place. I can’t talk about what I don’t understand.

“Here we are,” I announce the obvious.

Hollister peers out the front window at the nondescript brick building. “This is brunch?”

“Yeah. Brunch and a show. Let’s go.”

He chuckles as he exits the car. “Ah, the show. I should’ve realized it wouldn’t be just a meal.”

I wink at him, wrapping my arm around his shoulders and pulling him into me like I always do. “It should be fun.”

He nods, but I know he’s nervous about what I’m going to spring on him this time. He’s always nervous. That’s the whole point of this weekend. To loosen the guy up. He works hard and deserves to have some fun.

We enter the building, signing in and then being led to our table, which is right in front of the stage. There are already a lot of people here and soon enough the place is full. The stage has a runway down the center and a pole in the middle. This should be interesting.

“Gonna tell me what this is?” Hollister asks, his eyes darting around the room.

“Drag brunch. We’ve talked about how we can be better allies for the LGBTQ+ community before, so I figured this was a good start.”

Hollister smiles, his shoulders dropping. Did he think it was a sex show? I guess after last night he might've.

“Great choice,” he says, smiling. He lifts his water glass, holding it out to me.

I lift mine too.

“To new experiences,” he says.

“I'll drink to that.”

## Chapter Nine

## HOLLISTER

By the time I crack my eyes open on Monday morning, I feel like I'm returning from a long-ass vacation, both relaxed and exhausted. I have no idea what's on the books for today, but Axel warned me last night that he had one more thing planned.

I climb out of bed and shuffle to the bathroom attached to my room. We chose this house specifically for the two primary suites, even though it was more than I wanted to spend. Axel nudged me with all his cost versus benefit points. The man does know how to get to my accountant heart.

As I brush my teeth, I force my gaze up to my reflection. I'm forty fucking years old today. Damn. My life isn't at all how I thought it would be as a bright-eyed teenager. Okay, semi-bright. I've always been a little more serious and grounded than my peers. But divorced, single, living with Axel, and still slaving away at a desk job to live up to my impossible-to-please father's expectations was never part of the vision.

Before that reality took over, I had plans to finish college, go on to graduate school, and then pursue my first love—cooking. A heavy weight settles over me. It's been so long since I've even had time to cook for myself, much less pursue it as a career. I didn't want to be just a chef though, which made my goals even more unrealistic. No way was I working for someone else's success. And frankly, with the failure rate of restaurants, it didn't make sense fiscally. I wouldn't be my father's son if I didn't consider that.

Not for the first time, I wonder what it is about me that's so desperate for my father's approval. Why aren't I happy enough to have my mom and stepdad's support? Why do I care about *anyone's* approval but my own? That's probably a question best tackled by a therapist, but I'll never see one. While I think therapy is a great tool, I know for a fact I would never be able to open up my inner thoughts to a stranger. Nope. No way.

After I shower and throw on some clothes, I venture out to the living room to see what Axel has planned for me today. Saturday's drag brunch was hilarious and something I'd definitely do again. Later that evening, we had dinner at the trendiest Japanese restaurant in the city, and Axel did all the ordering to make sure I tried things out of the norm for me. It was okay.

Yesterday was kind of fun. He took me to a dispensary for a lesson on cannabis, and I walked out with some edibles to start with. I've never been against it for *other* people, but again, the loss of control makes me nervous. At least he let me out of using them last night.

Gah, I sound so ungrateful. Axel is the best friend a guy could hope for, especially a guy like me. If it weren't for him, I'd probably be an antisocial hermit. He's the one who dragged me to college parties and introduced me to pretty girls. He's the one who takes me to movies, restaurants, and anything else of interest in the city. He *likes* spending time with me. I should show him how much he means to me even if it's hard for me to display it.

He comes around the corner from the kitchen, smiling when he sees me. "Sleep well?"

"Yeah, it was good. You?"

"Yep. I was high as a kite."

I snort a laugh. "Good for you."

Handing me a travel mug, he tilts his head toward the door. "We should get going."

"And where is that?"

“Spa day. You earned it after enduring this weekend with me.”

I scrunch my nose. “Spa day?”

“Yeah, you know, pampering. Men deserve it too. Don’t get hung up on how society makes all the good shit seem like it’s for women only. It’s not.”

“No, I know. I just never thought...” The words trail off as the motive becomes clear. “Yeah, okay. Let’s do this.”

“Atta boy.” Axel wraps an arm around my shoulders, pulling me into him, and plants a kiss on my temple.

It’s a comforting gesture, something he’s always done, and he’s the only person I allow to freely smother me in affection. It’s just how he is, and I would never change it.

“Hey, Ax?” I say as we step out of the house.

“Yeah?”

“I’m really lucky to have you. I just want to make sure you know I appreciate you.”

He grins. “I know that.”

“Good.”

I really am a lucky man. Maybe it’s time I start acting like it.

The drive to the spa is a quiet one and my guess is that Axel is replaying the weekend too. He has a tendency to drift away at times, but I’ve learned he’s just thinking. Back when we were younger, I initially thought he was the kind of guy that just let everything slide off, while every thought I had stuck to me like glue.

I discovered that’s not true though. He thinks a lot. It’s just that you have to know him well to notice it. Otherwise all you’ll ever see is happy-go-lucky Axel.

Twenty minutes later, he pulls into the parking lot of the spa I often pass on my way to work if I choose the side roads and not the freeway. Can’t lie and say I’ve never wondered

what the inside looks like, because the outside is the opposite of what I think of when I picture a spa.

It's got an industrial vibe to it, with exposed brick walls and black metal fixtures. Instead of that weird instrumental music I heard the time I dropped off a girlfriend at a spa, the music has more of a beat to it—soothing, but still with some energy.

The man behind the front counter glances up from his computer screen and smiles. He's blond with a light beard. His black t-shirt stretches across muscular biceps and tattoos cover all the exposed skin I can see from his neck to his knuckles.

“Gentlemen. Do you have an appointment?”

“Yeah, we do,” Axel answers. “It's under Axel Penniston.”

The man clicks his keyboard. “Here you are. If you want to sit over on the leather couch, your attendant will be out in a few minutes to escort you back. Would you like a mimosa or bloody mary?”

Axel turns to me with a questioning expression. “I think I'm good for now,” I answer.

“Same,” Axel says to the man, who nods and returns his attention to the computer. “It's designed for men,” Axel continues. “The owner is actually a woman who wanted to give the spa experience to men in a less feminine environment.”

“Oh. So there are only male clients here?”

“That's my understanding. I guess it makes sense in a way. Some men have hang-ups about doing things that are perceived as feminine.”

“Yeah.”

A memory hits me as we sit quietly. Axel's dad chewed him out about “being a man” when we were only sixteen and he started wearing eyeliner. It really fucked with him, because up to that point he didn't know his dad had such strong opinions about gender roles. He still wore it at school, but carefully washed it off at my house before going home to his.

I squeeze his knee and he turns his face to me and smiles.

“You know that shit pisses me off,” he says.

“Yeah, I know.” I glance around for a second. “So you picked this place for me to feel comfortable?”

“Yeah, but I had another reason too. I want to support the cause. Break down some toxic masculinity, you know? If some men need bricks and iron to get there, so be it.”

Smiling, I bump his arm with mine. “You’re a good one, Ax.”

He flashes his dopey smile at me, bumping me back.



# Chapter Ten

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“Axel and Hollister?”

I look at the man holding a clipboard near the front desk.  
“That’s us.”

He smiles, walking over to greet us. He’s wearing a tight black t-shirt, black jeans, and black boots. He sports a thick black beard and plenty of tattoos. He looks far more like a motorcycle-riding tattoo artist than a spa attendant.

“I’m Tank. I’ll be working with you today.”

“I’m Axel.”

Hollister literally stares at the guy until he blinks himself out of it. “Uh, Hollister.”

“Cool names.”

“Thanks, *Tank*,” I tease.

Tank laughs. “Fair. Full name is Theodore, but come on. Can you imagine me as a Theodore? My folks had no vision, I tell ya.”

“You could be Theo,” Hollister says. “That’s a cool name.”

Tank tilts his head, shrugging like he’s never thought of it before. “Huh. Yeah, I guess it could be. You guys ready for an indulgence?”

“We are,” I answer.

“Awesome,” Tank says, clapping his hands together. “Follow me.”

He leads us through a doorway and we enter the actual spa. The walls are dark gray brick with images of scantily clad women draped over cars and motorcycles, or lounging by pools with skimpy bikinis on.

The farther down we go though, the art changes to buff men, various parts of their bodies highlighted for the images. Tank stops us toward the end, opening a door and gesturing for us to enter.

“This is your dressing room for the day,” he explains. “You can put your things in the locker and wear the provided robes. When you’re ready, flip this switch and I’ll come get you to start on your massage.”

“Thanks, man,” I say.

Tank nods and leaves. Hollister starts undressing right away. At least he’s comfortable with this, though I wonder about the touch factor. He doesn’t tend to like strangers touching him, but maybe since this one has a purpose, he’ll be cool with it. I can’t wait for mine. My neck is tighter than the jeans I wear.

Once we’re both undressed and wearing robes, our personal items locked away, I flip the switch. The door opens and Tank enters.

“We’re just going down the hall,” he says, gesturing for us to exit the room as he follows us.

“I noticed the art changes from women to men,” I say as we walk. “Why is that?”

“Something for everyone,” Tank answers. “We don’t assume anyone’s preferences when they book with us.”

“Oh, yeah. That makes sense.”

The area we enter is closer to what I think of when I imagine a spa. It smells clean, like eucalyptus—a scent I’ll never forget thanks to a girl I dated who always had a diffuser of it in her apartment.

“These are the wet areas,” Tank explains as we pass. “Sauna, Jacuzzi, and water therapy.”

“Water therapy?” Hollister asks, his eyes searching the space.

“Yeah. Targeted jets of water that work like a massage but with a different intensity.”

Hollister nods, his face still curious. Tank opens another door and we step inside. There are two massage tables side by side with another man standing between them. Looks-wise, he’s Tank’s polar opposite, with pale blond hair and equally pale skin, a slight frame, and big blue eyes. He’s clean shaven with not a single tattoo in sight.

His bright smile fills his face. “Hi guys. I’m Pix. I’ll be working with Tank to give you both a fabulous experience today.”

“Hi,” Hollister says, smiling softly.

“Have you had a couple’s massage before?” Pix asks.

Hollister and I look at each other at the same time as I mutter, “Uh, dual massage you mean?”

Pix tilts his head and Tank just chuckles. “I guess you could call it that,” Pix answers.

“I don’t think they’re a couple, Pix,” Tank says, unfolding a towel.

Hollister’s face goes bright red. “This is for couples?”

“It’s okay,” Tanks says. “It can be for...” His eyes shift between us. “Friends?”

I nod like a bobble head. “Friends.”

Pix giggles. “Got it. Good thing we cleared that up,” he says to Tank, who chuckles in response.

“Why?” Hollister asks, probably against his better judgment.

“We usually make the experience... intimate,” Pix explains. “You know, to give you good vibes.” He wiggles his

eyebrows and my stomach flips.

I'm guessing when I skimmed over all the descriptions on the website, I missed some important parts, just like the bondage club on Friday. I'm waiting for Hollister to give me one of his looks, but instead he just nods, his face tight but not outraged.

"Don't worry, we'll take good care of you," Pix says. "You'll feel like a pool of melted butter by the time you leave today."

"Sounds good," Hollister says, glancing at me.

"Great," Tank says. "You can remove your robes and climb on the tables face down. When you're ready, just say, 'ready.'" The two men step behind a partition.

"Holl—"

"It's fine, Ax. I know you and details. It's not like we're getting strapped to a board and spanked this time." He actually chuckles, relaxing me instantly. "This'll be nice. Fuck knows I could use a little relaxation."

"Yeah. Definitely."

Blowing out a breath, I peel out of my robe and climb on the table, my eyes flicking to Hollister's nude backside. I'm more than a little surprised he was willing to remove his underwear. Me and nudity are close friends, but Hollister's always been modest.

My eyes linger on his butt longer than they should, my thoughts immediately drifting back to Friday night when I smacked him with a crop. I can't stop the image of bending him over the table right now, riding crop in hand, and leaving a bright red mark across his pale skin.

My cock swelling startles me and I choke back a gasp. What the actual fuck? I've never looked at Holl that way. Sure, I've admired his looks before—he's a good-looking guy. And okay, I've checked out his cock once or twice, for comparison's sake only.

A memory of a party back in high school reaches me, rudely reminding me of the sisters who blew us out back, and the way Hollister's face looked as he gave in to the pleasure of it. I squeeze my eyes shut as the images of me watching how hard and thick his cock looked sliding in and out of Ashley's pink lips replay. I wrote it off as normal at the time. Any guy watching a blow job would get worked up, right?

But when Hollister came, his eyes settling on my face, the image of his flushed cheeks, blown pupils, and our knees brushing together as we sat across from each other sent me over the edge.

I clear my throat, adjusting my position on the table as my cock pushes against the soft sheets. When I open my eyes, Hollister is on his table, covered by the sheets.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Uh, yeah. I'm good."

Just over here fantasizing about spanking my best friend with a crop.

I am definitely *not* okay.

# Chapter Eleven

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Glad Axel is fine. I'm just over here trying to calm the fuck down, but my dick has decided to pay attention to everything going on around me.

It would be extremely helpful if my brain would chime in right now and explain to me why I'm reacting the way I am to these new stimuli. Why am I looking at Tank like he's a slice of cake? And Pix. Why did my brain decide he's *pretty*? When did I start describing men as pretty? The fuck?

Why does the fact that my best friend, who I've known practically my entire life, lying naked an arm's length away is making my stomach do weird fluttering shit? Does finding out you might like a little roughness in the bedroom open up your view of the entire world?

"Any preference, boys?" Pix asks, standing between the two beds.

Axel looks at me with a raised eyebrow, and for some reason, I blurt out, "Tank. Uh, I mean..." I cringe at my complete lack of words.

Pix just chuckles. "Tank, it is. You get me, pretty boy," he says to Axel.

Pix's comment draws my attention back to my best friend's face. I guess he is pretty in a lot of ways. He has perfect skin and always has, a fact that drove me insane with jealousy in high school while I battled breakouts daily. Straight white teeth that fortunately, for my dignity at least, required braces,



but he even looked good with those on. I don't think Axel ever had an awkward phase, while I've never quite grown out of mine.

It's not that I think I'm ugly, I just don't think about my looks much at all. Axel says I'm good-looking, and the occasional pretty girl throwing attention my way helps, but in comparison to Ax, I'm average at best. He's always had a throng of women trying to get his attention, even back in elementary school. His Valentine's day boxes overflowed, his dance card was always full. And then there was me.

His shadow. The guy who got second choice. I never resented him for it though. How could I when he's such a good guy? He never carried himself like the other popular guys. He was nice to everyone, from the nerds to the jocks.

The lighting in the room dims and a fine floral mist fills the space. I close my eyes as Tank's big hands start at my feet, kneading out aches I didn't know existed.

As Tank works out the tension, I replay how I've lived my life up to now. Axel doing this for me was perfect timing. As usual. The guy knows me so well. Maybe it's time I faced the fact that I'm just spinning my wheels. Life is going by pretty fast. If I don't switch things up now, when will I?

"Holl?" Ax whispers.

I turn my head to face him. "Yeah?"

"Stop thinking. I can feel it over here."

Pix snorts a laugh as he works on Axel's calves. I blow out a breath and try to focus on Tank's skillful hands. Turning off my thoughts is equivalent to climbing a mountain, but I'm gonna give it a shot.

"Drop your shoulders," Tank says softly. "Relax your neck and your jaw."

I focus on those areas, noticing an immediate change.

"Good," Tank purrs, and I'm almost expecting him to call me a good boy. Why does that thought sound kind of appealing?

As he moves up my body, I try as hard as I can to focus on the way his fingers feel, the soft texture of his skin mixed with the strength he uses to work my kinks out. I've never had a man touch these parts of my body, but I don't hate it.

I lift my head enough to glance over at Axel. Pix is at his head, knelt down and working on his shoulders. He's whispering something that causes Ax to let out a tiny moan, and the sound vibrates through me. When my dick reacts with a little twitch, I huff and adjust myself on the table.

Tank must pick up on my unease because he whispers, "Just relax. Everything you're feeling is good. It means you're alive."

His words do their job, settling my racing heartbeat and allowing me to push the confusing thoughts away. That is until Tank works on the back of my thighs. To say I wasn't expecting this to feel as good as it does is a vast understatement.

Tank's massive body leans into mine as he works the muscles in my legs, and the heat pouring off of him somehow reminds me of the night in the dungeon when Blaze hovered over me. Not being the tallest guy in the room, I've tended to date petite women, but the idea of a larger, much stronger body overpowering me is doing something to my head.

I can't even begin to unpack the shit going on in my thoughts right now. Where do I even start?

"Oof," Tank says softly as he runs his oiled hands up and down my bare back. "We've got some work to do here."

Little does he know how true that statement is.

"What do you do for work?" he asks, focusing on a knot in my lower back.

"Accounting."

"Ah. So you sit at a desk with a computer a lot, I'm guessing?"

"You got it. More than I should."

"Work out?"

I huff a laugh. “Do I look like I work out?”

Tank chuckles. “I don’t make assumptions.”

“That’s very kind of you. No, I don’t work out. Axel does, but I’ve never caught the fitness bug.” I reflect for a moment. “Never had a massage either.”

“No?”

I shake my head. “This whole weekend was set up to help me get out of my funk. I’m forty today.”

“Seriously? You look good, man.”

“Thanks. I could look better though, right?”

“It’s not about looks, in my opinion,” he says. “It’s about feeling good. About having enough energy and vitality to do all the things you want to do. About aging well and not feeling like shit all the time.”

“Hmm. You sound a lot like Axel.”

Tank chuckles. “Maybe your friend knows a thing or two.”

“He does.” Tank digs into the knot with his thumb, and I moan as it literally melts away under his touch. “Oh wow.”

“Good, right?”

Blowing out a breath, I nod. “So good.”

He continues up my back while I grunt and moan my way through it. I’ve definitely been missing out on massages.

“Can I ask you a personal question, Tank?”

“Yep.”

“How’d you get into massage therapy?”

“Many moons ago I was in sales. I worked my ass off, killer hours, tons of travel. I was so young that all I cared about was money. Then the top salesman in our company dropped dead on a business trip. Massive heart attack. He was forty-two.”

“Whoa.”

“Yep. The lifestyle caught up. The stress it takes to maintain a top rank, the toll it took on his personal relationships, the unhealthy habits. The body can only take so much. It felt personal to me even though I barely knew the guy. He was who I looked up to. Aspired to be, you know?”

“Yeah.”

“So it was like a ‘this could be you’ moment. Massive wake-up call. I was only thirty at the time, but twelve years goes fast. I quit the next week, went up to my friend’s cabin in the woods for a month and figured out my next steps. I decided to use all that energy I put at my sales job taking care of myself and my well-being. It led me to this industry, and I’m so much happier. Lost fifty pounds and got in shape, reduced my stress almost completely, and discovered a whole aspect of myself I didn’t know.”

“What do you mean?”

Tank moves to my other side, working gently on my shoulder. “I was raised by a man who had no tolerance for anything perceived as weakness. He pushed me and my brother into everything he thought symbolized manliness. Hunting, sports, you name it. He encouraged us to start dating young, meanwhile, he kept my sister and mom practically locked in a tower. They had to be protected from the kind of men he was trying to raise.”

Reminds me of Axel’s dad.

“I fell for it,” Tank continues, “until that month in the woods. There were parts of me I’d buried, knowing they wouldn’t be okay to let out around my dad, but I woke up. I decided it was my life I was living, not his. Nothing was ever enough anyway. My brother is a top cardiologist, one of the best in the country, and my dad still acts like he’s just average.”

“That sucks.”

“It used to. It doesn’t now. I do what makes me happy first. I came out at thirty-five after realizing I was both bisexual and polyamorous. Or, I should say accepting. A part of me was

well aware of my attraction to men and women. I deconstructed the religion I was forced to follow as a kid and walked my own path. I moved to New Onyx where I knew I could live the way I wanted to. I rebuilt everything from the ground up, and it was worth every challenge.”

My eyes flick to Axel who appears to be sleeping while Pix works on his back. Pix glances at me and winks, flustering me. I turn away quickly.

I lie quietly for a few minutes, processing Tank’s story. So much of it resonates with me.

“Uh, so how did you know? Like, about being bisexual? What’s the difference between being aroused by sexual stimuli versus the actual biology of a person?”

“Well, that’s a hell of a loaded question. What do you mean?”

“Okay, like...” I pause, thinking of an example. “Porn. You see a man and a woman having sex, right?”

“Right.”

“It turns you on to see the guy’s, you know, how he’s built and handling the woman.” I clear my throat as my body heats. Who even am I, talking about this stuff with a stranger?

“I’m with you,” Tank says, chuckling.

“So, are you turned on because hey, you’re watching two people have sex, or...?”

“Ah,” he says.

“Have you watched gay porn?” Pix asks, chiming in, and I cringe realizing he can hear the whole conversation.

“No,” I answer. “Why would I?”

“If you have questions, it’s a place you can start,” Tank explains. “If you get aroused by two *men* having sex, maybe you’re onto something.”

“For example,” Pix starts. “I can see a stunning woman. I can admire her body and the beauty of it, but not a single cell in my very gay body wants to be sexual with her. I’m more

interested in where she got her shoes so I can see if they have them in my size.”

“Oh. Gotcha.”

“And if I was watching straight porn, which by the way means I’ve been kidnapped and forced, I imagine I could possibly find something good by watching the man.”

I snicker at his colorful way of explaining things.

“But I’m not gay,” Tank says. “So I see a beautiful woman and I’m attracted to her. The wake-up call was realizing all the times I felt the same kind of draw to a man I found hot. I just shoved that part down.”

“What did you do about it?” Axel asks, indicating he’s also listening.

Awesome.

“Tested the theory,” Tank says, chuckling and digging a knot out from under my shoulder blade. “I went out to a gay club and waited to see if I had a reaction. I did. Then I got approached and the idea of leaving with him was a good one. The rest is history.”

I open my eyes, finding Axel’s gaze already on me. I know my cheeks are burning red at this point, but I hope the dimness in the room is hiding it. Is he thinking about the same things I am? Did the dungeon fuck him up too?

“My advice?” Pix says. “If it’s on your mind at all, why not try it. The worst outcome is you don’t like it. No big deal. That goes for anything, by the way, not just dating. I went on several dates with women in college, just to check. I tried on different gender expressions before landing on fluid. I moved around the country until I found the spot that felt like home. Life is a journey. Enjoy it.”

“Preach, Pix,” Tanks says.

I tear my eyes away from Axel to let all of this sink in. I don’t even know what I’m questioning right now. My sexuality? My career? My vanilla tendencies in the bedroom? Everything?

All I know is that I'm forty, and that feels like it carries some weight with it. Like a fork in the road. All I have to do is decide which way to go.

Piece of cake.

## Chapter Twelve

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## HOLLISTER

By the time I manage to get to my desk on Tuesday morning, I feel like I've stepped into an alternate reality. Everything that felt completely normal on Friday feels foreign now. Tight, like a suit jacket you've grown out of.

The buzz of a busy office swirls around me—a sound I've become so accustomed to I barely notice it—but today it's loud. Annoying. I close my office door to try and get my bearings.

When I left work on Friday, all I could think about were the reports I hadn't finished yet. Since I started this job, I've always pushed myself to get them in before the other managers. It's an unspoken expectation of me, but right now, I can't summon the interest to even boot my computer up. My head is simply too full of the experiences I had this weekend to think about something practical like work.

Just a couple of minutes later, while I'm still sitting dazed at my desk, Sara opens my door and peers in with a bright smile.

“Well?” she asks.

I gesture for her to enter. “Well, what?”

“Am I fired for participating in the intervention?”

I just laugh. She already knows she's not fired. “No.”

“Whew,” she says, playfully wiping her forehead. “Did you have fun, at least?” she asks, plopping down in the chair

across from my desk.

“I had a blast. It was great.”

Her face lights up. “Can you tell me any of it, or is it top secret?”

I laugh even as I squirm, and my stomach does a flip. “Top secret,” I answer, and she pouts, making me laugh more. “It was good for me, and something I definitely needed.”

“Well, yeah, it doesn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out you’ve been working a little bit too hard these days.”

“I guess so.”

She stands up, walking to the door and leaning against the frame. I study her for a moment. I don’t know a lot about Sara’s personal life. I don’t know if she’s fun and adventurous or a homebody. I don’t know that about anyone I work with. I keep my head buried in reports too much.

“It gave me a lot to think about,” I add as she waits quietly for me to process my thoughts. “Turning forty is no small feat, you know?”

She nods, smiling. “It’s a big milestone.”

“Right, but Axel dragging me to experience new things made me realize I’m not really living life to the fullest. I pretty much let work dictate... well, everything.”

She nods. “It’s easy to do. You have a lot of responsibility here.”

“Yeah, I do. I’m honestly not sure how to feel about it all yet, but I know I can’t go back to how things have been.”

“Oh?” she says, taking a seat again. “What do you mean? Are you rethinking your career?”

“I’m rethinking everything right now. The intervention did its job. It really pulled the rug out from under me and made me start questioning a lot of things in my life. I don’t know what I’m going to do with it all yet, and I don’t think I need to decide right away, but yeah, I’m thinking.”

“I think that’s really good.”

“I’m sure my dad won’t.”

She scrunches her nose like she’s smelling something foul. “No disrespect at all to your dad, but I don’t think he sees your value at all.”

Nervous laughter bubbles out of me. “You’re not being disrespectful. I’m fully aware of that.

I’m not even sure why he wants me around.”

“I hope that means you won’t be basing your decisions on anything he says then.”

I shrug. “I don’t know anything else. This has been it for as long as I can remember. He told me when I was in high school that he expected me to run the firm someday. I got the degree he wanted me to get. Everything I’ve done has been because my dad told me to do it, and trust me, I definitely recognize the irony in that.”

Sara gives me a sympathetic smile. “It can be hard to get away from what parents want from us sometimes.”

I nod. “The craziest part about it is I’ve never even considered anything else. I just did what he wanted me to do. I guess he keeps me around because I’m his only son. So that’s just his expectation, you know?”

“It’s still shitty the way he treats you. No offense.”

“None taken.”

Standing, she walks to my side of the desk and rubs my shoulder. “Thank fuck for Axel. He’s so good for you.”

I tilt my head back to meet her eyes. “I know. He’s the best. I’m not really sure what I offer him, but I’m glad he sticks around anyway.”

“Silly,” she says, heading back to the door. “It’s not like you’re a loser. You’re just a little stuck.”

“Thanks, Sara.”

“PS, don’t be mad, but Jill got you a cake. It’ll be in the breakroom after lunch.”

“Ugh.”

She smiles. “You know Jill. She firmly believes cake can fix anything.”

“She’s got a point.”

“She does. Don’t forget your staff meeting at ten.”

“I’ll be there.”

Once she’s gone, I summon the motivation to turn my computer on and try to focus on the day, but all I’ve got running through my mind is black leather and Tank’s oiled hands on my back, the heated look on Axel’s face as he watched, and the way my body reacted to him taking the crop. My cheeks heat as my stomach flutters. Well, fuck.

---

By the time I shuffle into the conference room for the staff meeting, I’m still struggling to shake off the weekend’s revelations and focus on work. I didn’t finish my monthly report, but I’m fairly certain I deserve a pass since it’s never happened before and I still have until tomorrow at noon. Somehow that doesn’t shake the nausea building in my gut.

My coworkers greet me and offer birthday wishes as we take our seats, but there’s an unusual tension in the air.

“What’s going on?” I ask quietly to John, my counterpart in a different division.

He shrugs. “Rumor on Friday at happy hour is that someone was termed, but it’s unconfirmed still.”

“Huh. You go to happy hour?”

“Once a month,” he answers. “Just to remain personable and connected to the team.”

I nod, shifting my gaze to my planner page. I’ve never once gone to happy hour with my team, despite Sara’s persistent invites. I figured they wouldn’t be able to relax with their boss around, but maybe John is onto something.

The director, a.k.a. my dad, walks in seconds later with the usual sour look on his face. I'm immediately reminded of the impression Axel does of him, strutting around with his butt squeezed and face tight, and have to hold back a laugh. I don't think my dad has ever smiled in front of me. I've only seen proof it's possible in photographs from long ago.

He doesn't even glance at me as he takes his seat at the head of the long wooden table, dropping a manila folder down like he's already pissed off. The whole energy of the room shifts as everyone's mood sobers. The meetings are always like this, but it's the first time I've been so *aware* of it. My dad's energy is like being wrapped in a wet blanket on an already cold, rainy day.

He clears his throat, flipping the folder open and gazing at the paper in front of him. A memory hits me of being nineteen and upset at a family reunion when a bunch of distant relatives on his side said I was his spitting image. It was the worst thing I could think of that I reminded people of him. It took Axel four days to talk me off that ledge. I was *this close* to booking a nose job.

It was Axel who borrowed picture albums from my mom and showed me all the pics of how much I looked like my mom and her father. It's always Axel who brings me back down to earth when I'm spinning.

That's when I realize everyone is looking at me. "I'm sorry. I missed that."

My dad huffs. "I asked when your report will be ready. You're late."

Feeling my cheeks burn with heat, I open my mouth to speak but stammer for a second until I clear my throat. "I took yesterday off."

"That didn't answer my question."

Margaret, the woman responsible for our improved reporting system, gives me a sympathetic smile. I cringe under the weight of my dad's dead stare as others around the room awkwardly look at their own notebooks.

From somewhere unbeknownst to me, a sentence falls out of my mouth that leaves everyone in the room shocked, including me.

“I’m not late. It’s not due until tomorrow.”

Now everyone is looking at my dad as he draws his head back and narrows his eyes. “You know I like to have them early.”

“Then make the due date early,” I mumble, barely audible.

“What was that?” Dad asks, his tone sharp.

With a shaky breath, I look up and hold his gaze, pretending Axel and my mom are watching. “I said if you want it early then change the due date. I was out yesterday. It’ll be done by the end of business today.”

I swear all the air leaves the room as the tension between me and my dad hovers over everyone. After what feels like an hour but is probably only a few seconds, my dad speaks.

“You’ll probably be the last of your peers, but if you’re comfortable with that, fine with me.”

My blood boils at the dig but I simply nod in response, happy to shift the attention to another topic. I feel a soft kick on my shin under the table and shift my gaze up to see Margaret wink at me.

As the rage dissipates, a new, foreign emotion takes its place. I think it’s... pride. I stood up to my dad. In front of people. Who even am I?

“Lastly,” my dad says, sitting back in his seat as he rattles on about business. “We had a situation last week that resulted in the termination of a partner on Friday evening. Robert Davidson, director of commercial law, is no longer with the firm. I’ll remind you all of the media clause in your employment agreement prohibiting discussing the company with anyone outside of employees.”

“Can we ask what happened?” Scott from transportation asks. “He’s been here for ages.”

My dad's face twists with disgust. "I suppose I should tell you since it's likely to hit the news."

My brow creases. Why would something a partner at a random accounting firm did be in the news?

"Robert was arrested for engaging in inappropriate conduct with minors."

Gasps spread through the room. Robert did that? He seemed like such a normal guy.

"The authorities contacted me early last week with a subpoena for his work computer and evidence was discovered that he used company resources to pursue his... activities."

My stomach twists with disgust. "He seemed so..." I shake my head. There are no words.

"He goes to my church," Scott says. "His wife and my wife belong to the same crochet club."

"Yes, well, we can't always know what secrets people keep," my dad says. "Anyway, in the interim I'll be overseeing his division until a replacement is selected. If your employees ask you anything, simply reiterate our policy on appropriate use of business resources."

The meeting ends shortly after that bombshell, and as I gather my things, my dad saying my name sends a chill of apprehension up my spine.

"Yes?" I twist in my chair to find him glaring at me.

"Want to tell me what's wrong with you? It's very unlike you to be so lax in your work."

I sigh, realizing I'm not gonna get away with my earlier clapback. "I'm not being lax. I took one day off. Any idea why?"

His brow furrows with annoyance before it relaxes. "Oh. It's your birthday."

"My *fortieth* birthday. Kind of a milestone. My family and best friend decided I deserved a day off. Especially since I have six weeks of vacation saved up, I've never taken a sick

day, and this is the first time since I've been in this position that I wasn't the first manager to have my reports done. I don't know in whose world that would be considered lax."

He chuckles, but it's filled with animosity. "You turn forty and think all of a sudden you can be rude to me? I'm still your boss."

"I'm aware. Is that all? I have reports to do."

"Keep up the attitude, Hollister. That's why you'll never be a partner."

Ah, there's the carrot. This is the part where the groveling kicks in to appease his ego and continue the dysfunction, but I don't have it in me this time. He's already promoted three people before me to partner, so why should I believe I have a chance? After this past weekend, I'm not even sure I want it anymore.

"I'm sure you'll find someone capable of meeting your impossible expectations." I stand and grab my planner. "Can I go?"

He stares at me like I turned green in front of him. He only nods in response, so I hightail it out of there before he can say anything else.

Back in my office, I slump in my chair, staring at the mess of papers on my desk. What would it be like to actually be late? Would he fire me? Yell at me? Publicly shame me? Do I care?

Rubbing my forehead, I grab my phone. I'm losing my mind and there's only one person capable of talking me off the ledge.



# Chapter Thirteen

---

AXEL

I use a towel to wipe the sweat off my hands and grab my ringing phone, smiling when I see Hollister's name on the screen.

"Hey," I answer.

"I need help."

"What's going on?" I ask, sitting on the edge of the weight bench.

"I don't know, Ax. Everything is going on. Nothing feels the same as it did when I left here on Friday."

"Is that bad?"

"I don't know." He huffs, and I can imagine that wrinkle of skin between his eyebrows when he thinks too hard. "You won't believe what I did."

"Try me."

"I stood up to him. My dad. He tried to call me out for being late on my report and I calmly told him I wasn't late."

"Whoa. Seriously?"

"Yeah. I even told him if he wants it earlier then he should change the due date." He's getting more excited the longer he speaks, drawing a smile to my face. "Here's the best part, Ax."

"What?"

“He dangled the damn partner carrot again, and this time, I didn’t bite. I didn’t fall for it.”

“Holl...”

“Did you drug me this weekend? Body swap me? Something?”

I laugh. “Nope. You’re still Hollister.”

“I don’t feel like it. I actually had the thought that I should purposely be late on my report. Just to see what he would do. What is wrong with me?”

“Maybe nothing’s wrong.” I wipe my forehead, smiling at the pretty redhead obviously trying to get my attention as she walks past, but I can’t be distracted right now. Holl needs me. “Have you considered that there might be a different part of you in there dying to get out?”

“No. I’m forty. How could there be another part of me I haven’t met yet?”

The pretty redhead is now on the shoulder press machine across from me, holding my gaze as she pumps her arms in and out, her tits practically bursting from her sports bra.

“Well, obviously something is going on. Hear me out, Holl. Is it possible that this weekend’s experiment, I don’t know, worked?”

He scoffs a laugh. “Gah, Ax. I don’t know what to do with myself. I just feel so... new. I want to...” His words trail off as he huffs out a breath.

“Use the journal I gave you. That’s what it’s for. Maybe this discomfort, these feelings, are exactly what you need.”

“Right. Yeah. Okay, I can do that.”

“Good. So let’s start with today. Are you gonna hustle to get the report done, or...?”

Hollister is quiet for several seconds, but I can practically hear him thinking. The redhead across from me is bending over in her leggings, showing off a sculpted ass you could

bounce a quarter off of, and while I can appreciate her effort, I'm not feeling inclined to close the deal.

"I think I'm gonna do it," Holl says softly. "I mean, *not* do it. It's a dumb report anyway. He already knows these numbers. He just makes us do it to stress us out. I'm gonna miss the deadline." He laughs softly, the confidence in his voice growing. "Yeah. I'm going to turn my report in late."

"Holy shit, Holl. I'm proud of you. How late?"

"Thursday morning? Oof. No. I won't sleep. I know. Tomorrow at four fifty-nine. I'll press enter and then leave."

"Okay wait. You're gonna leave at five?"

"I am. Today too." The pride in his voice is amazing. "What's he gonna do about it? Fire me? Maybe that would be fine. Maybe I'd... I don't know, do something else. I'm smart."

"Wicked smart."

"There's a lot of other stuff I could do. I could even be my own boss. I could open my own accounting firm."

"You definitely could, Holl."

"I could start over." His voice is soft again. "Forty isn't old."

"Not at all. If it makes you feel any better, the weekend got to me too. In a good way."

"Yeah? I'm not the only one who feels like an alien today?"

Chuckling, I stand and turn away from the redhead. Might as well put her out of her misery now. "I think your shift was a little more dramatic than mine, but yeah, I have some stuff on my mind."

"I'll take that."

"Well, since you'll be home early tonight, want to grab dinner?"

He laughs again. “Yeah. Anything to keep me from obsessing about my dad’s reaction all night, huh?”

“That’s my job.”

“What would I do without you, Ax?”

“You’ll never know. See you tonight.”

“Thanks for talking.”

“Of course.”

When I end the call, I head over to the cardio station for my last thirty-minute sprint, but a soft touch on my arm catches my attention. I turn to see the pretty redhead smiling behind me.

“Hi,” she says, her voice breathless.

“Hey.”

“I’m Julie.” She extends her hand like we’re at an interview.

“Axel,” I reply, shaking her hand.

“Cool name.” She wipes her brow, her big brown eyes focused on me as she nibbles her bottom lip. “I’m not usually so forward, but I was wondering if you’re available for a drink or something. Sometime.” Her cheeks flush pink as she speaks and tucks a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “I just, um, you’re...” She smiles. “Phenomenal.”

“Thanks. Uh...” I search my head for some kind of response. There’s no reason in the world why I should turn her down. She’s gorgeous, seems kind of sweet, and I can’t remember the last time I went out on a date that was more than a hookup. “You know what? Yeah, let’s do that.”

She looks shocked for a second before she exhales and smiles. “Great. I can put my number in your phone.”

“Yeah.” I hand it to her, watching as she taps it in.

“Okay, Axel,” she says, gazing at the screen pic of me and Holl when we vacationed in Cozumel back in college. “Who’s this?”

“My best friend.” I take the phone back. “I’ll call soon.”

Julie smiles, walking away and looking over her shoulder once as she heads for the yoga room.

Normally, I’d be pumped to score the number of such a beautiful woman, but my heart just isn’t in it right now. Maybe the weekend got to me more than I realized. Think I’ll take my own advice and work on my journal when I get home.

When I get home an hour later, I plop on the couch and grab my journal, flipping to the first page. I’m still stuck on the first question: what one thing can you do today to shift your energy?

So far, I’ve spent my day the way I always do. Up at seven, coffee and a protein shake, then the gym. I usually spend the afternoon fucking around doing nothing special until it’s time for dinner, and waiting impatiently for Hollister to come home. I’ve been spinning my wheels for way too long.

Leaning my head back, I close my eyes and replay the night at the dungeon, which quickly brings me back to the massage yesterday and Pix’s hands all over me. That felt great, but what bugged me was listening to Hollister’s soft moans of pleasure as Tank manhandled him. It was that same twinge of jealousy I felt towards Blaze.

I’ve always been protective of Hollister. He just naturally brings that out in me since he travels through the world in a fragile shell. I know he can take care of himself, but I don’t want him to feel like he has to. He can lean on me.

What’s bugging me is that it’s not protectiveness I’m feeling. It’s jealousy. Like I don’t want anyone touching him or making him happy but me. Which makes zero sense. I’ve fixed him up on a ton of dates over the years, trying to make sure he gets touched. Is it because they were men? Why would that make it different?

Rubbing my forehead, I sit up again and stare at the journal. I need to dissect this chaos in my head. I just need to start. I grab my laptop from the coffee table and fire it up,

waiting for it to load. Without hesitating, I start looking up information on being a Dom. *Real subtle, subconscious.*

My fingers float over the titles until I pause on a headline that says, “Are you a Dom, a Sub, or a Switch? Find out at our seminar.”

I click the link, chuckling when I see it’s a class put on by Chaos, the club we went to on Friday. As I read the details, I learn that it’s just a discussion on what the various roles look like, along with common traits to help you identify your own lane. After that, there’s a tour of the dungeon.

The image of being back in the dark room with a leather crop in my hand, Hollister spread out and ready before me, makes my cock swell. My breath catches, both out of surprise and desire, and I rub my bulge through my jeans, squeezing gently.

Chaos is a gay club, but maybe that makes it better. Easier to explore without the distraction of a pretty woman there. I close my eyes, trying to conjure the redhead from the gym splayed out over the cross, me behind her with a crop, but the image is equivalent to a bucket of cold water. Yeah, definitely not into it.

I try again, imagining Pix in the role, but that doesn’t work either. He doesn’t strike me as the kind to be the one getting smacked. Nope. That role is owned by my best friend, at least in my head, and fuck if I know how to process that.

Standing, I blow out a long breath and pace the living room, aware of all the tingling nerves in my body. Okay, there has to be a logical explanation for my response to Holl in this light. Maybe... maybe it’s because we’ve always been so close. We’ve shared every vulnerable moment two guys can have.

He was the one I told about my first awkward kiss with Candace Whipple in sixth grade. He shared his with Madelyn Wright in the seventh grade at a dance. We talked about touching boobs for the first time, shared our nerves over losing our virginity, and snuck a peek at porn at the adult store in town. We discovered life together. So this isn’t different.

That's gotta be it. I'm reacting to our closeness and the fact that we went through this new experience together. Why it's making my dick hard has to be a matter of biology. It turns me on. The experience. Not Hollister. He's my friend and a guy. I don't get a hard dick over guys. Right. That's... reasonable. Kind of.

I return my attention to the screen, clicking the link to sign up. I feel like this might be the one thing I do on my own. Without Hollister there as a distraction, I can explore whether sex dungeons and BDSM are really my thing, or if it was just a one-off reaction. I want to know if there's a whole part of me waiting to be discovered, and the only way I'm going to do that is to jump in feet first. It's kind of my speciality.



## Chapter Fourteen

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HOLLISTER

I've been staring at the clock on my computer for at least thirty minutes. As the time ticks closer to noon, nausea takes over. Who the fuck do I think I am planning to intentionally miss a deadline? I already know it's close to impossible that I'll get anything else done today waiting for five o'clock to come.

With ten minutes left, I cave and dial Axel to talk me down. The phone rings several times and panic sets in, increasing my heart rate and body temperature. Just before a full-on spiral takes over, he answers.

"Hey, Holl. You okay?"

Blowing out a breath, I rub my forehead. "No. I'm freaking the fuck out."

"Okay, let's start with a deep breath. Count to three."

Closing my eyes, I listen to his voice as he softly reminds me to breathe. Once the panic subsides, I open my eyes. "Fuck."

"You okay?"

"No. I can't do this. I can't defy him."

"Hey"—Axel's voice cuts through my racing thoughts—"you already did it. You don't have to push yourself so hard. You can take small steps."

"Small steps?"

“Yeah. Like, you said you were gonna wait until five, but the deadline is noon, right?”

“Right.”

“And noon is in...” He pauses. “Six minutes. What would feel good to you right now, Holl?”

I sit with his question, letting it bounce around in my head until something makes sense, but I’m torn. “There’s a part of me that really wants to just send it now and be a good boy.” I choke on the words. “Um, not a boy. A manager. I want to do the right thing, but...” I blow out a breath. “Fuck.”

“Hollister. Tell me what the other part of you wants.”

“I want to be bad, Ax.” My eyes go wide. Where did those words even come from? “I want to defy him.”

“Okay. Can you do that in a way that feels good for you?”

My eyes focus on the time. Three minutes left. “What if... um...” Swallowing hard, I nod as the idea settles over me. “What if I do it five minutes after twelve? So it’s late, but it’s not debilitating. He might not even notice right away, but I will.”

“Yeah, that sounds really good. Want me to sit here with you?”

“Can you? You’re probably doing something but—”

“Hey,” he interrupts. “I’m never too busy for you. You know that.”

“Thank you.” I blow out a shaky breath. “What were you doing?”

“Taking a shower. Just got back from the gym. Leg day.”

I laugh softly. “I admire your dedication.”

“Nothing else to do but maintain this body of mine.”

And then that body of his flits through my mind. More than once I’ve caught myself staring at him. When we swam or changed clothes in the gym back in high school. He was never shy about his body—I mean, why would he be, looking

like that?—but I tried to hide mine. Especially when girls were around. I'm lucky enough to have a naturally good metabolism, but my muscle tone is at zero.

“No desk body for you,” I say, practically choking on my words. My throat is so dry I swear I could spit sand right now.

“You better not say anything negative about yourself. You know I don't like that, Holl. You have your positives too.”

“Yeah, I guess.” I look at the clock. “Oh god. It's noon.”

“You got this. What are you gonna do the rest of the day?”

“Um... vomit, maybe?”

Axel chuckles. “Lunch, maybe?”

“I'm not hungry.”

“That doesn't mean you don't deserve a break. Why don't you go over to the park you like? Sit in the fresh air and ground yourself.”

“That's actually a good idea.”

“I have them sometimes,” he says, chuckling. “How's the upcoming audit going? Everything ready?”

I'm thankful for the topic change. “Yes. The team is ready. We're just finishing our scope list to get final approval from the director. Oh, I almost forgot.”

“What?”

“Oh, shoot. Remind me to tell you later. I'm not supposed to say anything.”

“It's about work?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, you can tell me over dinner if you're still planning to leave at five tonight.”

“Yeah, I'm gonna do that. I swear.”

“Good. What time is it now?”

“Fuck. Four after.”

“Okay, get ready to send it.”

“The email is ready.”

“I’ll sit here with you.”

Blowing out a breath, my finger hovers over the send button, and as soon as the clock flips over, I hit it. “I did it. Oh fuck, Ax. I sent my report late.”

“How’s it feel?”

“Not bad. Kind of good.”

“The world didn’t end. Hell didn’t freeze over. Worse case, he gives you shit, but he does that anyway.”

“Right.”

“You’re a damn good manager, Hollister, and an excellent accountant. He can’t take that away from you, okay?”

“Yeah, okay.”

“Now get up and walk out of the office. Go outside.”

“I will.”

“Nope. Do it now. I’m waiting.”

I laugh softly, but grab my jacket and head out. Axel listens as I move through the building, take the elevator down and walk out the front doors where the sounds of traffic take over.

“Good,” Axel says. “Now go sit in the park and stare at trees or birds or something.”

“Thanks, Axel. I really appreciate you.”

“Back at ya. I’ll see you later.”

“Bye.”

I end the call and sit down on a bench by the man-made lake. This little green space in the middle of the busy city is such a welcome reprieve from the madness.

Axel was right. This feels good and immediately takes the edge off my nerves. I tuck my phone away, resisting the urge to check my email for my dad’s response, and instead soak up

the sun and the light breeze. Birds chirp and squirrels scamper through the grass and up trees, and for just a few minutes, I let my mind wander, allowing it to land where it wants.

No surprise it takes me back to Friday night. Memories flood my mind of the moment Axel used the crop on me and the shameless way I pleaded for more. Maybe there really is an unexplored part of me waiting to be uncovered.

Pulling out my phone again, I open it to a browser and search “how do I know if I’m into BDSM.” Several articles show up, but one catches my eye right away, “Are you a Dom, a Sub, or a Switch? Find out at our seminar.”

I click it cautiously, like a Dom will jump out of my phone and spank me. As I read through it, I realize it’s at the club we went to on Friday. Huh. Maybe there’s something to that whole ‘universe listening’ stuff Sara is always going on about.

I read over the details several times while trying to make a decision about it. It seems like a safe place to explore, and if I went alone, I wouldn’t be distracted by what Axel was thinking. It is a gay club though, but I probably should explore the reaction I had to men touching me. Tank, I mean. I don’t want to explore the reaction I had to Axel. I’m sure it was nothing. Just overstimulation and our closeness as friends blurring reality. I’m not into guys. I’d know that by now.

There’s probably some repressed daddy issue that made me like Tank telling me what to do. As for Axel, well, he often leads me, so I trust him. Right. That all makes sense on a psychological level.

I remember the journal Axel gave me in my jacket pocket and pull it out, reading over the first page. The first question is, what one thing can you do today to shift your energy?

Sending my report late was probably enough energy shifting for one day, but my eyes drift back to my phone, still open on the seminar page. Am I brave enough to attend a kink class at a gay club?

Reading the description again, I realize it’s tomorrow night at six. I could always tell Axel I’m working late to finish the

audit prep, but I never lie to him. If I told him, would he want to come with me? Do I want that?

I blow out a breath and lean my head back on the bench.

“You okay?”

I sit up when a man sits next to me. “Oh, yeah. I’m good.”

“Hope you don’t mind company. All the benches are full.”

“Uh, no. I have to get back to work soon anyway.”

The man smiles at me, studying my face. There’s something unusual about him. Not his looks. More like his... energy?

“You seem like you have something heavy on your mind,” he says.

“Oh, um, kind of.”

“You could tell me if you want. I’m a good listener and a perfect stranger. No judgment here.” He drags a hand through his long, dark hair, his smile wide, his teeth sparkling white. He could be a movie star looking like that. Something about the way he’s looking at me draws the words from my mouth.

“I was exposed to something new recently. It affected me and I’m not sure if I want to explore it or ignore it.”

The man nods. “Ah, the classic dilemma. Let me ask you this, what if both choices were equally right?”

I tilt my head. “Huh?”

“Imagine for a moment the outcome of each path, knowing without a doubt that either one is correct. You can’t make a mistake.”

“Okay.”

“Now notice how you feel about each one, again knowing that it will turn out okay regardless of which option you choose.”

I nod, closing my eyes for a second to imagine attending the class. My body reacts immediately, heating up and tingling as memories of the sharp sting of leather hitting me rush back.

I go further this time, imagining myself naked and helplessly restrained, the crop leaving stinging marks on my flesh, Axel's voice whispering 'good boy' as he delivers another blow.

My eyes fly open, my breath heavy in my chest. The man smiles as if he knows what I saw in my mind's eye.

"Next option," he whispers.

Clearing my throat, I close my eyes again, imagining myself back at my desk, focused on my spreadsheets and tasks, ignoring everything I experienced last weekend. I don't need a PhD to notice the stark difference in reaction.

When I open my eyes this time, the man simply nods. "Did that help?"

"Yeah. How do I stop being scared?"

"That's easy. You stop being scared by doing what scares you."

"It all just feels like chaos. It's not me. I'm a very structured person. I don't take risks."

"Ah, but perhaps there's a part of you that wants to." He leans in so close his breath warms my face. "Chaos can be fun."

I nod, gazing into his eyes. "Are you a therapist?"

He laughs. "Far from it. I just enjoy people enjoying life. I think the world could use more chaos of the good kind. Why not pursue the things that feel good and even scare you a little? It makes you feel alive."

Swallowing hard, I nod, completely entranced by his words. He blinks and so do I, sitting up straight and backing away from him.

"Thanks for your help."

"My pleasure." He stands, glancing around the park. "Good luck."

"Thanks. What's your name?"

"Thorn."



“Maybe I’ll see you around, Thorn.”

He smiles, and as a car honks loudly, I turn to look at the sound. When I turn back, Thorn is gone. My eyes dart around the park, but he’s nowhere to be seen, leaving me to wonder whether I just imagined the whole interaction. Huh.

I might have imagined it, but his words linger, so I pick up my phone and very bravely click the link to sign up. If both choices are right, then I owe it to myself to follow through. If I find out I like being smacked around, tied up, and called a good boy, so be it. If I find out I like it more if Axel is doing it all, well... I guess I’ll figure out how to deal with that later. First things first.

# Chapter Fifteen

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The front door opens only twenty minutes after five. I smile as I hop up from the couch.

“Well, well. Look at you getting home while the sun is still up.”

Hollister grins, his cheeks turning slightly pink. He walks straight into me, pressing his forehead against my shoulder, so I wrap my arms around him, kissing the top of his head like I often do. It hits me how many times I’ve been teased for how much physical affection I show Holl. I guess I’ve always been more comfortable with him than anyone else.

“You okay?” I ask.

“Definitely. Just feeling sort of... alien. I needed my anchor.”

I hold him a little tighter, inhaling the fruity scent of his shampoo, like berries and pineapple on a summer day. He just leans into me, keeping his arms at his sides, but slowly, his hands move to my back, sliding down and resting at my hips.

Looking at this interaction through the lens of what we experienced over the weekend has my body tingling. The urge is strong to scoop him up and... and what? Cuddle him? Spank him? What the actual fuck is happening in my brain?

Hollister steps back, slowly untangling himself from me. As his hazel eyes focus on mine, his cheeks flushed and lips parted, I’m immediately reminded of the breathy pleas in the dungeon.

“Thank you,” Holl whispers.

“For?”

“Being you. Being here. Caring so much about me. It sounds dramatic but...” He chuckles, dragging his hand through his hair. “I think the intervention was actually life-changing. Nothing that was totally fine for me on Friday fits anymore. I am not okay with just doing life the way I have been. I want... more, I think.”

Smiling, I drag my hand down his arm. “I get it. I think it was good for both of us. It’s been bothering me that I don’t have any direction for my life now.”

He nods. “It’s a dream to retire early on paper, but in reality, what do you do with the next fifty years of your life?”

“Exactly. There’s only so much leisure a guy can take.” The words are on the tip of my tongue to confess about the class, but I have to stand by my decision to explore this without sucking him into it. He needs to decide on his own what and how he wants to explore. “Did anything happen at work?”

Holl scoffs. “No. I overreacted of course. I bet he didn’t even notice. He just gets off on beating me down in front of my peers. Remember when he hired me, and the whole speech about him not treating me differently because I was his kid?”

“Yeah.”

“But he does. He treats me like shit, and while he’s not exactly Mother Teresa with everyone else, he’s much easier to deal with.”

“He doesn’t deserve you, Holl.”

Hollister nods, biting his bottom lip as his eyes focus on the floor for a second. “Yeah. I think I’m starting to realize that.”

“Hey.” I grip his shoulder, squeezing gently. “Want to grab some tacos from the place on the corner?”

His face lights up. “Hell yeah.”

---

This time, stepping up to the heavy black doors of Chaos has my stomach in excited knots. Now that I know what's waiting on the other side, I'm both curious and low-key terrified that I'm going to learn things about myself I'm not ready to face. But I'm here now, and what kind of role model for Hollister would I be if I backed away from uncomfortable things?

The man at the door glances at his clipboard when I give him my name, nodding to the other man, who presses the buzzer and holds the door open for me. Once inside, I'm greeted by the same woman who was there last Friday. Her presence is interesting to me now that I know this is a gay club. Then it dawns on me that maybe I'm making a gender assumption based on appearance, and that's not cool.

Another man shows up a second later, wrapping a blue tag around my wrist. "Right this way," he says.

I follow him through the nightclub section and down the hall to the hidden elevator again, my heart rate kicking up the closer we get to the top floor.

"Don't be nervous," the man says.

I chuckle. "That obvious?"

He pats my arm. "No one will bite you here without your permission." His eyes roam the length of my body, the smile on his face revealing his appreciation. "I have a feeling you can hold your own though."

I sort of laugh-choke at his comment. "Do, um, do straight guys come to seminars like this?"

He twists to face me, one eyebrow lifted high. "Oh, sweetie."

Why did he say it like that?

The elevator doors open and we step out, but he stops me, putting his hands on my shoulders. For the first time, I really notice him. His deeply tanned skin and thick black curls, dark

brown eyes lined in purple liner and mascara, the glossy pout of his lips.

“There’s nothing wrong with being curious,” he says.

“Yeah, I know. That’s why I’m attending the seminar.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about. I mean...” He drags a long, manicured finger down my chest. “Curious.”

His meaning is shockingly clear as images of Hollister flash in my mind.

“You can find anything you want here,” my guide continues. “Anything. Just be open to it. Don’t judge it. Experience it.”

I nod, swallowing past my dry throat. “Good advice.”

He hooks his arm through mine, leading me down another hallway where there’s a room at the end. It’s got a lot more people in it than I anticipated, which makes me feel better actually. I can just sit in the back and soak it in.

“Enjoy, sweetie,” my guide says as he winks and leaves.

I’m sure I was told his name, but my brain can only handle so much new information at once. I head straight for the back row, only to find it full of people. I move up the rows until I encounter the first empty seat, along with three others, on the third row. At least it’s not right up front.

I take a seat, gazing around the space at the black walls with all sorts of ropes and sex toys lining them. Pictures of naked men in bondage fill other walls, and I find it visually appealing. I’ve never looked at another man like art before, but I see how it can be hot.

“Uh, hi.”

The familiar voice has me standing up from my seat. “Holl.”

His cheeks bright red, he nods. “Awkward.”

I laugh, pulling his wrist to get him to sit next to me. “This is... comical. Guess we both had the same idea.”

“Explore what we experienced without telling our best friend and roommate so we wouldn’t make it weird or make them feel obligated to join?”

“That’s it.” I bump his arm with mine. “We’re dorks.”

He turns and looks at me. “Yeah. Should I sit somewhere else?”

“Don’t be dumb. I’m glad you’re here.”

“I’m glad you’re here too.”

“Hey, gays, theys, and curious baes.” A man up front grabs our attention with his greeting. He looks exactly how I imagined a Dom would look, with jet black hair, a thick beard, muscles, tattoos, and leather pants with a harness around his chest. “Welcome to Dom, Sub, or Switch. Get comfortable as we spend the next hour discussing and demonstrating the dynamics of safe play, the different roles, and of course, the sexiness of consent and communication. I’m your host, Damon. My assistants tonight are Rick, Jace, and Everly.”

Everly is interesting. He’s a tall, kind of chubby man with a black collar around his neck. He’s ginger, and even from here I can see the marks the collar is making on his skin. My stomach does a little flip in reaction. I guess this is going to be interesting.

The men start a discussion of simple glossary terms, explaining each and asking the audience if they have experiences or questions to share. My nerves calm a little when I see that most of the men in the room are just as new to this as we are.

Damon launches into talking about Doms, with Rick and Jace chiming in. Okay, good to know that looks can be deceiving. Petite and feminine Jace is a Dom. But that assumption is once again challenged by a question from the group.

“You’re a Dom?” a man in the front row asks Jace, his tone incredulous.

“Glad you asked,” Damon says.

Jace laughs, putting a hand on his hip. “I’m a switch, darling. I’m whatever you want me to be.”

“Can you explain more about what that is?” another man asks.

Damon nods at Jace to explain. “Of course. So, story time. When I was a wee lad stepping into the big world of BDSM, I assumed, as I’m sure most of you did, that I would be a happy little subby pillow princess, and honey, I am definitely suited for that role,” Jace says.

Soft chuckles spread throughout the room.

“But I met a man who just loved to be dominated by someone smaller than him. So we gave it a try and I took to it like gays take to iced coffee. I learned that in the right circumstances, I’m happy in both roles, although my preference is to sub.”

The man nods, whispering to his partner.

When I dare glance at Hollister, he’s chewing his bottom lip, his hands in his lap, and I wonder if he’s sporting the same semi I am. Is it the talk of all this sex stuff, or is it really that I’m turned on by the man sitting next to me, his breath hitching periodically, the heat of his body warming mine.

As the discussion shifts to a demonstration, I watch, transfixed, as Rick puts Everly on his knees, tugging his collar and making demands that Everly eagerly complies with. I don’t know the answer to many of the questions running around my head right now, but I know without a doubt that I want to see someone in a collar at my feet, and dammit, I want that someone to be Hollister.

I want his hazel eyes gazing up at me, obediently waiting for the next command. I want his breath to hitch when I tell him he’s so good for me. I want... Fuck. What is happening right now?

“Could we get a volunteer from the audience?” Jace asks, startling me out of my strange fantasy.

Several men raise their hands, but I end up on my feet. Jace’s gaze settles on me as a sexy smirk spreads across his



face.

“Come on up, Axel.”

I glance at Hollister, his face revealing nothing, and I have to fight back the urge to grab his wrist and bring him with me. When I get to the front, Jace stands behind me, squeezing my shoulders, and whispering, “Relax.”

I nod, attempting to swallow, even though my throat feels like a desert.

“Do you know how you might identify so far?” Damon asks, while Rick hovers with a crop in his hand.

“Dom,” I answer, my voice slightly breaking.

“Don’t be nervous,” Jace whispers again. “You’re safe here.”

I nod, licking my dry lips.

Damon hands me the end of Everly’s leash, instructing me to follow my instincts, but I just stand there, unsure of what to do. As my gaze darts over the crowd, settling on Hollister, warmth spreads through me. All I have to do is relax and let my brain take me where it wants to go with this.

I tug the leash, and Everly’s cheeks flush as he kneels at my feet. I gaze down at him, but I see Holl, my best friend, eagerly waiting to please me. So those are the words that leave my lips.

“Please me.”

Everly presses his hands to my thighs, rising on his knees, and dragging his tongue over the bulge in my jeans.

“Good boy,” I whisper, knowing somewhere deep inside me that these words belong to Holl. “You’d do anything to make me happy, wouldn’t you?”

“Anything, sir,” Everly says. “I’m yours.”

“Mine,” I whisper. “You always have been.”

Everly’s eyebrows twitch, but he doesn’t break character. “Maybe you could spank me for being so good?”

“I think you’ve earned it.”

Everly crawls to a chair set up by the cross. I follow him, still on autopilot as I let this side of myself out. I sit and Everly scrambles over my lap, his large body nearly overwhelming mine. Someone hands me a leather paddle.

“Don’t forget to ask for a safeword,” Damon says from behind me.

“What’s your safeword, boy?” I ask Everly.

“Red, sir.”

“Red it is. How many spanks should you get?”

“Five really hard ones.”

“Is that what you think you deserve?”

Everly whimpers. “If it’s okay with you, sir.”

My eyes settle on Hollister, watching me with hooded eyes. Does he want to be the one on my lap as much as I want him to be? Am I legitimately attracted to my best *male* friend or is this just some kind of weird bonding experience? How do I find out?

“Go ahead,” Damon says, nodding his head in encouragement.

I bring the paddle down on Everly’s leather-clad ass. He hisses and moans, but in my head, it’s Hollister’s voice I hear. Hollister’s weight on my lap. Hollister’s fists clenching the leg of my jeans.

I do it again, noting how Hollister flinches. Even in the somewhat dim lighting, I can see the pink of his cheeks, and I swear I can hear his breath hitch. It’s like no one else is here but us.

And then he’s on his feet, walking towards me and peeling off his shirt, then his jeans, and finally kneeling before me. His hands move to my thighs, squeezing gently as he whispers, “Use me. Overpower me, Ax. I want it to be you.”

My cock twitches violently, snapping me out of the wild fantasy. As I look around, Hollister is still in his seat and this

stranger is still on my lap. I turn to Jace. "I..." I shake my head.

"It's okay," Jace whispers, and suddenly Everly is gone and Jace is kneeling in front of me. "You want to try it with your friend?"

I nod, my throat tight. Jace thankfully takes charge, twisting around to face the group, and I watch him get Hollister to the front of the room. It's all so out-of-body, like it's happening to someone else, but as Hollister's eyes meet mine and I see the tension fall away from him, my cock swells, desperate to feel the weight of his body across my knees.

Hollister climbs onto my lap, his hands and knees on the floor, supporting him. He's trembling.

"Is this okay, Holl?"

"Yes," he moans. "I want you to do it."

His cock hardens against my thigh and my head spins with need. I lift the paddle, stopping just before I swat him. "Safeword?"

"Broccoli," he whispers.

I bring the paddle down, and I'd swear every ounce of stress leaves my body instantly. Hollister squirms on my lap, and in that moment, I know in the deepest part of me that this is something we both need.

What happens next is anyone's guess.

# Chapter Sixteen

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HOLLISTER

Out of all the things I imagined I might do in my life, lying over my best friend's lap in a room full of people getting spanked definitely wasn't one of them. But when Jace offered his hand and gently led me to the front, never even asking the question, I knew without a doubt that I wanted to do it.

This might be embarrassing, but it's gotta be better than watching Axel with someone else, the jealousy twisting my stomach into knots, the desire to run up there and shove the man off his lap fierce.

Now I'm here. It's my body pressed against his thighs, my ass he's rubbing with his large hand. My cock is painfully hard already and I've only been spanked once. I couldn't find a coherent reason for my reaction if I tried, so I don't bother. I just twist the material of his jeans between my fingers and brace for it.

"How many do you want?" Axel asks, his voice deep and raspy.

"Whatever you think I deserve."

"Fuck, Holl," Ax whispers. "You want this, right?"

Squeezing my eyes closed, I blow out a breath. "Yes. Please. I want it to be you, Ax." His leg bounces beneath me, his tell when he's nervous. "Do you want to?"

"Fuck yes. I'm just, um... centering myself."

"Okay. I'm ready when you are."

Seconds later, the leather paddle smacks against my clothed ass, and although it doesn't sting the way I want it to, it's still just fucking good. "More," I whimper.

"Jesus, Holl."

He brings the paddle down, a little harder this time, and I squirm, aware of his erection pressed into my lower belly. I'm sure he can feel mine pushing against his thigh. I have no idea why I'm not embarrassed.

Axel spans me again, and I shiver as a stream of precum drips from my cock, leaving my briefs sticky. Without pause, Axel brings the paddle down on my ass several times, a whispered tumble of swear words spilling from his lips.

"I bet your ass looks so sweet right now," Axel whispers, and a needy moan leaves my lips. "Such a good boy, Holl. You're so good for me."

I slump against his legs, my body boneless while the room spins around me.

"Ax..." No more words come as I fight back the overwhelming urge to dissolve into tears.

Then Rick is in front of me, his hands carding through my hair. "This is a sub drop you're experiencing."

My mind vaguely remembers the discussion about it. The feeling of euphoria and release that happens after an intense scene, the raw emotions and far away sensations.

"Breathe through it," he tells me. "Axel, make sure he knows you're here. In a private setting, this is the time for aftercare. Rub balm on his tender spots, wash him, feed him, and give him water. Whatever he needs to know he's safe and taken care of."

Axel's hand slides under my shirt, rubbing my back. "I got you, Holl. I've always got you."

I blow out a breath as the world stops spinning and I slowly slide off his lap onto my knees. Axel is gazing at me like I'm some kind of miracle, but all I can see is the man I rely on for everything. Even this.

I'm handed a glass of water and helped to my feet as the crowd erupts into applause for us. Damon smiles. "Thank you for the brave demonstration of safe and consensual play, guys."

Axel takes my hand, squeezing it gently as he leads me back to our seats. Neither of us speak the rest of the class, which thankfully isn't long, and we opt out of the dungeon tour since we've seen it before.

My head is spinning, trying to process everything I just experienced, but even more than that, trying to make sense of why I *wanted* it.

When we step outside, the cooler air sobers me slightly, but I lean into Axel for support.

"How did you get here tonight?" Axel asks.

"Rideshare. You?"

"Same. Want to get wasted?"

"On a Thursday night?"

He grins. "Yep."

I shrug. "Why not."

We head into a quieter bar across from Chaos and take a seat at the bar. Axel orders six shots of Patron, and I know he's serious. We haven't done shots to this extent for years. Does he regret what we did? Or is he just as confused as I am?

The bartender lines up the shots and Axel picks one up, pushing another glass toward me. I lift mine too, relieved as a smile spreads across his lips.

"To old dogs learning new tricks," Axel says, chuckling.

I laugh too. "To old dogs."

---

By the time we stumble into the living room, we're both so drunk it's a wonder we can walk. We haven't stopped laughing

and reliving our younger years since the first shot. Axel reminded me that I did have a wild streak in college that lasted all of six months, but it was still in me once upon a time.

We tumble onto the couch, kicking off our shoes and still laughing at nothing. I'm super lightheaded, but in a good way. "I think I needed this."

Axel laughs. "Yeah."

We settle down, both of us leaning back against the couch, not speaking for a few seconds, until Axel turns to me.

"I had fun tonight, Holl."

"Me too."

"No, I mean at the club. I think I'm a Dom." He laughs at that. "Who would've thought?"

I shrug. "I can see it. You're a nurturer. You take care of me. You always have."

His smile fades as he focuses on my eyes. "And you always let me."

"Yeah, well, apparently I'm a sub."

Axel nods as his tongue flicks over his bottom lip. "Did you like it?"

I nod. "I didn't like it when that other guy was on your lap. I was fucking jealous." I huff a laugh. "Is that weird?"

"No. I was jealous every time Tank touched you last weekend."

I search his face, so familiar yet suddenly new again. His different colored eyes are one of the most comforting things in my life, the way he's always looked at me like I'm the best thing he knows. Maybe... my affection for him was slowly morphing into whatever this is right now.

That's the last thought I have as my mind slowly processes that we're both moving closer to each other. When our lips touch, there's nothing slow or tentative about it.



Axel moans, gripping the back of my neck as his hand slides into my hair. He pushes me back, his much larger body pressing me into the cushions, and my only reaction is to buck my hips into his.

“Holl,” he whispers against my lips before taking his kiss to my jaw and neck, both of us madly rutting into each other, hard cocks knocking together through our clothes.

I reach under his shirt, my breath hitching as I meet the hot skin and taut muscles of his back. Axel bites my neck, reaching down to hook his arm under my knee. The move brings us even closer together, my orgasm building quickly.

I find his mouth again, moaning as our tongues tangle. Axel tastes like tequila and the mint gum we chewed on the way home, but there’s something else, something so familiar and safe that it sends another wave of need through me.

“Want you to come for me, Holl,” Axel whispers, before attacking my mouth again.

I claw at his shoulders, rubbing against him like an animal in heat, desperate for whatever this is that’s happening between us. With my eyes closed, I imagine what this would feel like if we were naked. How it would feel if I touched him, tasted him, or if he entered me.

“Oh, fuck,” I moan as rivers of precum stream from my cock.

“That’s it,” Axel whispers. “Come for me. I’ve got you.”

When it hits, his name is a shout on my lips, and he swallows it, grinding his cock into mine as I ride out the strongest orgasm I’ve had in recent memory. Shaking now, I don’t fight the tears streaming down my cheeks, and I sink into the cushions, holding Axel to me.

“Good boy,” Axel whispers, dotting my face with soft kisses. “Good, sweet boy. You did so well for me.”

“Ax...”

“Shhh. We’ll figure it out. We always do.”

I nod, twisting my fingers in his hair and hunting for his mouth again. The kiss is softer now, sweeter, slower. My eyes grow too heavy to open, and I give in to the sleep dragging me under. We'll figure it out.

We always do.

# Chapter Seventeen

---

After passing out myself for a couple of hours, I feel clear-headed again and regretful that I didn't take care of him immediately after he came. That wasn't very Dom of me, but I'll fix it now.

I lift Hollister from the couch and carry him down the hall, pausing between our bedrooms and then choosing mine. After what happened, there's no way I'm letting him wake up alone.

I lay him down on the bed but struggle with what to do next. I need to get him out of his clothes, but I don't want to be a creep about it. Sure, I've seen him naked before, but not like this. Not after what we did.

Hollister murmurs, his eyelids fluttering for a second, and then he laughs, tugging on the button of his jeans.

"Can I help you, Holl?" I ask.

He nods. "So hot."

"I'm gonna undress you and clean you up a bit, okay?"

"Mm'kay. Naked," he says, snickering.

"You want your pajamas?"

"Naked," he repeats, patting my cheek before closing his eyes again.

Now that I've got his permission, I carefully strip his clothes off, being extra gentle with his cum-soaked briefs.

Once he's naked, I try to avert my eyes, but Hollister pats my chest.

"You too."

"Me too what, Holl?"

"Naked." He chuckles again.

"Holl. Can you look at me?"

He opens his eyes, focusing on my face. "Hi."

"Do you know what's going on right now?"

"Yep. We had sex. I'm sticky. You're helping me get unsticky." He drags his hand down my chest. "We had sex," he repeats, chuckling.

"We did. How do you feel?"

"Sooo good," he says, dragging his words out. "But sleepy."

"Are you drunk?"

Holl focuses on me again, propping himself up on his elbows. "Ax, you're asking me too many questions."

I chuckle. "I just want to make sure you're aware of what's going on. I don't want to take advantage."

His expression turns serious as his brow creases and he puts a hand flat on my chest. "You would never do that. You're just taking care of me. Like you always do." A dopey smile spreads across his face. "I'm a little drunk," he admits. "But I'm not wasted. I know what's going on."

"Okay, good."

"Can I go back to sleep now?"

"Yeah, Holl. You can go back to sleep."

I force myself to my feet and to the bathroom to get a warm cloth, and after returning, I gently wash him before tucking him under my comforter. Returning to the bathroom, I clean myself up quickly and then get in bed too, snuggling close to a softly snoring Hollister.

Lying on my side, I study his face while my head tries to sort out everything that happened tonight. Jealousy, desire, and then an intense need to feel his body and taste his kiss. He obviously wanted it as much as I did, but now what?

Are we gay? I shake my head. That doesn't make sense. I know for a fact that women turn me on. So then what? I'm bi and didn't know it? Am I just intensely attracted to Hollister? And if so, how come I'm just now realizing it?

Closing my eyes and rolling onto my back, I search my memory for any other clue that I might've missed. In our teens I always wanted to see him naked, but I wanted to see everyone naked, even adults. I was curious about bodies. Hollister said it was normal, then in sex ed they told us about how horny teenage boys were and I figured I was just a little hornier than most.

Another time, we were talking about dick size at age fifteen. His is longer than mine but mine is thicker, and we debated which one was better. Rachel Mayberry, a neighbor, was the tiebreaker, telling us that *how* we used it was more important. We believed her since she was nineteen.

Then another memory hits, sending shivers through me. We were swimming and wrestling in the pool, and I got hard. When he jumped on me and we rubbed against each other, I had to pull away to keep him from figuring it out. I wrote it off as just more horniness on my part, but maybe there was something else there I didn't recognize. Something about Holl.

Huh. Slowly it dawns on me that I never got hard seeing the other guys naked in the locker room. Sure, I peeked at their dicks for comparison reasons, but I never *felt* anything about it. Just curiosity. But it was different with Hollister. I *liked* seeing his body. I always found ways to touch him, even if it was just my leg against his while we watched movies or played video games.

As adults, my constant need to touch him morphed into daily hugs and sweet kisses on his forehead or cheek or the top of his head. I smile as the realization slowly sinks in. It's

Hollister. He's always had some kind of hold on me no one else has, even the women I've dated.

I want to take care of him, and I've always been that way. I want to make sure he's happy and safe, that he's eating well and not working too hard. Tonight, I wanted to make him feel pleasure. I wanted him to come, and fuck, I wanted that kiss more than I wanted to breathe.

I want to spank him until he melts against me. I want his moans and pleas. I want to be his Dom.

So that settles it. Hollister is what I want. I just hope I can keep him from spiraling when he wakes up.

---

"Holl," I whisper, pressing soft kisses to his cheek as I card my fingers through his hair. "It's morning."

He groans, slowly peeling his eyes open. "No."

Chuckling, I kiss his forehead. "Call in sick."

He focuses on me, his brow crinkling. "I can't."

"Why not?"

"I never call in sick."

Tilting my head, I raise an eyebrow. "Exactly my point. If you call in sick, I'll make your favorite strawberry stuffed pancakes."

His eyes go wide. "Bribery."

"Yep." I dance my fingers down his chest. "Stay home. Let me take care of you today."

Several emotions, from indecision to fear to affection, flash across his face before he nods. "It would be pretty fun to play hooky."

"Yeah." I drag my fingers through his hair again. "You look fucking hot this morning."

He scoffs, but then his face softens. “You mean that, don’t you?”

“Do I ever say things I don’t mean?”

He shakes his head. “What are we doing, Ax?”

“Right now, we’re talking. Later... we’ll figure it out.”

I see the actual moment the panic sets in. “I don’t want to lose you.”

“You can’t. That’s impossible, and you know it, Holl.” Cupping his cheek, I search his eyes. I want to kiss him so badly, but I hold back. He needs to process all this first. “Freshen up and call out. I’ll be in the kitchen making coffee and breakfast.”

He nods, but I can feel his heart racing against my chest.

“Hollister, breathe.”

He blows out a shaky breath. “Yeah. I’m good.”

“I’m not going anywhere. Nothing and no one could drag me away from you. Got it?”

“Got it.”

“Good.” I press a kiss to his forehead, my cock twitching as his breath catches. I know he wants this as much as I do. I just have to help him through this. Change is hard for him, even good change.

I watch as he climbs out of bed, glancing down at his naked body. When his eyes meet mine, he smiles shyly, his cock reacting to my gaze. I pull the blankets down to show him he’s not alone.

He chuckles, rubbing his forehead. “Is this real life?”

I laugh too, happy for the release of the tension in the room. “I think so, yeah.”

“Wild. Well, let me go blow Sara’s mind and call out sick.”

“I’ll be in the kitchen.”

Climbing out of bed, I squeeze my growing erection to calm it down. We need clear heads right now, not lust.



Hollister's eyes glaze over as he sways, biting into his bottom lip. Fuck, I want to attack him and tackle him into the bed. I could spend all day exploring his body, but I need to chill. It took us thirty years to get to this point. What's a little bit longer?

# Chapter Eighteen

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## HOLLISTER

In my own bathroom while I'm brushing my teeth, I stare at my reflection trying to figure out what happened to me from last Friday to this one. A week ago I was reliable. You could actually set your watch by my routine. I woke up at six and got to the office five minutes before eight most days. I don't drink heavily during the week. I don't drink heavily at all.

Now, a week later, I'm getting spanked in public, partying like a twenty-something, calling in sick, and rubbing myself all over my best friend.

But I can't ignore that all of this was already inside of me. Maybe Axel was right and I've just repressed a lot of shit to stay on the path I thought I should be on. As I rinse my mouth, it's already obvious I can't go back to the boring man I was seven days ago.

I lean against the counter as memories of last night rush back. I wasn't drunk enough not to know what I was doing, just enough to not stop myself. But Axel was right there with me, and based on how he's acting this morning, I think he was into it too.

I know for a fact I had clothes on when I went to sleep, but I don't this morning and there's no evidence of what we did. Axel must've washed me up. Ah yeah. I remember now. We talked about it. The sweet idiot asked for my permission. He took care of me. I'm not surprised. He's always taking care of me.

I grab a pair of basketball shorts from my drawer and sit on the edge of my bed, pressing the button next to Sara's name.

"Hey, boss," she answers, chipper as usual. "Is something wrong? You never call early."

"No, nothing's wrong. Um..." I take a deep breath. "I'm not gonna be in today."

Sara is dead silent on the other end.

"Sara? Did you hear me?"

"I heard some words that don't make any sense at all coming out of you. Did you say you're not coming in today?"

"I did, yes."

"You're calling out?"

"I am."

A surprised laugh is what I hear next. "I better go buy a lottery ticket or have my cards read or something. Surely, this is a once-in-a-lifetime event. Maybe Mercury is off its axis. The planets are shifting. That's the only reasonable explanation. Wait. Is Axel holding you hostage? Should I come rescue you?"

I laugh, scratching the scruff on my cheek. "I don't know what the planets are up to, but I'm fine. Axel isn't doing anything against my will. I just decided I deserve a long weekend."

"The second one in a row."

"Huh. Yeah. I don't think I have any meetings today."

"You don't. Guess the intervention really worked?"

"More than I can even express right now. Hold the fort down?"

"Of course. I mean, the team is gonna lose it, but I'll assure them you haven't been the victim of an alien abduction. Probably."

I laugh. "Thanks, Sara. See you Monday."

“Yeah. Enjoy.”

Chuckling, I end the call and shuffle out to the kitchen, the smell of fresh coffee luring me like a moth to a flame.

Axel smiles as he stands at the island stirring pancake batter. “Your mug is by the machine.”

“Thanks.” I fill my mug with coffee, inhaling before I take a sip. “Oof, I needed this.”

“The coffee?”

“All of it.”

Axel smiles but doesn’t say anything else.

“You washed me up last night, didn’t you?”

He nods. “Yeah. Figured it would be pretty gross to sleep in our jeans with the way the night ended.”

“Good call. Thanks.”

“I got you, Holl. You know that.”

“I do.” Taking another sip of coffee, I think about how to phrase my next question. “Is it weird that it took us this long to discover these other parts of ourselves? I mean, the Dom and sub stuff.”

“I’ve been thinking about that too. What I think is that there were clues, we just didn’t notice them. Not just sexual either, but if you really look at our dynamic as friends and roommates, it’s always been an undercurrent.”

My chest tightens as his words hit a spot deep inside me. “Damn. That’s really true.”

“It’s not bad, Holl.”

“No, it’s not bad. It explains a lot, actually.”

“Right.”

“I wonder if…” My words trail off as a new thought comes to me. “Maybe not knowing is why my sex life has been so… uninspired. Remember that girl Melanie I dated for a month back, damn, I think it was, like, five or six years ago.”

“I do.”

“She wanted me to spank her all the time during sex, but I didn’t want to. I hated doing it. She told me I was too vanilla when she called things off.” I huff a laugh. “Bet she wouldn’t think so if she’d seen me last night.”

Axel chuckles. “Life is a discovery. So is sex. How do we know what we like or don’t like until we’re exposed to it?”

“That makes sense, but until last week, the idea of anyone spanking me, much less you, never crossed my mind.”

He turns to the stove to pour the first pancakes, and my eyes move down his body from the broad shoulders and toned back to his ass, the top of which is revealed in his slouchy sweatpants. I’ve always been aware of how good-looking he is, I’d have to be blind not to be, but I’m seeing him in a new light. He’s not just good-looking, he’s fucking hot, and I want to... I choke on my spit as that thought grips my head.

“What’s wrong?” Axel asks.

“Nothing.” *Just that I want to crawl off this stool, sit at your feet, and choke on your dick. No big deal.*

“You sure?”

I nod, sipping my coffee as a distraction. “Sara about passed out when I told her I wasn’t coming in today.”

Axel chuckles, glancing over his shoulder. “I bet.”

We’re both quiet as Axel focuses on the pancakes and I think about all the possibilities in front of me if I decide not to hold myself back anymore.

I watch him as he slathers two pancakes with sweetened cream cheese and strawberry puree. He slides a plate in front of me, smiling big.

“Eat up.”

I dig in, my thoughts still swirling, until a coherent sentence finally forms. “What would we do if I gave you free rein?”

Axel's eyes go wide as he chews his bite. "Are you sure you want to do that?"

"It's worked out well so far."

"Shit, Holl. There's a million things I want to do with you. Even more now."

I cut into a pancake, shifting my gaze up to his gorgeous face. "Tell me some of them."

"Fuck. Hold on." He taps his fingers on the island, staring at me. "Would you get a tattoo with me?"

A shiver runs down my back, but I nod. "What of?"

"I don't know. Something that means something to us both. Something we can see whenever we need to be grounded again."

"Yes." My whole body heats as soon as the word leaves my mouth. "I'll do it."

"Because you want to? Or are you just pushing your limits?"

"Ax..." I exhale slowly, setting my fork down. "Where do I start? I realized this morning I can't go back to straight and steady, boring Hollister. I put myself in a cage, trying so hard to walk the path my dad wanted me to, hoping someday he would recognize me and appreciate me."

Axel nods, reaching for my hand and squeezing it.

"I've wasted so many years pining for something I'm never gonna get, and now I have to question why I even wanted it. So what if he doesn't approve of my life? Maybe it's time I followed my own path. It's not too late."

"Not at all. What does that look like for you?"

"I don't know yet, but I figure if I just started saying yes to things I want to say yes to instead of looking for reasons to say no, that would be a good start."

Axel's smile grows. "It's a great start. So you really want to get a tattoo?"

“Not just that, Ax. I want to do a lot of stuff. I want to shake off the guy that’s been holding me back. I want to dive right in.” I flip my hand so we’re palm to palm. “But I’m gonna need you more than ever to keep me from sliding back. I’m gonna need my anchor when the panic sets in.”

“You know you can count on me.” Axel walks around the island so he’s beside me, our legs tangled together. “And this thing with us? How does that feel?”

Searching his eyes, I let the feelings rise to the surface, fighting back the scared part of me that’s afraid of losing my best friend. “I’m not gonna lie. It’s scary. I’ve lost every relationship I’ve ever been in, and the only consistent person in my world is you.”

Axel nods, his brow creased. “Same.”

“But it feels good. Normal, in a way. Like an extension of what we already were.”

His expression softens with relief. “I feel that too. I’m attracted to you, Holl. Like, crazy into you. I don’t know why the dungeon took the lid off, but I don’t care either. I believe we’re about to step into something pretty damn epic. Maybe...” Axel shakes his head. “Fuck, I don’t know, Holl, but maybe somehow this is exactly where we’re supposed to end up. We didn’t waste any time at all. We followed the path to each other that made the most sense.”

“I can see that.”

“Imagine if we’d kissed at eighteen, or even twenty-five. Were either of us mature enough to process that back then?”

I laugh. “No.”

“Right? It might’ve torn us apart.” He drapes his arms over my shoulders, playing with my hair in back. “But we’re adults now. We’ve been through shit. Love and loss, ups and downs, and we’ve just become stronger. We’re mature enough to accept how this could happen.”

“I like that idea.”

“I have another one.”



“What’s that?”

“After breakfast we could go back to bed and cuddle. We could... explore a little more.”

“We were drunk last night. Are you worried it was just a moment of weakness?”

“Holl.” He pushes his growing erection into my thigh. “Does that feel like a drunken moment of weakness? I want more of you.”

My stomach flutters as I nod, leaning closer until he presses a soft kiss to my lips. “I want more too.”

“Good. We’ll play and rest and then you’ll trust me to lead you on even more adventures. Can you do that? Can you trust me?”

“I always trust you.”

Axel smiles, kissing me again, his tongue flicking quickly against mine. He tastes sweet, like cream and strawberries, but there’s that something else I caught last night that can only be Axel. He ends the kiss, pressing our foreheads together.

As he steps back, I squeeze my dick and blow out a breath. “You know, being on the receiving end of all that sex appeal of yours is pretty heady.”

“Yeah, well, being on the receiving end of your kisses is nice as fuck.” He winks. “Finish eating. You need your strength.”

Nodding, I stuff another bite into my mouth. I can barely sit still just imagining what my sexy best friend has in mind for me. Whatever it is, for once, I’m not holding back. I am all in.

# Chapter Nineteen

---

After breakfast, the two of us climb back into my bed, lying on our sides facing each other. I'm smiling like an idiot, filled to the brim with jumbled emotions for my best friend. Hollister's smile is softer, more reserved, but that's just him.

"What do you think people will say if they find out?" Hollister asks.

My brow crinkles. "Uh, I don't know. Haven't thought about it. Guess maybe I don't care."

He scoffs, nodding. "That makes sense. I care too much about what people think."

I reach out and drag my hand down his arm. "The people who love us will be happy if we're happy. Even if it takes them a minute to get it. I think right now we just have to figure things out for ourselves before we worry about the outside world."

"Right. I'm jumping ahead."

"One tiny, calculated step at a time."

Hollister chuckles. "So, um, besides what we did, I've been thinking a lot about this submissive side of myself I'm just discovering."

"Yeah, same. Never had a clue that I'd be into dominating someone, but..." My words drift off as I consider what to say next. I don't want to freak him out too fast, but I want to be honest. "Honestly, I feel like it's kind of a you and me

dynamic. Like something in me just wants to give you everything you need and want. I didn't want to spank Everly or the other guys. Just you."

Hollister's cheeks turn pink and he licks his lips. "When it was Blaze doing stuff at first, it was... how do I describe it?" He twists his lips for a second as he works it out. "It was cool but kind of strange and uncomfortable. Until you took over." He smiles. "Then it was like opening the cage."

"Yeah. I want to explore it more. With you."

"Me too. Do you, um, think... maybe we could, um..."

"Join Chaos?"

Hollister releases his breath, nodding. "Yeah. It feels like a safe place to play and explore this."

"I think so too. It'll help us find out how far we want to go and learn how to do things correctly."

"Yeah, 'cause, um, when they talked about rope bondage..." He chuckles, his cheeks turning bright red now. "That sounded exciting."

"Yeah?" I drag a finger down his chest. "You think you'd like me to tie you up, make you helpless?"

Hollister's eyes glaze over as he nods. "Yeah, I think I'd like that."

"Mmhmm. And what else do you want to try?"

"I want..." His voice cracks and he clears his throat. "I want you to take the decision-making away from me. I want you to decide what happens. I'm so tired of all the responsibilities and decisions I have to make just to get through my day. I'm exhausted by how tightly I control my environment. I want to give in and let go, and I know I can do that with you. I know I can trust you to pick me up if I fall."

"You'll never fall, Holl, not with me around."

"Is that what you want too?" he asks. "You want to be in charge of me?"

"Jesus, Holl, when you say it like that..."

“Too much?”

“No.” I scoot closer, my breath catching as our cocks brush together under the blankets. “I want whatever will make you happy. I think that’s what I’ve always wanted. I’ll gladly take care of you, Hollister.”

“I want to take care of you too, but like, differently, obviously. I want you to be happy and find what you need.”

“That’s what we’re doing.” Leaning in, I brush our lips together. Hollister’s little gasp lights me up. “Damn, Holl. It’s kind of wild that it took us so long to see how much we wanted this.”

He nods. “Like you said earlier, maybe we had to take the long road to see what was always right here.”

“And you’re not freaking out about it?”

He grins shyly. “Maybe a little bit, but I can handle it. I want this, Ax.”

I roll on top of him, eating up his sweet moan as our bodies press together. “Worth the wait,” I murmur as I close my mouth over his.

He parts his lips to let me in, and I sink into his taste once again. Today it’s strawberries and cream, but there’s another different, underlying sweetness that teases me to taste more. Hollister grips my back as we rub together, this time without any clothes between us, our cocks turning sticky with precum from both of us.

“Can I touch you?”

“Yes,” he moans. “Fuck, yes.”

I slide my hand down between us, taking my first handful of dick. Hollister’s dick. He’s just as hard and hot as I am, but touching him like this is beyond weird. Not bad weird, just brain short circuiting weird. I suck gently on his neck as I stroke him, rubbing myself on his thigh. Hollister bucks against me, his breathing heavy and moans soft.

I suck his neck harder, knowing I’ll leave a mark, and the image of that in my mind sends another stream of precum

shooting from my cock. Have I ever been this turned on in my life? If I have, I don't remember. All I know is right now, I want Hollister to come more than I want anything else. I want to swallow his cries and rub our slick and sticky bodies together until we fall asleep again from exhaustion.

"Can you imagine what it would feel like if you let me fuck you, Holl?" I whisper, nipping at his earlobe.

"Oh fuck, Ax," he moans. "Do you... do you want to?"

"Someday, yeah." Releasing his cock, I tug at his thigh to pull his leg up, balancing on my other elbow so I can stroke him better. "You can fuck me too. We'll see what we like more."

A low, guttural sound leaves Hollister as he squeezes my shoulders and throws his head back. His cock pulses in my grip, shooting streams of sticky cum. It slides down my hand as I stroke him slowly until he trembles and flinches. His body heat and the scent of his cum waft around me, making my stomach do flips as I join him in release.

I bury my face against his neck, riding it out as I hump against his softening cock. Hollister wraps his legs around my waist, kissing and biting sweetly on my neck as his hands twist in my hair. I slump against him, shifting most of my weight to the mattress, but he doesn't let me go, and I don't want him to.

As we lie together, slowly coming back to earth, my chest feels tight, but in a good way. I'm filled with so many things I want to say, but I keep my mouth shut. I know Hollister and he doesn't need a bunch of emotional word vomit right now. He needs my closeness.

"Fuck," Hollister whispers.

"You okay?"

"Definitely. I'm better than okay. I'm astounded."

"Yeah. Me too." Rising slightly, I search his face. He looks gorgeous with his hair messed up and flushed cheeks. "Nap?"

He nods, straining his neck to give me a soft kiss. "Nap."

---

I wake before Hollister and head to the living room to research how to join Chaos. As I look over the membership details on their website, a mixture of excitement and terror swirls around me. I'm so curious about this hidden side of me, and happy I can explore it with Holl by my side, but the thought hits me that this could blow up on us.

What if we cross too many lines we can't get back from?  
What if we're not really into each other and this is just a blip?  
What if this is what breaks our friendship?

Slumping on the couch, I rub my forehead. We really just jumped into this headfirst, and last night it all seemed like a great idea, but fuck. What were we thinking? Now I'm feeling bad that I pushed Holl into something he hasn't had time to think through. That's not like him. I'm the one who makes impulsive decisions and lives to regret them, not him.

Oh fuck. What if I screwed up? What if all of this is a mistake? Is it too late to stop it? But if I pump the brakes, will I hurt his feelings? What if he thinks I'm not into him? Am I into him? My dick sure is, and kissing him is... nice. But is this really how we want our relationship to be? Do we want to shift from friends to romance when neither of us have ever been into dudes before?

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Ax?"

I turn my head to see Hollister standing in the hallway, wearing only his briefs with his hair a mess. My stomach instantly flutters in response. That's gotta mean something, right?

"Hey."

"What are you doing?"

"Just, um..." Panicking. Questioning my entire existence. Wondering if I'm about to ruin the best thing in my life.  
"Nothing."

Hollister snorts a laugh and ambles over to plop down beside me. “You sure?”

“Actually, I was looking up how to join Chaos. If we still think we want to.”

“What’s involved?”

“Background check and payment.”

“Oh, it’s cool that they check backgrounds.”

“It is.” I stare at my laptop screen instead of Hollister, but slowly I end up turning my head toward him.

He’s scratching his stomach, his eyes trained on my computer screen, his expression curious and unguarded. I need to tell him what I’m feeling. I don’t hide shit from Hollister, and now would be a really bad time to start.

“Holl?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m, um, I’m freaking out a little.”

Hollister sits up, placing his hand on my forearm. “What’s going on?”

“You know how impulsive I can be.”

“Yeah.”

“I started thinking about it, about what’s happening between us, and I was all in because it feels good. It feels like it’s okay that it’s happening.”

“But?”

“What if we fuck it up? Neither one of us has a stellar romance record. What if we’re excited because it’s new and fun and different, but it fizzles out? Then what happens? We could lose everything we have together.”

Hollister’s eyes grow wider the longer I talk, before he stands up and paces the room, ending up in front of the windows.

“Holl?”



“Well fuck,” he whispers, twisting to face me. “I was counting on your confidence to guide us, but you’re having doubts.”

“I don’t doubt how I feel with you. It’s more like what happens after that, or how do we fix shit if we break it? I can’t lose you the way I’ve lost everyone else.”

Hollister nods, crossing his arms over his chest. “No, you’re right. We were being impulsive. Should we just back out now? Call it a weird blip and move forward as friends?”

The logical part of my brain is nodding in agreement, but the way my chest tightens and my stomach tenses tells me that’s not the path my heart wants to take. “I don’t know. Can we do that?”

I scratch the back of my head, at a complete loss. The idea of not holding him again, not kissing him, not feeling our bodies smashed together again leaves a bad taste in my mouth, but the thought of us not being friends anymore is worse.

“I’m sorry, Holl. This is my fault. I pushed us to this weird place.”

“Stop it. You didn’t force me, and frankly, it’s the most fun I’ve had in a long time.” He walks back to where I’m at and sits next to me, his hand resting on my knee. “I’m not sure we can just pretend it didn’t happen, but we can try.”

“How?” I fix my gaze on his. “How do we go back, Holl?”

He searches my eyes, and as he does, I already know it’s hopeless. I want him, and nothing else seems to matter right now. Gazing into each other’s eyes, we lean in at the same time, and as our lips meet, passion explodes between us. Hollister climbs onto my lap, straddling me, his erection quickly growing and pressing into my stomach as I knead his ass.

His kiss settles all the nerves and insecurity, so I just give in to it, believing somehow we’ll figure it out. “I won’t let you go, Holl,” I whisper against his lips.

“Never,” he says back. As he pulls away, pressing our foreheads together, his fingers tangle in my hair. “We opened

the cage, and I don't think we can stuff this beast back inside."

"No."

"So we just have to promise each other we'll fight for this. No matter how it goes, we'll fight for each other."

"I promise."

Hollister sits back, nodding. "I promise too."

"Do we still want to try the club?"

"I do, but if you want to wait—"

"No." I shake my head. "I want to go."

"Okay then. Let's sign up."

"Yeah. Okay."

Hollister climbs off my lap, making me want to grab him and put him back, but I let him go. As I click the membership link on the website page, I glance at him, and my heart sinks. For all his words of confidence, doubt lingers on his face.

I hope we're not making the biggest mistake of our lives. I couldn't survive losing him.

## Chapter Twenty

## HOLLISTER

Stepping into Chaos this time carries a weight with it that's impossible to ignore. Between what it means for me individually and what potential impact this could have on my relationship with Axel, it's... a lot. But for the first time in maybe forever, I didn't choose the safe route. I chose the chaotic one, and damn, I hope I didn't fuck up.

As members, we're not met by anyone and are free to enter the club and explore. The downstairs nightclub area is filled with people, pulsing lights, and loud music. Men of all types stand around the bar, sit together in booths, or writhe on the dance floor. The air around us is electric and crackling with sex.

"Do you want to get a drink here first?" Axel asks, standing close to be heard over the music.

"No. I want to go upstairs."

He smiles. "Yeah, me too."

As we walk to the secret elevator, I remind myself to breathe so I don't pass out. I thought the background checks would take a while, but they only took a few hours and now here we are. The elevator doors open and we step on, scanning our new passes to select the correct floor.

Axel's body next to mine is a much-needed anchor, and I lean into him until the doors open again and we step out right into an erotic scene on stage. Two men, very naked, roll around sensually, covered in what looks like some kind of oil.

It's not sexual, more sensual as their bodies slip and slide into different positions.

Axel grips my hand like he's holding on for dear life. "Damn. That's hot."

Swallowing the dryness in my mouth, I nod. "They sure know what they're doing here."

Axel chuckles, leading me down the hall to the dungeons. We study the sign-up log but the room isn't booked for another two hours. Which means we can go in now.

"Are we doing this together or apart?" I ask.

"Together," Axel answers quickly. "No way do I want to do this with someone else."

I nod, relieved by his answer. "Same."

"Gentleman." We both turn to see Jace walking toward us. "What a pleasure to see you again. Taking advantage of the dungeon?"

"We are," Axel says, grabbing my hand possessively.

"Great," Jace says, glancing at our hands with a smirk. "We have free rooms, or you can wait for a scheduled time with a master."

"Free room," Axel says.

"Well then, have fun, boys." Jace winks and saunters away, swinging his hips as he does.

We enter the dungeon together and stand near the doorway, looking at the setup. All the toys are out, the table with condoms and lube, the furniture. My body heats as soon as I see the barrel, remembering how it felt to be draped over it.

"Do you know where you want to start?" Axel asks, his voice weirdly husky.

"Yep. That." I point to it, even as my hand shakes. "I want..." The words fall away as soon as I realize what I'm about to say.

"Tell me, Holl."

“I want you to, um, to...” I squeeze my eyes shut. “To spank me.”

“Yeah,” he says. “Let’s do that.”

“Okay.” I turn to face him. “Should we, um, change or something?”

“Do you want to get naked?”

I nod, even though my cheeks blaze with heat.

“Okay.” Axel puts his hand on my shoulder. “Let’s just agree that this is a safe space for us. We can be whatever we want or need in here.”

“Yeah. I agree. I’m just excited.”

Axel’s tongue flicks across his bottom lip as his eyes heat. “Yeah? You want to be spanked like a bad boy?”

“Oh fuck. Yes. I don’t want to be bad. I want to be good.”

“For who?”

“For you, sir.”

“Prove it.”

Um, okay, where the hell did this beast come from? I don’t dare ask, too desperate to keep this going before either of us chickens out. I practically tear my clothes off while Axel is far more chill, tugging his shirt over his head but leaving his jeans in place.

Once I’m down to my briefs, I instinctively put my hands over the growing bulge, but Axel clicks his teeth.

“Don’t hide yourself from me, Holl. You’re too pretty for that.”

Pretty? A full body shiver rattles through me as I drop my hands.

“Briefs too.”

My breath catches but I nod, sliding them from my body.

“Mmm, look at you,” Axel says, his eyes roaming over my naked body. “I like looking at you.”

“I like it too.”

He steps toward me, his expression turning stern. “Why are you getting spanked?”

“I, um, I think that—”

“Uh-uh,” he interrupts. “Be confident in your words. Tell me why you need this, Holl.”

I let his question bounce around my head until an answer comes to me. “I’ve been too good for too long for the wrong reasons.”

“Yeah? Tell me about that.”

“I followed all the rules, did what was expected, but it’s led to so much disappointment. I want to learn to be good for the right reasons. My reasons.”

A slight smile pulls at his lips. “So you want me to be the one to do it?”

“Only you. Free me from the past and this boring existence. Teach me who I really am. Show me who you see when you look at me.”

“Damn. I’m so proud of you.”

“Not yet.”

“Yes. Just getting here was a big step.” He exhales slowly. “Now lay yourself out for me.”

“Oh fuck.” I scramble to the barrel, draping myself over the cool leather, my legs shaking so much I vibrate.

With my eyes closed, I listen to Axel move around the room, and I imagine him choosing what he’s going to spank me with. I have no idea why this is exciting to me, but it is. My rock-hard cock is proof of that.

His presence looms over me, casting a shadow as heat pours off him. “Safeword?”

“Broccoli.”

“Yes.” He reaches out and touches the bare skin of my ass, squeezing gently. “Fuck, your skin is soft.”

I squirm as my cock plumps even more. I won't allow my brain to get too rational with this. I want to enjoy the moment and lose myself in it.

Axel moves behind me and presses his cock against my ass. Oh yeah, he's naked now, and I want to turn and look, but I'm also afraid I'll come the minute I process all this, so I keep my eyes closed.

"Remember to tell me if it's too much," Axel says.

"I will."

Then soft leather smacks against my skin. It's... nice, but not what I'm looking for. He swats me a few times with it before stepping away. When he returns, he rubs something much harder across my skin.

"It's a paddle," he says. "I think you want something more, am I right?"

"Yesss," I hiss.

"Okay." He rubs my ass in a circular motion and then, *whack!* He brings the paddle down pretty hard, leaving a sting that is instantly addictive.

"Holy fuck."

"Stop?"

"No. No, please. Again."

Axel swats me again, but I can tell he's holding back.

"Harder," I whisper.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes. Please, Ax."

"Please what?" he asks, appearing in front of me and gripping my chin so I'm forced to look into his eyes. His cheeks are flushed, eyes wild. "What do you call me here?"

"S-s-sir. Please, sir. Harder."

"That's my good boy." He presses a soft kiss to my lips. "I'll give you anything you want."



As he moves behind me again, the thought of wanting his dick inside me assaults my mind, and I shiver as precum dribbles from my cock. If I manage not to come during this process, it'll be a damn miracle.

# Chapter Twenty-One

---

Fuck, my best friend is hot.

Seeing him straddling this damn barrel with his ass out and his skin red, moaning for more, is about to melt my brain.

I resume my position behind him, ready to give him exactly what he wants. With each swat, I feel another part of his defenses melt away, and I think he needs this. He needs to know he's so much more than what his father wants him to be.

I deliver the next smack pretty hard, the loud sound of the leather against his skin sending shockwaves through me. His ass bounces with every swat, and as if possessed, I just want to get on my knees and bury my face there.

“Ax,” he mumbles after several more smacks.

“Safeword?”

“No. Want... Touch me.”

“You want me to touch you? Where?” He whimpers and the sound unlocks some buried part of me. “Where, Hollister?”

“I... don't know.”

“You want me to decide?”

“Oh fuck. Please.”

“Well then ask nicely, sweet boy.”

Hollister moans, rubbing himself on the barrel. “Please, sir. Touch me somewhere. Wherever you want.”

Dropping the paddle, I shake my shoulders to clear my head. I want this experience to be amazing for both of us. I stand behind him, gently rubbing his red ass cheeks, then pull them apart slightly, gasping at the sight of his hole. Never in a million years did I think I'd find this attractive, much less on a guy, but fuck, yeah. I want some of that.

I kneel again, dragging my finger down his crack, and his reaction is out of this world. His body shakes and he moans my name loudly, kicking his legs.

“Too much?” I ask.

“No. I like it.”

“So do I. You look good like this, Holl.”

He smacks his head on the leather bumper, making me chuckle. Deciding not to overthink, I just let instinct take over and lick a stripe over his hole. Hollister shouts my name, but I'm a goner. His hole is perfect—soft, clean, needy.

Next thing I know, I've got my whole face buried between his ass cheeks, lapping at his hole like it's my favorite meal. Hollister moans and pushes back against my tongue, obviously enjoying himself. I didn't restrain him, but I kind of wish I had. That would make driving him wild even better.

“Ax,” he moans. “Ax, Ax, Ax.”

“Shh, good boy. I've got you.”

I push the tip of my finger into his hole, gasping as his body gobbles me up, accepting me easily. I want to fuck him. Fucking hell.

“Ax. Pl-please.”

“What, baby? What can I do?”

“Make me come.”

“Mm, yeah. I want to.”

Standing, I grip Hollister around the waist and pull him off the barrel and into me. He twists in my arms to face me, throwing his arms over my shoulders and practically climbing

me. I walk us over to the cross and lean him into it, pausing only to grab lube before I'm back and slicking my hand.

I grip his dick, focusing on what he feels like in my hand. Hot and hard, he throbs, spilling sticky dots of precum.

"Fucking hot," I whisper, leaning in to bite his neck. "You're so hot, Hollister."

Instead of rejecting the compliment, he watches me with heavy eyes, his cheeks bright red and lips parted.

"You've been such a good boy," I whisper. "Taking everything I give you." I stroke his cock faster. "Do you want to know what I'm thinking?"

Hollister nods. "Yes."

"I'm thinking about how gorgeous your body is, how delicious your ass looks, how much I want my cock inside of you."

"Yes," he whispers. "Yes."

"Not tonight, but soon."

"Why?"

"Do you trust me, Holl?" I grip his chin with my free hand. "Trust me to take care of you and give you what you need when you need it?"

He squeezes his eyes closed, nodding.

"Open your eyes. Look at me."

He nods, his expression wrecked. I know he's close as he starts thrusting into my fist.

"You want to come so bad, don't you?"

"Yes, sir. Please."

"Yeah? Then what?"

"Make you come," he gushes. "Gah, I want to make you come."

"How?"

Hollister searches my eyes for a second. “With my mouth, sir.”

My stomach does a somersault. “You sure?”

“Fuck yeah.”

“I hope it’s what you want, ’cause I’m gonna fuck your throat and come all over you.”

Hollister’s entire body tenses. He throws his head back, his nails digging into the leather, and I look down in time to see the sticky ropes of cum shooting from his cock.

The sight nearly pushes me over the edge, but I stumble backward and land in the massive leather chair. A dazed Hollister steps off the platform and falls to his knees, crawling across the wood floors to me. He’s fucking *crawling*. I squeeze the base of my dick to keep myself from blowing right now.

With his hands on my knees, he gazes up at me with his sexed-out eyes. “May I suck your cock, sir?”

“Jesus, babe.”

“Please?”

“Yeah.”

He practically pounces on me, swallowing my erection with no chill at all, until he gags. All he does is laugh and scoot closer, trying again until he’s got most of me in his mouth. I haven’t had time to wonder what a blow job from my best friend would feel like, but if I had, it wouldn’t be this fucking amazing. I don’t know if it’s his enthusiasm or if he’s just a natural, but goddamn, he’s good. It’s like he’s made it his personal mission to erase every blow job before this one. It’s sloppy and wet and he gags more than once, but with his fingers on my balls and his hot mouth all over my dick, it’s only a few minutes before I’m done.

I bury my fingers in his hair just as my orgasm hits, and I fuck into his throat through it, realizing too late that I didn’t warn him or pull away.

“Oh fuck. I’m so sorry.”

He sits back on his haunches with a dopey grin on his face and my cum on his chin. His hair's a mess, and his face is red. "For what?"

"I didn't warn you. Didn't pull out. I was too into it."

"I loved it. I wanted you to use me and you did."

"What... what was it like? I mean, I came."

"I knew you were going to. I wanted to feel it. Wanted to taste you. I wanted to know if..." He shakes his head. "I guess, if this attraction is the real thing, you know? Not just spankings and whips but that I really *want* you. All of you. All of this."

"And?"

He lays his head on my inner thigh, eyes shifting up to me. "I asked you to teach me who I really am, and you did. This is me. Submissive and needy. This is me, sexually and emotionally attracted to a man who just happens to be my best friend." His eyes turn glassy. "I feel like I just stepped into a universe I didn't know existed. Not just the sub stuff, but this. Us. Sex has always been... you know, okay, but not epic."

"Yeah."

"But this was epic. I'm not afraid to admit that if you'd bent me over to fuck me, I would've let you. I wasn't just saying that."

"I wanted to, but I didn't want to overwhelm us. When I saw you bent over, I knew it was all real. Who really cares why we didn't see it before? Maybe we just weren't ready yet."

"Yeah." He sits up but sways a bit. "Oh damn."

"Fuck. I messed up aftercare too. Sit right there."

I hustle out of my chair and walk over the snack area, grabbing water, juice, and a package of cookies. When I return, I help Hollister into the chair.

"Eat your snack. I'll be right back."

Hollister grins and nods while I hustle over to the sink to get a warm cloth. I return to his side, kneeling to wipe his torso down. He watches me with sweet eyes, dutifully eating his snack.

“I like this side of you, Ax.”

“I like this side of you too.”

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By the time we enter our place a few hours later, both of us are exhausted. Everything was overstimulating, but there's a certain peace within me I'm pretty sure I haven't felt before. I hope Hollister feels the same way.

He grabs my hand and leads me to the couch. As we sit, he scoots closer and lays his head on my chest.

“The first time you kissed me on the cheek,” he begins, “I remember thinking it was nice because my family wasn't affectionate like that.”

“Yeah?”

He tickles my chest through my shirt. “Eventually I got used to it, but I've always liked it. I hoped you would keep doing it even as we grew up. You kept getting more chill and fun and affectionate and I kept getting more serious and uptight.”

I wrap my arm around him and rub his back. “You had a lot of pressure on you.”

“I know, but it means a lot to me that you never left. You never made me feel like I was lame, even though I was.”

“You're not lame, Holl. I've always loved hanging out with you, even if all we do is order a pizza and watch a movie we've seen a hundred times. It doesn't matter as long as we're together.”

He tilts his head up. “I've wondered many times why you didn't go out and find people you have more in common with. I'm glad you didn't, but I feel like maybe I held you back.”



“Hey.” I card my fingers through his hair. “I’m a grown man. I can choose who to hang out with and my first choice is always you. It always will be you. Do you know why?”

He huffs a laugh. “Not at all.”

“Because you get me. You knew me when I was just a scrawny kid that was too loud and couldn’t pay attention in class. You never cared what I did for a living or how I dressed or how I acted. You’ve never judged me or told me I need to settle down or get serious about life. You just accept me the way I am.”

“You’re easy to accept.”

“So are you, even though you don’t think so, but that’s your dad talking. Look at all the other people in your life, Holl. You’re a great guy, and your heart is big, and the fact that you don’t throw it around at everyone makes it really special when you do. I’m proud of you. So proud. Being your best friend, and now... whatever this is, makes me feel like a fucking king.”

“Come on, Ax.”

“I’m serious. You told me earlier to help you see yourself the way I do, so that’s what I’m gonna do. I think you’re incredible.” Gazing into his eyes, I take a chance and say the words still on my tongue. “And you’re such a good boy for me.”

His eyelids flutter as he exhales, clutching my shirt in his fist. “Am I?”

“So good, and I’m gonna be a better Dom. I’m gonna learn how to take care of you.”

“You’re a perfect Dom for me. I was thinking on the way home... Can we, um... maybe we could get a few things for the house and, you know, practice here.”

“You want to be my good boy at home too?”

Hollister nods. “I do. I want to see what it feels like just in regular life, you know?”

“Yeah, me too. So, just to make sure, you want me to take charge?”

“Fuck yeah,” he whispers, rubbing his soft dick against my thigh. “Guide me.”

I lean in and press a kiss to his lips. “You know, Holl, if we’re not careful, we’re gonna fall in love.”

“We’re already halfway there. We’ve loved each other in one way for a long time. It’s not such a leap to the rest of it, is it?”

“I was hoping you’d say that.” I kiss him again. “Thank fuck I can’t pay attention to details. It led us to discovering this between us.”

He laughs softly. “Will you sleep with me tonight?”

“Definitely.”

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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## HOLLISTER

Last night felt like a dream, but when I roll over in bed straight into Axel's warm body, I know it was real. Everything we did rushes back, and my dick immediately reacts, twitching and swelling. Whoa. It's almost unreal how my body reacts to the mere idea of me and Ax and all the subby things I want to do with him.

The weirdest part though, is that it doesn't make me feel weak the way I do when I let my dad walk all over me, or when my coworkers speak over me and I don't stand up for myself. It feels like the opposite of weakness, which doesn't make sense to my analytical brain.

I slip from the bed to let Axel keep sleeping and start the coffee. My head is still stuck on how much has changed for me in such a short time. For us. It makes me question a lot of things, like if I was more bisexual than I knew all along or if I just have some kind of connection to Axel that makes all of this possible. Maybe he's right and it doesn't really matter.

As the coffee brews, I curl up on the couch with the journal Axel gave me. In it is my calculated chaos list, and reading over it brings a smile to my face. Get a tattoo, do something scary, explore submissiveness. I could literally check them all off as one thing, but since writing it, my viewpoint is already changing.

Suddenly my world is opening up to possibilities I haven't allowed myself to entertain. Instead of trudging through the

dating scene again, I could have what I've always hoped for and more with Ax. I could even...

The sudden thought gripping me nearly takes my breath away. A distant memory, a dream, hurtling back to me like an out of control truck. Seventeen-year-old me dreamed of owning my own café, with books and pastries and a place that people wanted to spend time in. When I told my folks, I was met with sweet encouragement from my mom, but my dad delivered a damn presentation on how many new businesses, especially food related, fail in their first year. I had to listen to how unqualified I was and how even though I had some skill in the kitchen, I would always be struggling when I could have a secure future following Dad's path.

I thought he'd killed the dream, but as it blooms again in my chest, I realize he didn't. It was just hibernating. Could I do something so scandalous? Could I figure out how to get a business like that started while keeping my job for income? Where would I even start?

"You okay?" Axel asks from the hallway.

I glance up, my breath catching at the sight of him. Messy hair, sleepy eyes, and low-riding shorts make the man look like a walking dream.

"You're so hot, Axel. I've always known it, but not from this angle."

"What angle is that?"

"That I can... you know?"

"Use your words, sweet boy."

My stomach does a flip as my eyes go wide. "Oh damn."

"Didn't like it?"

"Loved it. I don't know why, but sweet boy from your lips is the highest praise."

Axel smiles, sauntering over to me with the swagger he used in the club. "It feels good to say it, even though I'm well aware you're a grown-ass man."

“I made coffee,” I say, knowing my cheeks are bright red.

“I’ll get it. You stay here.”

Axel walks to the kitchen, and I twist around on the couch to stare at his ass. My needy begging from last night returns to me now, sending a wave of desire through my entire body. I want him again, and I want him now.

Axel returns carrying two mugs of coffee. As he settles next to me, I can tell from his curious expression that he has a question.

“What’s on your mind, Ax?”

“Weird question, but what was it like when... um, well, when I came in your mouth.”

Just hearing the words causes my dick to twitch again. “Honestly, it happened so fast and I was just turned on that it was happening. It wasn’t gross, if that’s what you’re asking.”

His forehead creases. “Britt always said it was gross. Couple of other women I dated too.”

“Maybe they just didn’t like it. Rebecca refused to even try, but I dated another girl that loved it.” I put my hand on his thigh. “I loved it, but I think it’s because I wanted to please you so badly. I wanted you to feel as good as I did. I still want that.”

Axel’s eyes heat as he searches my face. “I’m not gonna lie, you looked so gorgeous on your knees with my cock in your mouth. It was like... I don’t know how to say it, but like you were made for me.”

“Maybe I was, Ax. We’ve always had a strong connection. It’s not too shocking that we ended up here, is it?”

“No.” He sets his mug down, then takes mine from me and does the same. “I want to do it to you. I want to feel your cock on my tongue, I want to be inside you, and I want you to fuck me too. I want to do everything there is to do with each other.”

I nod, scooting closer. “I do too.”

Axel cups my face. “I’m not afraid to say that I think everything I was ever searching for and longing for was right here all along.”

“You’re not scared anymore?”

He chuckles. “Hell yeah, I am, but I’m doing it anyway. I believe in us enough to work through it if things change.”

“I do too.”

Axel presses a kiss to my lips. “Good,” he whispers before pulling back. “Let’s enjoy our coffee then go to a museum.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “A museum? Why?”

“I owe you one. Besides, I just want to make you happy, Holl. It’s all I’ve ever wanted.”

“You’re too good for this world, Ax.”

“Nah. I’m just a guy who knows what a gift you are as a friend and a lover. We’ve earned this happiness. Both of us.”

“You’re right.”

“Now be a good boy and finish your coffee so I can wash your gorgeous body.”

I shake my head, grinning. “I promise to be very good.”

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After rushing through coffee, my excitement builds as we walk down the hallway together. Axel holds my hand like he’s afraid I’m going to get lost or run away, but there’s no chance of that happening. Granted, I’m still trying to make sense of all this, but for once in my life, I’ve made a change that feels right. I don’t want to run from it.

Axel releases my hand, turning his attention to the shower. I doubt it’s big enough for both of us to fit comfortably, but that just means we can get close. I lean on the vanity, watching from behind how his muscles ripple under his skin. I’ve always been an ass guy, and Axel has booty for days.

The memory of his tongue on my ass grips me and my cock instantly swells. I rub myself while wondering what it would be like to return the favor. Would he come undone the way he took me apart?

He turns to face me, a slow, sexy smile spreading across his lips. “Enjoying the show?”

“Yep. It’s crazy how I can see you in a totally different light now. You were always handsome to me, above average, but now?” I shake my head. “You’re perfect.”

Axel closes the space between us. When he reaches me, he wraps his arms around my waist, grinding his growing erection into mine. “And you’re gorgeous. Especially when lust takes over.”

“Why?”

“You look good with flushed cheeks and plump lips after we kiss.” His eyes heat as he speaks. “I really love looking at you, Holl.”

“Back atcha.”

Smiling, he takes my wrist and guides me into the shower, where we do have to squish together. We laugh as we jockey for the soap and the shower spray, somehow managing to wash up without flooding the bathroom.

Now cracking up, we grab towels and head to my bedroom, where we collapse on my bed. After a few seconds, Axel rolls on top of me, his laughter falling away as his expression turns serious.

“I want to blow you,” he says.

I nod as my stomach flutters. “Whatever you want.”

“If I do everything I want, we won’t leave the house today.”

“I don’t have a problem with that either. The museum will be there another day.”

Axel lowers himself and claims my lips in a heated kiss that I swear makes me melt into the mattress. Damn, the man



can kiss. I always figured he was a sex god, and learning I was right is cool as fuck.

He kisses his way from my mouth to my chest, circling my nipples and sending shivers through me. No one has ever paid attention to them, and when Axel sucks on them, I nearly jump out of my skin.

“Oh fuck. That’s so good.”

“Yeah?” Axel asks, glancing up at me as he circles my nips with his tongue. “I like how they feel in my mouth.”

“I like how they feel in your mouth too.”

Axel grins, moving on even though I moan with disappointment. That emotion is short lived though as he dots kisses on my inner thighs. My cock, already sticky with precum, twitches with every kiss until I’m close to humping the air just for some relief.

“Patience, sweet boy. You promised you’d be good for me.”

His words cause another hot wave of need to hit me, and I nod, biting my bottom lip.

“You love being good for me, don’t you?” Axel says, flicking his tongue out, just barely making contact with my ball sac.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Sir. Oh god.”

“Do you want me to suck your cock? Want to show me what you taste like?”

“Yes, sir. Please.”

“Mm, I want that too.”

He drags his tongue up my shaft before sucking just the head of my dick into his hot mouth. A hiss of pleasure leaves my lips, and I twist my fingers in the sheets.

“That’s right,” Axel says. “Keep your hands exactly where they are.”

He returns to sucking me, slowly, savoring each up and down stroke of his tongue, and pushing me to the edge of my sanity in the process. Axel reaches under me, gripping my ass cheeks and kneading them as he swallows my length.

When the tip of his finger tickles my hole, I cry out again, desperate for something I have no words to describe. It’s like a tug of war between needing the release of an orgasm and wanting this sweet torture to last forever. Axel must know it, as he pops off my dick and hovers over my face, the tip of his finger still gently pushing into me.

“Can you imagine what it’s going to feel like the first time we fuck?” he asks.

I nod. “Yeah, I can. Gonna be hot.”

“It is.” He pulls his finger out of me and licks it before replacing it.

Oh fuck, that’s good.

“You know what we should do?” Axel asks, not waiting for me to answer. “We should get tested together so I can come inside you and you can come inside me. Wouldn’t that be fun? I’d leave it there and let it drip out of me, and I’d make you keep mine inside of you and I’d spank and finger you and make you messy.”

My eyes go wide. I never expected Axel could talk like this.

“Sound good, babe?”

“So good,” I whisper. “I want you.”

“Mm, I want you too.”

He slides down my body and returns to his oral ambush of my dick, sucking me in and out and finding a pace that feels like fucking heaven. I’m getting too close to the edge, moving my hips to fuck his throat. I want to bury my fingers in his hair or drag my nails over his shoulder, but I keep my hands planted beside me like he told me to.

Just as I'm about to explode, he pops off me, grinning as I whine and buck against the bed.

"Such a pretty boy," Axel whispers. "So good for me. Look at you. Damn, babe. You make me crazy."

"Please. I'll do anything to come."

"You don't have to do anything. Just trust that I'll take good care of you." He tickles my balls. "Do you still trust me, sweet boy?"

I nod, even though I'm dying. My cock is throbbing with need, my ass clenching around his finger.

"Beautiful," he whispers, pushing his finger in deeper.

It burns and stings, but there's something addictive about the pain. "More."

"Shh, baby. Trust."

I close my eyes, but Axel clicks his teeth.

"Uh-uh. You keep those pretty eyes on me. I want to see you come and I want you to see me watching you. I always want you looking at me, Holl."

I gaze at him, utterly speechless and in complete awe of how he commands me. He's a natural, all right.

"Good boy," Axel says, grinning as he kisses my stomach.

Then he shows me mercy and returns to sucking my dick like his life depends on it. I turn into some kind of sex-crazed maniac, bucking wildly and fucking both his throat and his finger. The pleasure is almost too much, like I might crack open from it, and I welcome my demise. I'm positive I've never felt this good in my life.

"Gonna come," I moan. "Oh, fuck, Ax. Gonna come so hard."

He responds by swallowing my entire length, gagging around it but not letting go. He pushes his finger just a little deeper, and that's all it takes. I fist the sheets as my body tenses and my cock pulses, releasing what has to be the strongest orgasm of my life.

It seems to last forever as wave after wave washes over me until I'm completely spent. Axel pops off and slides his finger out of me, moving up to my mouth for a sexy, sensual kiss. It's slow and deep and full of all the things we haven't dared to say yet, but as I wrap my arms around his neck, two things are crystal clear.

This man is my future, and I'm completely in love with him.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

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## AXEL

After just a couple of days of waking up next to Holl, I've already become addicted to it. He smells good in the morning—soft, and exactly how I would describe cozy if it had a scent. His body is warm and he snuggles against mine with his face smashed under my armpit. Guess I don't smell so bad either.

I have to piss, but there's no way I'm disturbing him. Instead, I distract my bladder by imagining what we might do next. Definitely gonna buy some sex toys. Maybe we can convert one of our bedrooms since there's no fucking way I'm not sleeping in the same bed anymore.

My mind wanders to what our friends and family might say, and if I even care. The only person whose opinion of my life has mattered for a long time is the guy lying next to me right now. I'm not sure anything matters besides the two of us and this new life we're embracing.

The doubt that's been plaguing me since it all started is fading, but not gone. At any moment now, Hollister could freak out and pull the reins. Hell, I could panic. I'm not exactly known for my relationship prowess.

I just have to hold on to hope that we'll figure it out if anything goes sideways. Like the time we actually got in a fight over Cara Miles back in our senior year. To be fair, Cara was using our closeness to stroke her ego, but we fell for it. It was the first time we'd both liked the same girl, and one night at a party she'd invited us both to, it blew up, thanks to too much alcohol on my part and Hollister's insecurity. It was the

first time since we became friends that we didn't talk to each other for a full twenty-four hours.

But Hollister's maturity won out. He came over and told me that he'd rather admit defeat and let me have the girl if it meant keeping me as his best friend. At that moment, I realized no one was more important than Holl. We both told Cara to get fucked.

"Morning," he whispers, kissing my side. "What time is it?"

"No clue." I kiss the top of his head. "I have to pee. Be right back."

"Mm hmm."

I slide out of bed and head to the bathroom. Once I'm done, I hurry to the kitchen to start the coffee pot, then return to the bedroom. Hollister is sitting up, his hair standing on end as he frowns at his phone.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing. It's eleven. I don't remember the last time I slept like that on a Sunday."

"Feels good though."

"Amazing, actually." He sets his phone down. "I'd also like to point out that I have not looked at my email all weekend."

Grinning, I crawl back into bed, slinking towards him. "Good boy."

Hollister's eyes heat as he gazes at me. "I love it when you say that."

"I know." Leaning in, I press a quick kiss to his lips. "You look delicious in the morning."

"Delicious, huh? Whatcha wanna eat?"

"Mm, so many things. I want to tie you up and bend you over to gorge myself on your ass."

He whimpers, rubbing his growing erection under the blanket. “Ax.”

“And then flip you over and suck your dick until you beg me to stop.”

“And then?”

“Fuck you, deep and long, drawing every sexy moan from that pretty mouth of yours.”

“You, sir, have dirty talk down.”

“I’m inspired.” I climb on top of him, pressing him into the mattress and rubbing against him. “I can’t get enough of you. There are so many things I want to do with you. To you. Let you do to me.”

“We have time. The rest of our lives.”

My chest flutters. “The rest of our lives. I can see it. Can you?”

“It’s already what we are. What we have been for most of our lives. I don’t see it ending unless one of us really starts craving a woman.”

“If that happens, we’ll talk, right?”

“Of course, but I’m pretty sure it won’t. We’ve both had our share of relationships. We both knew how and why they weren’t right. None of that is here between us. I believe this is it for me. And it doesn’t matter that you’re a man. It matters that you’re my best friend and everything I ever wanted to feel in a relationship. You know me better than I know myself, Ax. I know you the same way. I know I’m safe with you. My heart is safe.” Hollister exhales as he holds my gaze. “I’m just gonna say it. I’m in love with you, Axel Penniston. So madly in love with you.”

My eyes well with unexpected tears. “I don’t think I knew until right now how much I wanted to hear that. I don’t think I understood what all these feelings in me were until right now. It didn’t just happen either. It’s been decades in the making, hasn’t it?”



Hollister nods, brushing his fingers over the stubble on my cheeks. “Yeah.”

I scoop him into my arms and kiss him so deeply my stomach flutters. “I love you, Hollister. So much it makes me feel like I never understood love before. You’re it for me too. I know it. I think I always have.”

Hollister smiles, pressing our foreheads together. “Nothing has ever felt as right as this. Even the subby stuff. It’s you, Ax. You gave me this freedom. You, helping me step into the man I always wanted to be. I guess better late than never is true for us.”

“Funny thing is, you gave me freedom too. I’ve just been coasting, but now I know that what I want to do is support you and your dreams. Wherever those lead us, I’ll be there.”

“Do we want to come out?”

I laugh softly. “To who? Our unimpressed fathers?”

“My mom and stepdad will be happy for us, I think. Sara will be happy. My dad can get fucked.”

I laugh, flipping over and taking him with me until he’s plastered on top of me. “Works for me. How should we spend our Sunday?”

“In bed ordering toys for our very own sex dungeon.”

“I like how you think, Holl.”

## Chapter Twenty-Four

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## HOLLISTER

This Monday feels particularly shitty after the amazing weekend I had with Axel. Tearing myself away from him this morning sucked. He made coffee and toast for me while I got ready for work, and the gesture made me want to jump him all over again, even though it's not unheard of for him to make me breakfast. It's all just different now that I know we're in love.

I log into my computer with a huff of frustration. The sooner I get this day over with, the sooner I can get back to Axel.

My office door opens and a flustered Sara hurries in. "Your dad is coming."

"What for?"

"No idea, but word on the street is he's pissed about something."

"Great."

Sara leaves and I continue working on the emails that built up while I was gone. That's when I see the block of emails from my dad. Of course this is the weekend he decides he needs information from me. I'm about to get my ass chewed.

Barely a minute later, I hear Sara greet him and his gruff hello in reply, his steps heavy as they head for my door. My pulse quickens as sweat dots my forehead. It's like waiting to be executed. I assume.

The door opens and he steps in, his face a mask of anger. “I see you deemed us worthy of your presence today.”

“I have no idea what that means.”

“It means you were MIA on Friday and the entire weekend.”

“I took a sick day and I don’t work on weekends.”

My dad narrows his eyes. “Oh you don’t work on weekends? Well, as an executive of this firm, you are expected to answer your emails.”

I blow out a soft breath to calm my churning stomach. “I’m fine, thank you for asking.”

“What?”

“You don’t care at all that I called out sick for the first time in my career here?”

“Hollister, I don’t know what the fuck kind of game you think you’re playing, but this is exactly why you haven’t been promoted to director yet. I can’t count on you.” Placing his hands on my desk, he leans in. “You proved my point this weekend.”

“That isn’t fair. It was one day.”

“We never know what day something is gonna come up. You know who was available? Tanner. Tanner, who is in a junior position to you, but he got me what I needed. Oh, and don’t think I didn’t notice your report was late. You’re slacking, Hollister.”

As he stands there looking disgusted and superior, my blood boils. I’ve spent my entire life being broken down by this man, only to get nowhere. I stand up, leaning across the desk to meet his stern gaze. He raises an eyebrow in surprise, and for once, there’s nothing in me that wants to back down. Maybe learning how to let go with Axel gave me the strength I need right now.

“Maybe Tanner would like to have my position.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I have spent my entire life chasing your approval. I could’ve been anything, but I’m an accountant because you’re an accountant. I gave up all the things I wanted to do to follow in your footsteps, only for you to make me feel worthless on a regular basis.”

My dad leans back, staring at me with a confused expression.

“I was out on my birthday because my friends and my real family saw what was happening to me. All work and no fun. They knew I would wake up one day and see you in my reflection. I don’t know what I want to do with the rest of my life, but I know I’m done with you. I did everything I could, worked as hard as I could, studied, stayed up to date on changing regulations, and what do you do? Throw Tanner in my face.”

“You better think about what you’re saying to me.”

“Oh, I am. Two weeks ago, your threat would’ve worked. I would’ve doubled down and killed myself to prove I was worthy of this promotion I don’t even want. But you know that, don’t you, Dad? You like seeing me squirm and work myself into the ground. You reap the benefits of my desire to make you happy, so why would you change? I mean, other than loving me, but I guess that’s not something you feel.”

“Now wait a minute, Hollister—”

“No, you wait.” As if Axel is standing over me telling me I’m a good boy and he’s so proud of me, I summon every bit of courage within and remove my employee badge from my belt. “I’m done. I quit.”

“What?” Dad looks truly shocked. “You can’t just quit.”

“I can, actually. And I did. You can always give my accounts to the team, or hell, promote Tanner. I don’t give a fuck.”

“You will not walk out of here when we have a major audit coming up. You think you can just throw a tantrum and I’ll, what? Bow to your list of demands?”

I grab my phone off my desk and my messenger bag from the back of my chair. “I don’t care what you do. I don’t have any demands. When you try to play the victim, just know that I would’ve done almost anything for you to act like you cared. I take the blame for being so stubborn. You never gave me an ounce of hope to hold on to, but I did anyway. So, my bad.”

“If you walk out that door, don’t expect me to take you back when you realize what you did.”

“When you’re lying on your deathbed, don’t expect me to come say goodbye.”

He has the nerve to look shocked.

“Anything else of mine can be shipped to me, along with my last paycheck.”

I walk past him with my head high. Sara is sitting behind her desk, staring at me with wide eyes.

“Hollister!”

I ignore him as I keep my gaze on Sara.

“Did you really just quit?” she asks.

“I did. I’m sorry. I’ll be happy to write a recommendation letter for you.”

“I’m going with you.” She grabs her handbag from her drawer.

“I can’t ask you to do that, Sara. I have no idea what I’m doing next.”

“You didn’t ask me. I’ve got savings, and I’ll find something else. I have skills.” She walks around the desk, taking my hand in hers. “I’m so proud of you. There’s no way I’m staying to watch this place crumble without you. Your dad is in for a rude awakening.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.” Hooking her arm through mine. “Come on. Let’s go day drink.”

We walk outside and the magnitude of what I just did hits me. My knees buckle and I grab Sara's arm to keep from stumbling.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

Smiling, I nod. "I can't believe I just did that."

Sara smiles. "You did. You stood up to the biggest bully ever. I'm so proud of you."

"I have to call Ax. You don't mind if he joins us, do you?"

"I wouldn't expect otherwise."

The two of us continue down the sidewalk while I dig my phone out and call Axel.

"Hey, babe," Axel answers. The endearment causes my belly to do a happy flip.

"Hey. Are you busy?"

He laughs. "Nah. What's up?"

"Sara and I are headed to Janson's to day drink. Care to join us?"

Sara giggles as she loops her arm through mine.

"Day drink? What's going on, Holl?"

"I'd rather tell you in person. Can you meet us?"

"You bet. I'll be there in twenty. Order a mimosa for me."

"I will."

After ending the call, I blow out a breath. "I feel so damn free right now."

"You are."

We make it to Janson's, an all-day breakfast place, which I'm very grateful for right now. We're led to a corner booth where we sit and peruse the menu, but nothing is sinking in. I'm brimming with excitement and shock.

Then a thought hits me. "Uh, Sara. I should probably tell you that um, me and Axel are... Well, we've decided to... I suppose it happened the night of my birthday. It was

unexpected and I've never... you know... with a man but Axel is different and..." I stop myself from babbling and stumbling over my words. "We're together."

Sara grins. "About damn time."

"What do you mean?"

"It was obvious to me that you've been in love with him at least since I met you."

"What?" I sputter. "No. We were just best friends."

"Right. Except that your face lit up like Christmas Day whenever you talked about him."

"It did?"

"Yep." She glances down at her hands for a second. "Okay, confession time. When I first met you, I had a crush on you."

My jaw drops. "That doesn't make any sense, Sara. Me? I don't seem like your type."

She laughs softly. "You're not, but I think that's what attracted me. You're so smart and kind. Dedicated. You treat the team well. I thought I actually had a shot because you were just so sweet to me." She glances around the restaurant before settling her gaze on me again. "Until the day Axel came up to visit you. The way you responded to him, the way you looked at him, I knew no one had a shot with you. Axel already had you."

I'm flabbergasted.

"I honestly thought you were a couple until I picked up on cues that you weren't. So I just assumed it was a matter of time until you both figured it out. Better late than never, as they say."

"It was a surprise to both of us. Neither of us have dated men before."

"Sometimes we don't see what's right in front of us. Obviously, you're soulmates. Soooo..." She leans in with a conspiratorial smile. "Are the gender bits working out okay?"

I laugh, feeling my cheeks heat up. "It's working out."



“I’m so happy for you, Hollister.” She squeezes my hand. “You deserve happiness, and leaving your dad was so brave. You deserve better than him too.”

“Thanks, Sara. I appreciate your friendship. At least I got you out of that job.”

“Yep. Can’t shake me now.”

We order mimosas and a pastry platter, chatting about all kinds of office gossip, but then a shadow darkens our table, and I look up to see my handsome man standing there, looking slightly concerned.

“Hey,” I say, standing and kissing him sweetly.

Axel kisses me back, his eyes shifting curiously to Sara. “What’s going on, Hollister?”

“Oh, nothing much. Just told my dad off and walked out of my job. Sara quit too and now we’re day drinking.”

The look of shock on his face is priceless. I take his hand and drag him into the booth.

“This is the beginning of the new me,” I announce.

## Chapter Twenty-Five

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My internal panic subsides when I see that Hollister is happy. He's grinning from ear to ear as he sits in the booth and makes room for me. Sara smiles happily.

"The cat's out of the bag too," she says. "I'm happy for you both."

"Uh, thanks."

"Big day," Hollister continues, putting a mimosa in front of me. "Told Dad off, quit my job, came out to my assistant-slash- friend." He shakes his head. "And the craziest part is that I feel lighter than a feather. I swear I could walk on clouds."

"That's amazing, babe." I kiss his cheek. "I'm super happy for you. Tell me what happened with your dad."

"He just came at me like he does. He was threatening to never give me the promotion because I wasn't reliable. I took one sick day. One. HR has had to pay me out for my sick days every year because I don't take them. The first time I take one and he loses his shit." Hollister scoffs. "It was just too much. The final straw."

"He's such an ass," I murmur.

Hollister nods. "Maybe it's everything that's happened since my birthday, but there's a new me trying desperately to rise from the ashes, and I want it to happen. I like who I'm becoming."

“I love it, but I love you no matter what.”

Sara releases a dreamy sigh, reminding me of her presence. Hollister’s cheeks turn pink while I just shift in my seat with a dopey grin on my face.

“Adorable,” Sara says. “Is there anything you’ve always wanted to do, Hollister?”

“Not really.”

I nudge his arm. “Yes, you have. The café.”

He rolls his eyes. “I know. I thought about it again, but I don’t know anything about how to open a café. That was just a youthful dream.”

“Does anyone know how until they learn?” Sara asks.

“Exactly,” I say, nodding at Sara in agreement. “And you have money now.”

“And help,” Sara says brightly. “I can do something.”

“And you know I’ll be there.”

Hollister looks slightly panicked. “You’re both encouraging me to do something as risky as opening a café?”

“Yep,” Sara and I answer at the same time.

“Why not?” I continue. “If it fails, well, at least you tried. Someday, this life ride will be over. The worst thing I can think of is reaching the end and having regrets.”

Hollister nods, his gaze shifting to his drink. After a moment, he lifts his head and smiles. “You make good points, guys. The new me can’t just go get another accounting job, right?”

I squeeze his forearm. “If that was what your heart wanted you could, but it doesn’t.”

“Right. I want change and excitement. I want to wake up in the morning and look forward to my day. I want to call the shots and decide what my future looks like.” A fresh smile graces his face as he gazes into my eyes. “Whether I fail or

succeed, at least it'll be based on my own effort and not someone else's mood."

"Yep."

"And I have a feeling you won't fail," Sara says softly. "You're wicked smart, Hollister, and you're determined. I know a lot of people in our department stayed at Burke and Associates because of you. I wouldn't be surprised if more people leave now."

"I feel a little bad about leaving the team without saying goodbye," he says. "But I couldn't stay a minute longer. We all know giving notice wouldn't work with my dad either."

"They'll understand. I'm sure of it." Sara looks down at her purse and pulls out her buzzing cell phone. "Oh look at this. The word is out. It's Leonard."

"What does it say?" Hollister asks.

"Dude, is it true Hollister walked out? Where are you?" She giggles. "I'm gonna ask what he heard." She types out a reply, watching her screen.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he told them I died," Hollister mutters. "I'm probably out of his will. If I was ever in it."

"You don't need his money anyway." I kiss his temple.

"No."

"Okay," Sara says, reading her phone screen. "Your dad stomped off, slamming doors in his path, and was gone for about twenty minutes. He came back down and yelled at everyone to get in the conference room." Her nose scrunches and she makes a scared face.

"What does it say?" Hollister asks.

"He told the team he fired you." Sara frowns. "He said your lack of dedication pushed him to it and he was making Tanner the interim manager."

"Shocker," Hollister mumbles. "I don't want people thinking he fired me though."

“Oh wait. Leonard’s typing.” Sara’s smile grows as she focuses on her phone. “Oh okay. So Robin was making copies and heard the whole thing. After your dad left, she spilled the tea to the team. She told them you stood up to him and finally had enough.” She grins at her screen like she’s watching a movie. “And that I pulled a Jerry McGuire and went with you.”

Hollister chuckles. “Tell Leonard to thank Robin for me.”

“On it.” She taps on her screen then cackles. “He wants to know if you and I are an item.”

Hollister turns to me, his eyes warm and filled with love. “Tell them the truth. I’m with Axel.”

Sara beams. “You got it, boss.”

“Just Hollister now, Sara.”

“We’ll see about that.”

Two hours later, we stumble out onto the sidewalk, drunk as fuck in the middle of the day. After getting Sara safely into a rideshare, I order one for us too, holding on to Hollister as we wait.

“I’m so fucking proud of you, babe.” I kiss the top of his head. “You’ve done so much lately, and I’m in awe of you.”

“Thanks, but I wouldn’t have done any of it without the push from you.”

“So what? You could’ve resisted, but you didn’t. You let yourself explore and find a new path. Little did I know it would lead to me having everything I ever wanted too.”

“Do you mean that? Do you think we can make this last?”

“Fuck yeah. How could either of us possibly go back to dating other people when we know this exists? This kind of love and passion and friendship. This is it for me.”

*I want to marry him.*

The thought dances in my head, trickling down and gripping my heart. The words are on the tip of my tongue, but I manage to shut up. Not here. He deserves better.

“If you have any doubts—”

“No,” Hollister interrupts. “Maybe I’m just scared that something this good can’t exist. Not forever.”

“Just like anything worth having, you have to nurture it. I’ll do the work if you will.”

“I will.”

Pulling him close, I kiss him hard, giving zero fucks who sees us. “Right now, I’m gonna get you home, Hollister, and I’m gonna reward you for being such a good boy today.”

His breath hitches as his eyes heat. “What are you gonna do?”

“Spend the whole afternoon unraveling you.” I grip the back of his neck. “I’m gonna do whatever I want and you’re gonna love it.”

Hollister tilts his head back, nodding. “I love everything you do.”

“Because I know what you need. You know what I need?”

“What?”

“I need to taste your cum. I want it all over me, babe.”

“Fuck,” he whispers, swaying softly in my arms.

“I can’t wait to get you naked again. I love looking at you. Touching you. Tasting your skin. I’m so fucking obsessed with you, Hollister. If you think I’m ever leaving you, you’re crazy.”

“I’m starting to believe you.”

“You need to. You’re perfect for me, warts and all. I know all your quirks and hesitations. I know all your brilliance. And I love all of it. I always have. You can’t scare me away.”

His eyes fill with tears, but he smiles. “I’m so crazy about you, Ax. I’ve never felt this way about someone before.”

“Because you were waiting for me, just like I was waiting for you. We’ve got this, Holl. Together, I believe we can do anything. I really do.”

He nods. “Yeah. We can.”



## Chapter Twenty-Six

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## HOLLISTER

The sound of the doorbell stirs me from sleep. I sit up slightly, focusing on Axel walking to the door before looking around. I chuckle when I realize our trashed asses fell asleep on the couch when we got back from our drunken brunch.

I scratch my head as he steps back from the doorway and two delivery men haul in a box. Axel holds a smaller box in his hands. Once the delivery men are gone, Axel turns to face me with a devious grin on his face.

“Go freshen up then get naked and join me in my room.”

“Yes, sir.”

I scramble off the couch, filled with anticipation. Maybe today is the day he’s going to fuck me. Gah, I hope so. It would be the best day ever if it happens.

I hurry into my bathroom to brush my teeth and splash water on my face. After that, I peel out of my clothes and walk across the hall to Axel’s room, stopping in my tracks.

“Holy fuck, Ax.”

He looks up, grinning. “Some assembly required, but that’s okay. It’s a start.”

I step forward, running my hand over the smooth black leather of the barrel. “We have our own dungeon toy.”

“We do,” Axel says, his eyes roaming over my naked body. “Fuck, you’re hot.”

I laugh softly, shaking my head. “I’m glad you think so.”

“Oh, I do. I’m gonna show you how much. Look in the box on the bed.”

As shivers run down my spine, I walk over and lean to peek inside, my breath hitching when I see the rolls of silk rope. Axel appears behind me, his clothed body pressing into mine.

“Get on the bed, Hollister. On your back.”

“Okay, sir.”

Before I can move, Axel wraps his arm around my front, pulling me closer as he nuzzles my neck. “You love giving me control, don’t you, my sweet boy?”

My eyelids flutter. “Yes.”

“Because you know you’re safe with me. I’ll never take advantage of you. Only worship you like you deserve.”

“Yes.” I can barely speak anymore as all the blood rushes between my legs.

“Fuck, I love you,” Axel whispers, biting my earlobe. “You showed me who I am too, and who I can be with you.”

“Ax...”

“Tell me you love me, Holl. I want to hear it.”

“I love you, Axel. Completely. I think I always have.”

“Yes, I think so too. We just didn’t recognize it for what it was, but that’s okay. We do now.”

“We do.”

Axel drags his tongue up my neck. “I’m going to do so many things to you.”

I clutch his hand on my stomach and twist in his arms, gazing into those pretty different colored eyes. “I’m all yours. Use me for your pleasure.”

The sexy smirk on his face makes goosebumps skitter across my skin. Now I know why women fell at his feet all the time—when he turns on the sex appeal, he’s undeniable.

He slaps my ass. “On the bed.”

I nod, twisting around to climb on his bed. With my head propped on a pillow, I watch as he attaches some kind of apparatus to the bed frame, quickly realizing it’s a restraint device. As the cool leather cuff locks around my ankle, I gasp.

Axel glances up, winking at me before moving to the other ankle. My dick is painfully hard at this point, twitching angrily and dripping dots of precum. My eyes are wide as Axel slinks up the length of my body, pulling one wrist and then the other above my head.

Using the red silk rope I saw in the box, he binds my wrists easily, like he’s done it a thousand times.

“How’s it feel? Not too tight?”

“Good,” I manage, still trying to regulate my breathing through all of this excitement.

“Okay, Holl. You’re gonna keep your wrists right where they are. If you move them, I stop. Got it?”

I nod eagerly.

“Use your words, sexy boy.”

“Got it, sir.”

He runs his hand down my chest. “You’re so excited, aren’t you?”

“Yes.”

“And you earned this, babe. I’m so proud of everything you’ve done and everything you will do. I can’t believe you’re mine now. Mine forever.”

“Forever,” I repeat, nodding. “Gah, Ax.”

“Breathe it out.” He leans in and kisses me softly. “Just breathe through it, babe.”

I nod, blowing out a breath to calm myself down, but Axel deciding to kiss my neck and chest doesn’t help. Neither does it help when he decides to lick circles around my nipples.

“Ax...”

“Sir,” he says. “You call me sir until I unhook you, got it?”

“Yes, sir.”

I close my eyes, soaking in his heated kisses across my flesh, dotting every part of me except my aching erection. He sure knows what the fuck he’s doing.

“Open your eyes,” Axel demands, and I do it. “I thought about what I would do with you when I got you in this situation. Thought about all the ways I could undo you. Part of me wants to spend the day edging you. Bringing you all the way to the brink but never letting you fall.”

Axel squeezes my thighs, leaving fingerprints. Fuck, I like that.

“But then I realized, this is our first major scene. Neither one of us will make it through that. So you know what I’m gonna do, Holl?”

I shake my head. “No, sir.”

“I’m gonna fuck you.”

The way his voice dips to a low rasp, his eyes heating, his cheeks flushing, I end up bucking against my restraints.

“Oh fuck. Please.”

Dragging a finger around my nipple, he grins. “You think you’re ready for this?” He lunges forward suddenly, roughly gripping my chin. “You want my cock inside you?”

“Yes.”

“It might hurt.”

“I don’t care. I want you so bad, sir.”

Axel bites my bottom lip until I moan. “Know what else I’m gonna do?”

“No.”

He brushes my hair off my forehead, his touch gentle after the harsh bite seconds earlier. “I’m gonna fuck myself on your dick. You’ll be helpless while I use you to get off.”

I swear my brain just went off-line. I can't even talk, just stare at this man who's been my best friend all my life as he transforms into a sex beast right in front of my eyes.

"You like it. I know."

Finally, he reaches between my legs and drags his hand over my aching cock. I gasp and arch my back, whimpering slightly.

"Mmm, such a pretty boy," Axel whispers. He reaches across me to the nightstand, holding up a bottle of lube.

I watch as he opens the bottle and slicks his erection, wondering just how much this is gonna hurt. I'm not prepared for what he does next though.

Straddling me, he drags his body up and down mine, our cocks briefly brushing together, just enough to tease me. He does know a thing or two about edging.

"I'm afraid I'm gonna blow as soon as I enter you," he admits in a moment of vulnerability.

"If you do, you'll just have to fuck me again later."

Axel grins. "Oh, count on it." He crinkles his brow. "Fuck. We didn't get the tests scheduled yet."

"I can't imagine getting a condom right now. Please don't. We're both smart, safe guys. Have you fucked anyone without a condom since your divorce?"

"No," Axel answers. "You?"

"No."

"You're sure about this?"

"Very. Please."

Axel's eyes soften. "Thank fuck."

He scoots down, reaching between my legs and gently probing my hole. Instead of tensing, I blow out a breath and will myself to relax into it. I'm sure it'll be easier.

All the things I would normally worry about—cleanliness, noises, pain—disappear in an instant. This is Axel and me. We

can deal with anything, no matter what. Just like we always have.

Axel takes his time massaging my entrance, keeping his eyes locked on my face as if he's silently checking in. When he finally breaches me with his fingertip, I nearly cry out with relief. I can't believe sex can feel like this. So electric and needy. I want it so badly I wish I could reach down and shove his finger inside me.

"So soft," Axel whispers. "Warm. Tight. You're gonna feel so good around my cock, sweet boy."

"You should find out now."

He chuckles. "Patience. I want it to feel as good as it can for you."

I nod, biting back another greedy moan as I shift my gaze to his dick. It's so big and thick and, unf, those veins. I want to lick them. It glistens with lube, bouncing between his legs every time he pushes a little deeper inside me.

Eventually he adds a second finger, and the stretch is heaven. The sting is expected and weirdly addictive. "Oh god," I moan.

"I know." Axel gets on his knees, kneeling forward and snatching a kiss before sucking hickeys onto my neck and chest. Just knowing I'll see his marks when this is over sends another jolt of heat straight to my dick. "Even your skin tastes good."

I release a throaty moan, unashamed of my blatant need for him. As two fingers become three and I loosen from his efforts, I'm on the edge of screaming.

"Ask me to fuck you now, Holl." Axel barely sounds like himself.

"Pl-please fuck me, sir. Please use my hole."

A smile tugs at his lips as he withdraws his fingers. I groan from the loss, but the sound is cut off as Axel positions himself between my legs, wraps his arms under my knees, and pulls me toward him. This is it. This is the moment.

The head of his cock finds my rim, pushing gently, and Axel puts his hand on my chest, pressing down. "Breathe out."

I blow out a breath and Axel pushes in. My eyes tear up immediately. The sting is fucking intense, but oh my hell, I love it. Axel squeezes his eyes shut, sucking in a breath.

"Fuck, Holl. Your body is heaven. I can't wait to feel you inside of me. If it's anything like this, I want you to know how good it feels."

"Move. Please, sir. Please. I'm going crazy."

Axel opens his eyes, a wild, crazed expression on his face as he begins to move back and forth in small, slow thrusts, giving my body a chance to adjust. We both feel the moment my body accepts him, and as if he was just released from a cage, Axel lets loose.

He pounds into me relentlessly, both of us grunting as our bodies slam together. Axel's face is the most spectacular thing I've ever seen, and the knowledge that I'm causing him this kind of pleasure is heady.

"Fuck," he grunts. "No. I want to last. I want to stay like this forever. You're too tight. Too good."

"Don't come, sir. You have to cum when you fuck yourself on my dick."

Axel's eyes roll back. "You've picked up some dirty talking tips."

"Learned from the best."

Axel's arms strain as he forces himself to pull out of me. The loss makes me crazy, but I console myself with the knowledge it's not over yet.

Axel pulls me into his arms, straining my bindings as he kisses my neck and shivers.

"You're gonna fuck me now, Holl, and I can't think of anything I want more than this."

Pretty sure I'm about to die and go to dick heaven.



## Chapter Twenty-Seven

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The image of Hollister panting and bound to the bed, his sweat-slicked skin catching the sunlight, jolts me for a second. I pause and take a moment to appreciate all of this.

“What’s wrong?” Hollister asks.

“Not a damn thing,” I answer, dragging my hand down his chest. “I just wanted to look at you.”

He shakes his head. “I guess I can’t do anything about it, being tied up and all.”

“Nope.”

I grab the lube next to me and open it, keeping my eyes on his as I pour some into my hand. Hollister gasps as I flip my hand and let the sticky liquid drip onto his cock. His erection bounces under my gaze, and I swear my mouth waters. It’s wild that it took me almost thirty years to understand real desire, but at least I know now.

“I’m gonna be so tight for you,” I whisper as I reach behind myself to rub my hole. I’m no stranger to ass play, but it’s still been a while and it’s never been with anything bigger than a finger. A female finger.

“I’m gonna finger myself for you.”

Hollister groans, nodding while he bites his bottom lip.

“And I keep getting hornier the more I imagine what it’s gonna feel like when you enter me. Do you want to fuck me, Holl?”

“So bad.”

Leaning forward, I straddle him and claim his mouth in a heated kiss, abusing my hole to get ready for him. Patience is not on the menu right now. It stings and burns, and I don't care. As I bite the fleshy part at the top of Hollister's shoulder, I pull my fingers out, ready for the main event.

While stroking his cock, I sit upright and position myself over him, aligning my hole. I tease both of us, just rubbing his tip back and forth until I can't take it anymore and sink down onto him.

I go slow at first, breathing through the punishing stretch until he bottoms out. Hollister's eyes are wide, his mouth agape, and his cock is twitching inside me.

“I know,” I whisper. “It's intense.”

Hollister nods. “Fuck.”

After a few seconds, my body adjusts, and as I place my hand on Hollister's chest, it hits me that he's inside of me right now.

I start out slow, rocking carefully to try it out, then, like a wild beast uncaged, I let loose. With my head thrown back, I ride his dick like a bucking bull, absolutely blissed out as I find my prostate and use Holl's dick to nail it over and over again.

My body shivers and goosebumps cover my skin. I'm getting close, and based on how his cock swells inside me, Holl is too. I open my eyes to hold his gaze, my stomach fluttering at the intense emotions on his face, my heart threatening to beat out of my chest as I push us both to the edge.

I'm torn between wanting his cum on me and wanting it in me, but our bodies make the decision before I can work it out. Hot cum shoots from my cock across his chest, hitting his chin. Holy shit, I came untouched.

Hollister cries out my name, “Ax, Ax, Ax,” like a chant as his orgasm rips through him. I feel the tug and swell inside me and I imagine his cum spreading through me. I fall forward

and balance myself on the headboard as we ride this incredible wave. My body seems intent on keeping him inside me, and the thought of staying like this forever sounds fucking badass to me.

Eventually the aftershocks subside, but I manage to drag my fingers through the cum on Hollister's chest and feed it to him with shaky hands. He licks my fingers like a starving man, and I snag his lips in another kiss, tasting myself on his tongue.

As we lie together, hot and sweaty, his softening cock slips out of my body, followed by a trickle of warm cum. I chuckle, burying my face in the crook of his neck.

“Bad news, Holl.”

“What?”

“I'm officially addicted. You're gonna have to fuck me a lot.”

He blows out a breath, dragging his fingers through my hair even with bound wrists. “I think I can handle that.”

## Chapter Twenty-Eight

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## HOLLISTER

What a week it's been. Seven days ago I walked out of my job and started to envision a new future for myself. One where I'm in love with my best friend and the possibilities are endless.

I roll to my side just to watch him sleep for a minute. After years of waking early, I'm always up before him, but I like that. These sleepy mornings with my body tangled around his and his warm breath on my neck have turned into my favorite thing.

Today I have a surprise for Axel, and I think he's gonna flip out. I can't wait. The old me never would've had the nerve, but the new Hollister is all about pushing outside my comfort zone.

I lean in and press a kiss to Axel's neck, inhaling his sleepy scent with residual hints of yesterday's cologne and deodorant. He's been the most important person in my life since we were just kids, but I never expected it to be like this.

I swear my heart swells with love, pleasant tightness wrapping around me like a bear hug. I already know we're going to spend forever together—we always were—but I want the official hoopla that comes with being in love and life partners. I want to get up in front of friends and family and declare my love and commitment to Axel. I want to put a ring on his finger so everyone knows he's taken.

I want to marry him.

Axel stirs, scooting closer and throwing his arm over me. The peace inside me is such a contrast to literally every relationship before this one, even my marriage. Maybe it's because there are no expectations outside of the two of us just being ourselves. We already know each other's quirks, our strengths and weaknesses. Our dynamic already worked, it's just better now. Axel will never pressure me for kids or drag me to family events I don't want to go to. Besides, we already know each other's families. We already know how we feel about kids and how we want to spend our later years.

I reach out and card my fingers through his hair, smiling as his eyes finally open.

"You're thinking," he whispers. "I can hear your brain."

Chuckling, I nod. "Yeah, but it's all good stuff. Promise."

Axel focuses on me, a serene expression on his face. "I'm so happy, Holl."

"Me too." I lean close and press a quick kiss to his lips. As I pull back, marveling at the beauty of his eyes and the way they shine with love for me, the words in my heart tumble out. "Marry me, Axel."

His eyes go wide. "What?"

"Marry me. Please. I want this to be official. I know we both said we'd never get married again but—"

"You want to marry me?"

I nod as certainty spreads through me. "Yeah."

He releases a breathy laugh. "I want to marry you too, Holl. It's been on my mind a lot and I was thinking about pulling off some elaborate proposal, but this works too. It fits us."

"You've been thinking about it?"

"Definitely. We both spent a lot of time chasing the wrong dreams, but we ended up exactly where we were supposed to be. Together. I don't know what the future holds, but I know we're facing it as a couple. As partners." A beaming smile spreads across his lips. "Yes, Hollister, I'll marry you."

Hearing the words does something inside of me, like unlocking the final box I stuffed my hopes and dreams into. “I’ve been afraid to think of anything else besides the daily grind. I spent so much time trying to be the man my dad wanted me to be, only to realize that all I really needed was to be the man *you* wanted. You rescued me, Ax.”

“Nah, babe, you rescued yourself. I just gave you some rope to help.”

“Just the same, everything that’s happened since that fateful night has been truly life-changing. I love you so much.”

Axel runs his hand down my arm. “I love you back. It’s funny. I used to think maybe I wasn’t built like most people when it came to love. It always felt like I was holding back, even when I tried not to. I get it now though. I’m capable of fully loving someone else as long as that someone is you.”

“Our families are gonna freak.”

Axel laughs. “Let them. We deserve to shake things up a little. Well, you do. It’s the norm for me.”

Grinning, I poke his chest. “Well, I might just surprise you. Speaking of, let’s get up and go out for breakfast, then we have somewhere to be at eleven.”

He raises his eyebrow. “Not gonna tell me where?”

“Wouldn’t be a surprise if I told you. Just trust me?”

“Always.”

---

Just before eleven, I turn onto the street to reveal my surprise for Axel. He’s staring out the window like a kid and practically jumping out of his seat. A little covert digging on his phone calendar led me to this place, and I really hope he’s as excited as I am when he figures it out.

As the shop comes into view, he quietly gasps then turns to face me, eyes wide. I just chuckle as I pull into the parking lot.



“No way, Holl.”

“Yes way, Ax. We have an appointment with Reylon. He’s your dude, right?”

Axel’s smile is just about off his face. “He is, yeah. You arranged all this? How?”

“Peeked at your phone when you were in the bathroom so I could see where you went for these. Hope you don’t mind.”

He just shakes his head, unbuckling his seatbelt before I fully stop the car. “I love tattoo days,” he says, already exiting the car.

Laughing, I hop out of the car too and jog to catch up with him.

“This is awesome,” he gushes as he opens the door and walks in.

His joy is infectious. Grinning, I follow him to the counter, where a man the complete opposite of how I pictured a tattoo artist looks up and smiles. He’s got a wild head of curly hair, dyed in various colors like blue, green, and purple. He’s on the shorter side and pretty lean, and he only has one tattoo that I can see—an elaborate scene on his bicep that I can’t quite make out. He has big blue eyes lined with black eyeliner, and several facial piercings.

“Axel.”

“Hey, Rey.” Axel throws his arm around my shoulders and pulls me into him. “My boyfriend made an appointment for me.” He glances at me. “I mean, my fiancé.”

Reylon’s face registers surprise before he nods. “Uh, congrats, man. I could’ve sworn we’ve talked about all the woman troubles you’ve had.”

Axel nods. “Yep. Turns out I was looking for love in all the wrong places. This is Hollister.”

“Ah, Hollister,” Reylon says, nodding knowingly. “I’ve heard a lot about you.”

I feel my cheeks heat and I just smile in return.

Reylon turns his attention to the computer screen and taps on a few keys. “Oh and, Ax, the appointment is for both of you. Let me get the artwork printed for approval and then we can get started.”

Axel turns to me, wide-eyed. “You’re getting a tattoo?”

“Yep. The chains are off. Told you, I’m trying everything and anything that interests me.”

“Yeah, okay, but tattoos are kind of permanent.”

“I won’t regret it. Trust me.”

He eyes me curiously, but I just turn around and pretend to be interested in the art on the walls. It only took me a couple of hours of internet searching to land on the design, and I think Axel is going to love it. I hope so, anyway.

Reylon returns quickly, placing the artwork he designed on the glass counter. I stare at Axel instead of the paper, hoping for a positive reaction.

“This is so cool,” he whispers. “You picked this out, Holl?”

“Something like it, and then I asked Reylon if he could tweak it.”

Axel nods, dragging his fingers over the image. It’s an infinity symbol with an anchor top, but it’s got rough edges that give it a cool, sort of mechanical vibe to it. It’s mostly black, but Reylon added some light watercolor around the curves, and on two of the curves, the words “friends first” and “together always” are scrawled.

“Is it cheesy? I was looking for something that represented the bond we have.”

“Not cheesy,” Axel says, turning to face me. The dopey grin on his face warms my insides. “It’s thoughtful and sweet and meaningful.” He leans in and presses a kiss to my lips, and my cheeks burn with the knowledge that this is our first truly romantic PDA in front of someone one of us knows.

I think the pride washing over me could power a small city. This man is mine and he has no problem letting the world

know it.

“I love it,” Axel whispers.

Reylon clears his throat, grinning at us when I look up. “Just need placement preference and who wants to go first, then we can get started.”

“Um, I was thinking the insides of our wrists so we can always see them,” I murmur.

Axel nods. “Perfect. You want to go first so you don’t freak out?”

I chuckle. “Good call.”

As we follow Reylon to his station, anticipation roils through my stomach, but in a good way. A bold way. I’m finally not holding myself back anymore and it feels damn good.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

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## AXEL

I watch in stunned pride as Hollister gets his tattoo. It was wicked cute watching him read through all the details and aftercare, ask Reylon all his credentials, and finally relax enough to get in the chair. He might be trying new things, but he's still my adorable and very cautious best friend underneath it all.

He's rambling now, telling Reylon everything that's happened in his life in the last month. I know the word vomit is nerves, but Reylon seems truly interested in the story of how Holl went from caterpillar to butterfly.

"That's pretty amazing, man," Reylon says. "I think it's badass that you're forty and starting over. Some people let age hold them back from reinvention, but it's never too late to change as long as there's breath in your lungs."

Hollister nods. "Yeah. I think I had to get to this age to see how derailed everything was. With some gentle nudges of course." He smiles at me. "But forty's not old."

"Not at all. No age is old in my opinion." Reylon taps his temple. "It's all in the mind."

"How old are you, Rey?" I ask, spinning on a stool next to Hollister.

"Older than I look," he answers, winking. As he pours ink into tiny containers, I can tell he has more to say. "I believe in reinvention," he continues. "People always say life is short, but if you're miserable, it's long as fuck." We all chuckle.

“Sometimes, you just have to grab it by the balls and go for it, even if it scares you.”

Hollister nods. “Yeah, I agree.” He fixes his eyes on mine. “But when it’s right, all those scary decisions lose their edge.”

“Well said,” Reylon says. “Alright, I’m ready. Are you?”

Hollister exhales slowly and nods. “I’m ready.”

When Reylon’s needle touches Hollister’s skin, the look on his face says he was definitely not ready. I probably should have warned him that the wrist is pretty sensitive, but it didn’t cross my mind. The horrified expression on his face remains while I try to get him talking about the last museum exhibit he saw.

Reylon chimes in, discussing how much he likes indigenous art from the Americas and that we should put Peru on our bucket list, but the chatter does little to calm Hollister. Fortunately, Reylon is fast and the tattoo isn’t too big.

Hollister is breathing like he’s in labor, his face screwed up in pain and cheeks red from the stress. Seeing him freak out like this triggers my Dom mode, so I roll my stool behind him, massaging his shoulders and leaning in close to his ear.

“You’re doing such a great job, sweet boy. You’re so brave and I’m so proud of you.”

His breath catches as he sinks into my touch.

“That’s right. Good boy. Relax. I can’t wait to reward you when we get home.”

Hollister squeezes his eyes shut as he leans his head back to rest against my shoulder. “Thank you.”

“I’ll take care of you, baby. You know that.”

He nods, opening his eyes and turning his face slightly to see me. “I know.”

Hollister chills out at that point, relaxing into the pain and discovering the joy that is fresh ink.

Once the final touches are done, Reylon sits back in his chair, admiring his work. “What do you think?”

Hollister, breathing heavily, looks at his wrist, a slow smile spreading across his lips. “Oh wow. That’s... so much better than I even expected. Wow.”

Reylon beams. “Yeah, it came out cool.”

Hollister nods, slowly shifting his gaze to me. “What do you think?”

“I think you look good inked up.”

Holl’s cheeks turn bright pink, and if we were alone, I’m pretty sure I’d pounce.

“Thanks, Reylon,” Hollister says softly as he slides out the chair. “But don’t get any ideas that I’m suddenly into tattoos. That fucking hurt.”

I chuckle and Rey pats Hollister’s back. “Famous last words, am I right, Axel?”

“Yep.”

Hollister sits next to me while Reylon works on me, his eyes glued to his own wrist. I already know what he’s thinking without asking. He’s proud of himself for doing something so out of character. When I catch his eyes, his face lights up.

“I’m so damn happy, Ax.”

“That’s good, baby. You deserve it.”

Hollister nods firmly. “You know what? I really do.”

---

After tattoos, lunch, and a few hours of shopping for casual “non-accountant clothes” as

Holl put it, we’re on our way home when Holl’s phone rings.

He answers it via Bluetooth. “Hey, Sara.”

“Where are you?” she asks.

“In the car. Why?”

“Can you meet me at Larry’s on Twelfth?”

“The bar?”

“Yeah. I have something important to talk to you about.”

“No hints?”

“No hints. I’ll be waiting.”

She ends the call before Holl can say another word. “Well, that was weird,” he says.

“Kind of, yeah. Do you think she’s in trouble?”

“No clue. Guess we’re gonna find out.”

Nearly forty minutes later, we pull into the parking lot of the bar, a posh place in an up and

coming revitalized section of downtown. There are quite a few cars in the lot considering it’s only mid-afternoon, so it must be a popular place.

We enter, looking around, and then Hollister waves when he sees Sara lingering by a set of stairs. She smiles when she sees us.

“Hi,” she says, throwing her arms around Hollister when we reach her. Then she offers me a hug. “I got us some space upstairs. Come on.”

She grabs Hollister’s hand, practically dragging him up. We enter an open space, and then Hollister stumbles over his feet. Sara is grinning like the Cheshire Cat. I have no idea what’s going on.

“What is this?” Hollister says as about eight people turn to face him.

“This,” Sara says, gesturing to the tables full of folks, “is what happens when the only good thing about your job ends.”

“What?” Hollister asks, stepping closer. “Why are you all here?”

“We’re unemployed,” one of the guys says. “Voluntarily. We walked out today.”

“Holl?” I ask.



“Sorry, Axel,” Sara says. “This is most of Hollister’s former team. They walked out as a group this morning after the staff meeting.”

“I don’t understand,” Hollister says. “Why would you do that?”

“Have a seat,” Sara says, pushing us both towards two open chairs. “Wait until you hear this story.”

A guy waves at Hollister. “Hey.”

“Hi, Tim.”

“So after you left,” Tim begins, “unsurprisingly, all the shit hit the fan.” Several people nod and make noises of agreement. “Your dad was ten times worse than usual, stomping around the office and trying to figure out what was going on. If anyone reminded him of how meticulously you kept your files, he would yell and tell us we can’t talk about traitors.”

Hollister scrunches his nose. “God.”

“I think it took two days of that before I started thinking about a new job,” Tim continues, and several others agree. “But then it got way worse.”

“How?” Hollister asks.

“Tanner,” several people say at the same time.

“He was promoted,” Tim says. “And he had a huge head about it. Not only that, but he was determined to prove he was somehow better than you, and when he realized you had everything as perfect as it could get, it frustrated him and he was being a huge dick to everyone.”

“Dang,” Hollister mutters.

“Which only made your dad more frustrated,” another woman says. “So it was basically hell for two weeks. We weren’t allowed to say your name, and when we talked about any process you had us doing, Tanner would immediately change it.”

“One day, we went to lunch to vent,” Tim adds. “And we all decided we’d collectively walk out. The only person who didn’t was Angie because she’s on maternity leave, but we called her and she said she’ll quit as soon as her leave is up.”

Hollister appears stunned. “You all quit? Together?”

Tim nods. “This morning. The staff meeting was epically bad, with yelling and finger pointing, and then Tanner gave us the perfect out.”

A guy across from Tim chuckles. “He told us if he went down, he was taking all of us with him.”

“That was my cue,” Tim says. “I said ‘wrong. You’re going down, but we’re getting on the lifeboats.’ I handed him my badge and one by one we all made a pile of badges. I told him we were quitting.”

“Oh my god,” Sara says. “What did he do?”

“He just sat there stunned. We left the conference room and grabbed our stuff. We had already been taking things home a little at a time and gathering any stuff we wanted to take with us, knowing your dad would shut off our access as soon as he knew.”

“He didn’t try to stop you?” Hollister asks.

“I don’t think he knew what to do,” Tim answers. “Pretty sure he didn’t leave the conference room until we were gone.”

“Guess they thought bullying you would work, but it backfired,” Sara notes.

“I can’t believe you guys quit,” Hollister says. “What about jobs and stuff?”

“Don’t worry about us,” Tim says. “We all knew what we were doing. Besides, there are several competing firms in the city that will pick us up just to stick it to your dad.”

Hollister’s face turns red with emotion as he sips his glass of water. Sara rubs his back with a sweet smile on her face.

“I told you,” she says. “You had an impact on the team.”

“Thanks, guys,” Hollister says, once he regains his composure. “All of you deserve way better than what you were getting there.”

“So do you, Hollister,” a woman says. “You started the wave. Yes, there were positives there. A smaller firm and good benefits, but without you there, those things couldn’t outweigh the negatives. We’ll all land on our feet.”

“Thanks, Megan. I know you will. I’m happy to be a reference for any of you too.” Then he finally chuckles. “My dad must be shitting his pants. The entire department is gone.”

“Is it bad that I low-key feel bad about the wrath Tanner is going to face?” Sara asks.

“No, it’s valid,” Hollister says. “He’s just a young, ambitious guy caught up in my dad’s bullshit.”

“Has he reached out to you at all since you left?” Sara asks and Hollister only laughs in response. “I see,” she says. “Well, I propose we get day-wasted.”

“I’m in,” Hollister says. “But first...” He turns his gaze to me. “I have exciting news. Axel and I are engaged.”

Sara gasps while others cheer for us. Not a single person looks surprised though.

“Engaged?” Sara gushes. “This is wonderful.”

Hollister nods, squeezing my hand. “It’s been a wild few weeks, but it was everything I needed to get to the person I was always meant to be. There’s nothing wrong with accounting work, but it’s not my passion. I’m gonna find out what that is, and I’m going to do it next to the man who’s always been by my side. Thank you all for the dedication and support you provided. I know you’ll go on to do great things because you’re great people.”

Sara kisses Hollister’s cheek as the waiter appears and drinks are ordered. Leaning across him, she pokes my arm.

“You better take care of his heart. He’s one of the good ones.”

“Don’t worry about a thing, Sara. Hollister is safe with me.”

“I know. I just wanted to play tough sister for a minute. I’m super excited to see what you guys do in the future.”

I press a kiss to Hollister’s cheek. “So am I.”

## Epilogue

Hollister

Two years later

I fold the napkins for about the twentieth time today, hoping the activity will burn off some energy. I still have thirty minutes before the doors open. I should be supervising my staff swirling around me making final preparations, but I can't focus enough to do it.

"Holl."

Axel's voice is an immediate balm to my racing heart. Dragging my gaze from my meticulously folded napkin, I meet his mismatched eyes. Axel's still my rock and my best friend, but now he's my husband and business partner too.

"Take a deep breath, gorgeous. You've got this. People are already lining up outside."

"Oh god. Really?"

"Really. Sara's marketing paid off."

"What if they hate food?"

"Hate food, Holl? I don't think they'd come." Axel chuckles. "Babe, we spent two months finding the perfect chef and another month testing recipes. You know you nailed it."

"Right. Okay." I shake my arms and twist my neck back and forth. "I can do this."

Axel squeezes my arms. “You’re living your dream, babe. Your real dream. We can handle anything that comes our way.”

“You’re right. Thanks for the pep talk.”

Axel presses a sweet but firm kiss to my lips. “Let’s go out front.”

I take his offered hand, allowing the memories of the last two years to wash over me. What a leap I took, quitting my job and eventually deciding to dive into the restaurant idea with tons of support from my friends and family. Now I’m minutes away from opening the doors on Onyx Café, a lunch-only restaurant offering pastas, salads, soups, and sandwiches. Our signature offerings though, are the pastries, designed to draw people in just for those if that’s all they want. I believe in my concept, but that doesn’t mean I’m not a nervous wreck.

When I enter the front room, I stop in my tracks when my mom and stepdad turn to face me. Between them is none other than Benjamin Burke, my dad. His posture is... sheepish? As if he’s actually nervous.

“Dad? What are you doing here?”

He clears his throat, cheeks lobster red as his eyes dart around at all the people watching us. “Uh, well, I saw the announcement online and uh, well, I thought I’d come check it out.”

I don’t even know what to say. I haven’t seen his face since the day I walked out of the office. I didn’t call him to tell him about my engagement, and we didn’t invite him to the small ceremony we had at the courthouse. As far as I knew, I didn’t exist to him anymore.

“Can we talk alone?” he asks.

“No,” I answer before I even think about it. “If you have something to say, you can say it here, but you have five minutes, then I have to open the doors.”

My dad nods, glancing anxiously at Axel. “Fine. I, um... I haven’t been a great dad.”

I almost scoff but manage to hold it back. Understatement. Axel moves closer to me, his arm pressed against mine.

“It took me way too long to realize I was the reason things blew up. My behavior made you leave.”

I nod, but remain silent. Sara appears on my other side, wrapping her arm around mine.

“Things went to hell when you left, and I was too proud to ask you for help or beg you to come back. We lost some accounts and I finally saw how much you did.”

My throat tightens with emotion, but I do my best to keep my expression neutral. I’m not letting him off the hook that easily.

“Hollister, I came here to... to apologize.”

My mom’s gasp is audible. Has the man ever apologized for anything?

“Not only for my failings as a boss, but also as a father. I see now how my tactics backfired.”

I can only imagine the shock on my face. “Why now?” I manage to ask.

“Something you said to me the day you walked out replays in my head every morning. You told me not to expect to see you on my deathbed.”

Axel cringes, whispering, “Damn.”

“At first I was just angry,” Dad continues. “But I started wondering, what kind of dad would push his kid to say something like that? I made you hate me.” He chuckles darkly. “But I’m good at that, right?” He wrings his hands together. “I decided to go to therapy to figure out why I push everyone away. Your mom, you, everyone who ever took a chance on me. I can’t really say why yet, but at least I figured out that I’m the problem.”

“Yeah,” I murmur.

“And listen, I know I can’t wave a magic wand and suddenly be the man I always should’ve been. I don’t really

deserve your forgiveness so I'm not asking for it. I just wanted you to know, I guess, that I see it now. After the year I had, it was time to face you."

"What does that mean?" I ask.

He takes a step forward. "Turns out I was sick, and I had been for a long time. I ignored the symptoms."

"You better be telling the truth and not manipulating him," Axel says, leaning in like he's gonna punch my dad.

My dad nods. "Definitely the truth. Prostate cancer. I thought the weight loss was just stress." He glances at my mom and Jameson. "I'm better now. In remission and making lifestyle changes."

"Dad..." I whisper.

"I don't want anything, Hollister," he continues. "I don't expect anything. Not your time or your sympathy and certainly not your pity. I created this. All of it. But I got a second chance and with the time I have left I figured the least I can do is make sure you know that..." He pauses as his voice breaks. Before he speaks again, he looks around at everyone, then he nods. "You did the right thing by leaving and following your own path. I learned the hard way that all that matters in this life is the people who care. You have a lot of people who care, Hollister. You lived your life never forgetting to be kind. Not that you need it, but I'm really proud of the man you became in spite of me. A testament to your mom and Jameson, for sure."

I lean into Axel for support, trying to keep from falling into a sobbing mess. I waited my entire life for this man to say he was proud of me, but the weirdest thing is the realization that I didn't need it as much as I thought. While the sentiment is nice, somewhere along the way I let go of the desire to hear it. I'm proud of myself, and apparently that's all I truly needed.

"I'm stepping down. If anything happens to me, you're still the beneficiary of my estate, but the board of directors will appoint a new CEO for Burke and Associates, unless of



course you change your mind. You could come back and take over now.”

Everyone falls silent, and as my eyes dart around the shop to my friends and family, the staff who trusted me to work here, the people lining up outside peering through the windows, and my dad’s revelation, a sense of peace and rightness like I’ve never felt washes over me.

I turn to Axel with a huge smile on my face. He smiles back, rubbing my neck. “Whatever you want to do, I’m here to support you.”

“I know.” I turn back to my dad. “I’m sorry to hear you were sick, and I appreciate everything you said today. I’m open to seeing you again, but as far as I’m concerned everything worked out perfectly for me. I’m about to embark on the dream I’ve always had with all these wonderful people around me. You’re welcome to grab a table and try the food, but I’ve got work to do. My husband and I have a restaurant to run.”

“Husband...” my dad whispers, looking at Axel before he nods. “Congrats. I’d be happy to stay.”

“Great.” I smile, noting how my mom wipes tears away and Jameson gives me a thumbs-up. “Sara, can you open the doors, please?”

With a bright smile, she nods. “You bet, boss.”

As people stream in and tables fill up, I squeeze Axel’s hand. “We did it, Ax.”

“Nah, babe, you did it.” He kisses my temple. “Just like the very good boy you are.”

My stomach flutters. “Maybe I’ll get a good boy present then?”

“You better believe it.”

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Mia is a USA Today Bestselling author of queer paranormal and contemporary romance. She's obsessed with vampires, mermaids, and tattoos, all of which make regular appearances in her books. She's fluent in sarcasm, addicted to caffeine, and easily amused by memes. She may or may not be a witch.

Her books are low to mid-angst, high heat, and celebrate the many ways people of all types can fall in love- even the paranormal kind. After all, love is love.



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**Friendship and Desire:** Low angst, high heat, friends becoming lovers.

[readerlinks.com/l/2235237](https://readerlinks.com/l/2235237)

**Love in LA:** Doting Daddies and their sweet boys finding love in Los Angeles.

[readerlinks.com/l/2235256](https://readerlinks.com/l/2235256)

**Tattoos and Temptation:** Featuring low angst, steamy tales complete with decadent desserts, hot Miami nights, and boys with ink. [readerlinks.com/l/2235255](https://readerlinks.com/l/2235255)

There's an [adults-only coloring book](#) too!

**Written in the Stars:** Featuring low angst, found family, space nerd love set in a Boston Planetarium. [readerlinks.com/l/2235254](https://readerlinks.com/l/2235254)

**Other Books and Series**

**The Jerk Next Door:** Enemies (kind of) to lovers, bi awakening, low angst, high heat

**Snow Big Deal:** Winter-themed, holiday adjacent, crushes to more, fake boyfriend novella.

**Deviate:** Best friends to lovers, bisexual awakening, fake marriage

**Damage:** Second chance, tons of groveling

**The Secrets We Keep:** Forbidden romance, cheating with a twist