

Merry Critulats

A DUNGEONS & DATING NOVELLA



KATHERINE
MCINTYRE

Merry Critmas

**A Dungeons and Dating Christmas
Novella**

Katherine McIntyre

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Contents

Dedication

Acknowledgements

Prologue

1. Chapter One

2. Chapter Two

3. Chapter Three

4. Chapter Four

5. Chapter Five

6. Chapter Six

7. Chapter Seven

8. Chapter Eight

9. Chapter Nine

10. Chapter Ten

11. Chapter Eleven

12. Chapter Twelve

13. Chapter Thirteen

14. Chapter Fourteen

Afterword

Also By

Also By

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About the Author

*To my family, who set the bar for warm, magical, and chaotic
Christmases.*

Acknowledgements

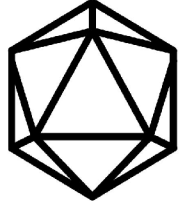
While Charisma Check was the end of the main series, this is the final book included in the Dungeons and Dating series. I had the premise in the back burner for a while now, and it was a flash fiction I did for the Small But Mighty Facebook group that gave me the spark for this book.

For Merry Critmas, I owe a huge thanks to Melissa, Zile, Alex, AE, and Rob for beta reading this book to make sure it was the best holiday sendoff to the Tabletop Tavern crew. Always a shout out to my author friends who lift me up every step of the way—ie, listen to my whining and ranting. A huge thanks as well to Cate Ashwood for knocking it out of the park with the cover and to Rebecca for her sharp editorial skills. I also need to mention the Small but Mighty group on Facebook, as the flash fiction shorts they run there was how I got the inspiration for this book!

A massive thank you to my reader group and amazing readers. Your love for the Dungeons and Dating series fills me

with such joy, and I adore all the antics we get up to in the group!

And as always, a thank you to my wonderful friends and family for all the support and encouragement—I wouldn't be able to do any of this without you.



Prologue

A Couple of Years Earlier

Coming to this wedding was a mistake.

Jay had thought he was ready for a big event with most of his relatives, but he'd already been deadnamed by five different family members, misgendered by three, and he was one drink away from walking out the door.

He clutched his vodka tonic tight, as if it were Cap's vibranium shield.

The warm lighting brought all the details of the Julia Morgan Ballroom to life, from the octagonal imprints in the ceiling to the weird floral chandeliers. When he'd responded yes to Luke's wedding, he'd been riding high on the new IT job he'd landed right in the heart of Union Square, and he'd figured it was time to see the whole family as his best fucking self.

However, he'd forgotten how garbage several of his aunts and uncles could be as well as quite a few of his cousins. His best friend Beck had offered to be his plus one, but he'd stupidly decided to go solo. Mom and Dad were on the prowl, ready to fight any of the family members who gave him shit, but if they knew every little detail about tonight, they'd be fighting all night and not enjoying the wedding.

Jay snuck to one of the elegantly framed windows for a spot to lean while half of the family danced in the glossy center dance floor. Music pulsed through the place from the DJ they

hired, and while Jay tapped a foot to the beat, he wasn't about to go show off his lack of dance moves.

He tipped back another sip of his vodka tonic, the smooth liquid doing little to assuage his nerves.

“Hey, gorgeous. You look like my next husband.” A loud, booming voice sounded beside him.

Jay glanced up, curious at what interaction was going on. Except when he looked to his right, he was met with a broad chest. He continued his scan up past the sharp lines of the charcoal tux to shoulders that made him a little weak in the knees, a chiseled jaw with just the right amount of scruff, and the most stunning blue eyes he'd ever seen.

The guy was looking at him expectantly with the sort of charming smile that never got levelled his way, not from guys that were nuclear-grade hot. And this guy? He was like Bruce-Wayne-level hot.

Jay glanced around him to see if anyone else was nearby, but no, it was just the two of them standing here by this window. “Uh, are you talking to me?” he asked, unable to help himself from clarifying.

The guy arched a brow, a smirk tugging at those full lips, and fuck, apparently he could get hotter. “What other gorgeous guy would I be talking to?”

Jay's heart pounded in double time at that, and goddamn, he was a goner. From a single cheesy pickup line, he'd gone from feeling like shit about the night to validated as fuck. He took a

moment to soak the man in before realizing he recognized him —as well as the tux. “You’re one of Luke’s groomsmen, aren’t you?”

“Guilty,” he said, casting him a glance before taking a sip from whatever amber-colored liquid filled his glass. “And you’re family, I presume?”

“Cousin,” Jay said, his throat drying as his mind raced for anything to say. He doubted a sexy-as-fuck guy like this wanted to hear about why *Hush* was one of the best Batman stories or his top ten list of Vertigo comics.

Based on the glint in the guy’s gaze as it slowly rolled over Jay, maybe he didn’t need him to talk. Which sounded more than perfect. He chewed on his lower lip, looking back up to catch that gorgeous man’s smirk. Fuck. The last time Jay got laid was months ago, and he’d been hoping for a cliché wedding hookup.

He seriously couldn’t be this lucky.

“The name’s Leo,” the guy said, his light blue eyes twinkling.

Jay cupped the back of his neck. “Jay Barlowe.”

Leo lifted one of those thick brows. “Didn’t realize we were already on last-name basis.”

A flush spread across his cheeks. Standing as close as he was, Jay caught cedar and spice, the rich scent stoking the flames of his libido.

“Damn, I love that blush,” Leo said, tapping a finger against his glass. The guy had big hands and long, almost elegant fingers, to the point that Jay was entranced. Leo tilted his head in the direction of the corridors leading to the open bar. “Want to talk somewhere private?”

“If by talk, you mean fuck, I’m in,” Jay responded, the words traveling past his lips before he realized what he’d said. Oh lord. What the hell had gotten into him? Panic began to set in a second later, the ping, ping, ping of his nerves.

Leo’s eyes widened with surprise and then a sharp bark of a laugh followed. “It’s like you’re reading my mind.” He winked, the sheer, smooth cockiness of this motherfucker rolling through Jay better than the vodka tonic ever had.

Leo turned on his heel as if to lead the way, but Jay winced, reaching out to grab him by the wrist. The moment their skin touched, the electric sensation almost zapped every errant thought from his brain. But he’d already been burned by a hookup before, and after struggling with his extended family for most of the night, he wasn’t going to be able to stomach another disappointment.

“I’m trans,” he said, wishing he didn’t have to feel like he was exposing a soft underbelly every time he went through this with guys he slept with. Maybe if things weren’t so new, so fresh...maybe these nerves would fade over time. “Just so you know.”

Leo shrugged. “That doesn’t change the fact that you’re the most gorgeous guy in the room.” His eyes gleamed with

unrepentant lust that sent one hell of a jolt through Jay. His heart restarted at that, and he didn't bother restraining his grin.

Leo crooked a brow. "Since we're getting things out there off the bat, I'm a top only—is that going to be a problem?"

Jay's mouth dried as desire punched him straight in the sternum. "Hell no."

Leo's lips quirked. "Ready to go?" He started striding forward, and Jay moved so fast to follow that he almost bumped headfirst into his back. And what a fucking back it was. The guy had a strong, delicious frame, and the tux jacket just highlighted it with firm, stark lines.

They passed through the doors leading out of the ballroom, past the thump, thump, thump of whatever 80s music was playing that had cast a summoning spell on the dance floor—seriously, it was packed. Jay couldn't give a fuck. The blood was thumping hard through his veins at the idea of doing anything with Leo—whose last name he didn't know. Whether the guy was leading him to a bathroom stall or his car, Jay was pretty much good for anything.

Not only had it been that long, but this guy was so damn hot he felt like his skin was melting off.

He scurried past family members, a few who tried to stop him to talk, but he simply offered a nod or a wave and kept on moving. Leo didn't seem to have that issue as he strode forward, the powerful pump of his legs drawing Jay's gaze to his ass. Jay chewed on his lip, trying to ignore the throb downstairs. Goddamn.

They walked through one of the rooms with the bar, then turned a corner to pass the restrooms. Jay's heart was thudding. Leo didn't stop there like Jay had thought, instead walking a little farther until he ducked through the next open door.

Jay followed him in, glancing around the small room with a plush window lounger on the opposite end. Voices could still be heard from down the hall, but apart from folks stumbling into the bathroom, no one else was near here. He stepped inside, making his way toward the window that showcased the heart of San Francisco, all silhouetted buildings and starry velvet night in frame. The door creaked as Leo pushed it shut, and once it closed with a click, a shot of adrenaline burst through Jay.

He slowly turned around to see Leo standing by the door.

Jay allowed himself a long, lingering look at the man. He was taller than Jay's 5'7 with the sort of broad shoulders meant for gripping. The scruff enhanced his angular jaw, and the slightly rumpled collar of his tux made him appear a little less polished—a little more real. The guys Jay interacted with in the IT department were more like him—nerdy, slim, avoiding the gym most days. Jay's tongue slipped out as he licked his lips, not missing the way Leo's burning blue eyes traced the movement.

Leo flicked the lock on the door, and his lips lifted in a smirk. "What do you want, gorgeous?"

A whole carousel of filthy images paraded through his mind, but a lot of them he would need to take his time with—not fast and dirty while his family marched around outside.

Jay's gaze zeroed in on the prominent bulge in Leo's pants, and he drew in a sharp breath.

“I want to suck your cock,” he said, shocked at the brazen words coming from his mouth. He didn't normally talk like this, but something about the heat in those eyes and the thrill of hooking up at a wedding had him blunter than he'd ever been before.

It felt so damn *good*.

Leo's eyes widened in surprise at his response, but a smile spread on his lips a moment later, and those white teeth gleamed. “Oh fuck yeah.”

Leo began crossing the space between them, his stride powerful, sleek. The guy moved with the prowess of a panther, and Jay's knees all but turned to jelly because he definitely wasn't immune.

When Leo closed in, his hand slipped around Jay's nape, and a second later, those firm lips were on his.

The kiss surged through his veins like electricity, the sort of charge that sparked him to life. Leo's hand tightened on his nape, the other hand gripping his hip with the sort of possessive claim that turned him upside down. Jay basked in the feel of it, the way Leo slipped his tongue in to devour his

mouth. He clutched at the lapels of Leo's tux, fucking loving how this man just took control.

His life had been going through so many radical changes—good ones, amazing ones, but some days the sheer volume threatened to just wash him away. Leo's grip, the way he pinned him to the spot in this moment was perfect.

Jay let out a guttural groan, the pressure along his nape, that firm clutch against his hip making his mind dizzy with need. Their chests pressed against each other's, and Jay wanted to sink into all that warmth, that heat. He lost himself in the rhythm of this kiss, the way Leo caressed in one moment and ravaged the next. It was wild, unpredictable, everything to get his heart pumping and his pulse racing.

Glued to each other the way they were, he could feel the press of Leo's thick length. Fuck, that was hot. Leo licked into his mouth with another claiming kiss, but he was burning up inside for more.

Jay reached down to fumble with the button of Leo's tux pants and then all but ripped the zipper down. The sound echoed in the air between them, and they both broke for breath as Jay paused, his fingers still on the zipper.

“If you're about to ask if I want this, the answer is fuck yes, gorgeous,” Leo purred, reaching around and giving Jay's ass a possessive squeeze. Lust zinged through him, and he all but panted.

Jay let go of the zipper, sinking slowly to his knees.

Leo reached into his pants and tugged out his cock—long and thick with a prominent vein running down the side. The tip was flushed red, and Jay licked his lips at the glisten of precum at the slit. Unable to help himself, he leaned forward and lapped at it, salt bursting on his tongue.

A low groan came from Leo's lips that shot through Jay like whisky, and it was game on.

Jay wrapped his hand around Leo's cock and licked the tip again, this time with more pressure. He teased around the end with his tongue, enjoying the hushed sounds coming from Leo, the responsive way his thighs flexed whenever he hit a sensitive spot.

He looked up, the sight of Leo towering overhead just *doing* things to him. The man speared fingers through his curls, clutching on tight. The slight sting grounded him in the moment, and he lined up Leo's cock to his mouth before swallowing him down.

He'd never been able to deep throat, so he didn't try to now, keeping a firm grip around the base as he sucked him down as far as possible. The weight of Leo's cock on his tongue, the musky scent of him was like a drug, and Jay couldn't get enough. He began bobbing his head forward and back, finding a rhythm as he savored each sensation. Being down on his knees ticked some box inside him every time, and at this point, he was so fucking turned on it grew painful.

Leo began to thrust a little, small movements with his hips, and Jay shifted in time with him, drool dripping down the

sides of his mouth.

“Fuck, you look so hot like that,” Leo murmured, his voice low and raspy. “You like having your mouth stuffed full of cock?”

Jay sucked harder at that, reaching down to unbutton his own slacks. The way this guy talked was unreal, and it did more for him than he thought it would. He tugged the zipper down and slid his fingers behind his packer to start rubbing on his cock. The first touch sent sparks bursting through him, and Leo’s grip on his hair tightened, making him delirious with need. The pressure began mounting inside him, a tension that he was desperate to slake.

“You’re so good, gorgeous,” Leo murmured as he kept on with those slow, deliberate thrusts forward. Drool poured down the sides of Jay’s mouth, dribbling down his chin as he tried to suck him even deeper. He closed his eyes, losing himself to the feeling of the heavy cock in his mouth, the scent of musk around him, and the burn of his knees as he knelt on the carpeting. The pressure in his cock was mounting by the second, more and more as he rubbed at it, wholly consumed by this intense need.

“That hot mouth is going to be the death of me,” Leo murmured as he continued to thrust, his voice coming out thready and a little more desperate. Jay could feel the hard way Leo gripped his hair, the sting only elevating his desire. He was nearing that edge, that coiling tension that begged for

release. Jay kept on rubbing his cock as he continued to slurp and suck at Leo's cock with renewed desperation.

Salt burst on his tongue from the pre-cum, and Leo let loose a low swear.

"I'm going to come," he forced out, giving a second's warning before his release flooded Jay's mouth, tangy and warm. He almost choked from the sheer volume of it, some of it dripping down as he fought to swallow. Jay didn't stop touching his cock the whole time, so damn near the edge that he ached.

"Such a good boy," Leo purred.

The word shot through him like epinephrine, a key opening a lock he didn't even know existed.

All of a sudden, his cock was spasming as he came violently, his fingers mid-stroke.

Bliss surged through him in a violent sweep, intensified by the tendrils of warmth curling up inside from those words in that husky tone. His entire body locked up from the intense orgasm wrenched from him, and the aftershocks sparked through him.

Some of the cum began to drip down his chin, probably staining his shirt, but he couldn't pull his thoughts together enough to move. Leo drew his cock out of Jay's mouth and tucked himself in, and a second later, he was kneeling on the floor with him.

“That was so fucking hot,” Leo murmured before licking the cum off his chin and then drawing him in for a languid, lengthy kiss. Jay all but melted in his grasp, slowly pulling his hand out of his pants.

They broke for breath, and Leo drew back. “Let me take care of you now.”

A flush rose through Jay, up to his cheeks. “I already came.”

Leo blinked and then a seductive fucking grin curled his lips. “I take that back. *That* is so fucking hot.” He pushed up from the ground and offered Jay a hand up. Jay accepted it, his knees tender from kneeling.

He probably looked wasted after that. Even though Leo had just come, his hair was only the tiniest bit mussed and his tux a little ruffled. Jay ran fingers through his curls in an attempt to smooth his style back down. The taste of Leo’s cum lingered in his mouth, which shouldn’t have been as hot as it was. He rearranged himself and then zipped up his pants, still feeling off-kilter after coming that hard.

Leo tipped Jay’s chin up, planting another kiss on his lips. When Leo pulled back, he winked. “Why don’t we take advantage of that open bar while it lasts. I’ve got another drink or so in me before my early-as-fuck flight back to Chicago.”

Jay grinned, feeling fully sated, his limbs loose and relaxed. He’d been stressed as shit earlier, but a quick hookup had been just the ticket to cast away the garbage parts of the night. “I don’t know—even a drink or two probably won’t cure my lack of conversation skills,” he responded, his tone a bit wry.

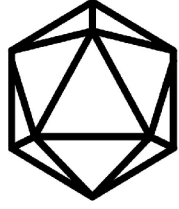
“Try me,” Leo said, taking the first few steps toward the door.

“Unless you want to hear ad nauseum about my corgi Peter Parker or you don’t mind me talking your ear off about D&D, then I’m about out of small-talk topics.” The words he’d been stumbling with earlier just rolled off his tongue. Nothing like having a guy’s cock in his mouth to break through his normal social anxiety.

“Considering I was a huge Spiderman fan growing up, I want to hear all about your corgi and how he got his name,” Leo said, flashing a heartbreaker smile.

Jay’s heart sped up at the sight, and a grin of his own reached his lips. The man was fucking perfect, and while a small part of him wished the guy didn’t live in Chicago—someone that hot, that fucking interesting demanded a repeat—he would enjoy every second he could get.

“Well then,” he said, walking past Leo as he reached for the doorknob. “It’s a long story about a puppy, a spider, and a bottle of Gatorade...”



Chapter One

Deck the halls with douchebag exes. Jay was fine being single for the holidays. It wasn't like he had an upcoming work party at his new job that he'd said he'd be bringing his boyfriend to. Or a big, loud Christmas family function he'd been hoping to weather with someone else rather than going by his lonesome.

No, that all got blown to shit when Dan decided he wanted to see other people—and started hooking up with a guy at his office the same day. Sure, he hadn't cheated, but he'd definitely lined things up so he had a safe place to land post-breakup.

Jay tugged on the lapels of his canvas jacket, wishing he'd put on something a little warmer. Not like winters in San Francisco were anything terrible compared to other parts of the country, but he preferred the summer.

The sign for Tabletop Tavern rose into view at the end of the block, looking plucked out of a Dungeons and Dragons

adventure with the wooden backing and fancy font. The board game cafe had been a regular stop for him ever since it opened, a chance to unwind around fellow geeks in a welcoming environment. Plus, he'd met some amazing friends here too—other gamers who stopped by on a regular basis, ones he'd eventually started a regular Pathfinder game with. They were all having so much fun in their campaign.

He stepped in front of the glass doors, ready to get out of this funk with a board game or two. The breakup was still fresh—like a week ago fresh—and he needed some quality friend time and distraction. The moment he pushed inside, the rich scent of coffee wafted his way, followed by the murmur of casual chatter from over by the gaming tables. This place emanated comfort from the exposed brick walls to the polished brown tables, signs for Magic the Gathering nights, D&D one-shot sessions, and a myriad array of theme nights stationed all throughout.

His best friend, Mal, had snagged a corner table along with Mal's boyfriend, Omari. Jay spotted the box for Lords of Waterdeep, which meant they'd already picked the first game to start with. Fine by him—the less decisions he had to make, the better. Jay strode up to the front desk to check in with the gaming pass they'd started for regulars here.

Mase stood at the front desk, decked out in their punky finest. They were wearing red and black striped pants, a black tunic that flared out at their thighs, and a spiked collar and thick black bracelets.

“Hey, Jay,” they said, all pep and sunshine. “They’re waiting for you over there.” They jerked a finger toward his friends.

“Thanks,” he said, running fingers through his hair and hoping he looked presentable and not like he’d gotten his heart stomped on.

“Are you okay?” Mase asked, their voice gentling a little bit.

Clearly, he wasn’t pulling it off.

“Just your garden-variety breakup,” he said, trying to wave the whole thing off as casual. “Except without the ‘let’s be friends’ tacked on because he was ready to leap right into the arms of someone new.”

“Ugh, ouch,” Mase said, wrinkling their nose. “That never feels good.”

Honestly, if Mason wasn’t already paired off with Hunter, another gorgeous employee here, Jay might’ve considered asking them out. They emanated a confidence he found attractive, so different from his go-with-the-flow but also perennially anxious attitude. Though, who knew—maybe their bright personality masked anxiety too.

“Yeah, but I’m in a good place to just hang and not focus on the past today,” Jay said, offering a smile before heading toward where his friends were stationed.

“What took you so long?” Mal asked the moment he got close enough. “You live closer than we do.”

“I had extra primping I needed to do,” Jay shot back as he slipped into the open spot. The game was set up and ready to

play, and Omari didn't say anything, but with the way he kept glancing to the pieces, he vibrated with the need to get started. "Go ahead," Jay said. "Kick things off."

"Fantastic," Omari said, shooting Jay a charming grin. The guy was the smooth to Malachi's ruffled, and the pair had been together for two years—lucky bastards. Jay couldn't seem to get anyone to stay longer than eight months. What made it worse was every breakup always ended up doing a number on his dysphoria too, the shitty little voice making an appearance along with the normal garbage feels. It mostly centered around bottom dysphoria, which made getting intimate with new partners harder, but despite him passing most of the time now, occasionally insecurities snuck in there too.

He ignored the insidious shiver through his body as he settled in at the table. People weren't watching him—not here. Places like this were better for his headspace when he felt a bit off.

"Are you coming to our holiday hang this year?" Mal asked while scrutinizing his next move in the game.

Jay wrinkled his nose. He loved most of the people attending, so the answer was probably yes, but he couldn't ignore the reminder that his stupid ex was supposed to join him for Mal's party too. Who the hell agreed to this many holiday social engagements?

Right. He had.

"Take away the question there," Mal said. "You're coming, not moping. I think there'll be some cute single friends in

attendance.”

“If you’re talking about Ally, she cornered me last time to talk about cheese for an hour straight,” Jay muttered. “Look, I get we’ve all got our fascinations, but I didn’t sign up for a lecture on Gouda, and she wasn’t catching any of my cues to escape.”

His real type, the one he fantasized about, was someone commanding. He’d played around with kink a little before, and that Dom voice got his attention every time. Maybe he needed to go to a munch at Whipped or something. They had a great reputation in the area, and the owner, Meg, ran a tight ship. As the game rounded to his turn, he focused on his moves rather than pondering the inevitable attempts at holiday setups that would occur. Mal was a great best friend—caring as shit and enthusiastic, but he could be relentless in trying to find his friends their happy ever afters.

Jay couldn’t help that he just kept striking out.

The conversation switched toward Lords of Waterdeep as they sank into the game, the exact escape he’d been looking for. At the table, he could forget the crappy feelings that had been trailing him all day. Time passed in a blink, and they placed coffee orders, and he sipped on a warm cappuccino with plenty of cinnamon as they got closer and closer to a conclusion of the game. Jay loved the trance-like state of focusing on tasks that gaming brought, the same sort of lure that had drawn him to a career into working with tech.

He settled back in the seat again once they finished tallying the points.

Mal pounded the table. "I won."

"Bully for you," Jay teased, enjoying how into the game his friend got.

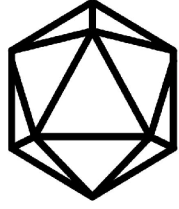
The jingle of the door dragged his attention in that direction, and he found himself unable to look away.

A guy walked in, the tall, broad-shouldered type that sucked him in from the get-go. His hair was dark brown and tousled, and his eyes were an intense storm blue. He wore a gray Henley that hugged those shoulders too well and black jeans that showed off muscular thighs. Jay might've started drooling a little if recognition hadn't slammed into him like a freight train.

He knew the guy.

Not like someone he'd been friends with years ago.

No, like knew the weight of his cock on his tongue and what those long fingers felt like gripping his hair.



Chapter Two

Starting over was a bitch.

Sure, Leo finally got the chance to chase his dreams. Goodbye Chicago high rise condo and hello shitty little apartment in San Francisco. Goodbye six-figure finance job with insanely good bonuses and hello minimal salary while partnering with another guy in a cafe.

But baking had been all Leo had wanted to do for a long time. The tradeoffs were fucking worth it, but damn, what he hadn't anticipated was the loneliness.

He approached the board game cafe his business partner, Matt, had told him about. Leo wasn't a huge geek, but at the worst he could try to get to know Matt's friend circle a bit better. The guy's boyfriend was one of the owners of Tabletop Tavern and made regular appearances at their shop, Land and Hearth.

The wooden sign stood out, and the second he pulled the door open, he was greeted with sunshine and the crisp scent of

orange. The place had a similar warm and cozy vibe to his own cafe, which set him at ease. The plan was just to grab a coffee and check Tabletop Tavern out, since he wasn't prepared to dive into the deep end with learning board games by his lonesome.

A blonde cutie stood behind the counter, who Leo recognized as Mase since they'd visited Land and Hearth before. Mase was deep in conversation with another customer. Leo looked around the room, soaking in the ambiance of the place, the big stuffed couches around this area, the massive bookshelves and gaming tables on the other side.

The burn of a gaze snagged his attention from the corner of the room, and he locked eyes with the culprit.

Slender and on the shorter side with rich chestnut hair that had a slight wave to it, the guy was gorgeous. He had bright hazel eyes, a sharper nose, and plush lips.

And Leo had totally fucking met him before.

At one hot wedding a few years back, they'd hooked up in a side room, and goddamn the encounter had been scorching.

Would it be weird to go say hi? Sure, chatting him up went against one-night stand protocol, but hell, apart from his business partner and employees, he didn't know anyone in this city. And Jay had been downright adorable.

Fuck it.

He offered an up-nod to Mase behind the register who looked at him, prepared to help out, and he pointed in Jay's

direction. Not like he'd gotten anywhere without taking a few risks. His life had been comprised of a series of calculated ones, all of which had led him to San Francisco making an investment on a cafe searching for a business partner. It wasn't until he'd gotten halfway across the room that Jay seemed to register Leo was walking in his direction. The guy's eyes widened, but he wasn't making a mad dash out of here, so Leo figured that was a good sign.

Jay had been sitting at the table with two of his friends, but he slipped out to stand, taking a few tentative steps forward. That action cemented his decision, and a broad grin ripped across Leo's face as he closed the remaining distance.

"It's been a spell," Leo said, stopping mere feet away from him. This close, he could see all that detailed gorgeousness—the tousled waves, the slight sprinkle of freckles on his nose, and muscular thighs, visible with the tight jeans he wore. Hot as fuck.

"What are you doing in the area?" Jay asked. "Work conference?" Leo didn't miss the way Jay skimmed him over from head to toe. He thrust his shoulders back and his chest out, hooking his thumbs in his pockets. Let the guy look all he wanted.

"Moved here," Leo said. "In a complete life overhaul, I decided to buy in on Land and Hearth cafe, so I'm now one of the owners."

"No shit," Jay said, blinking, those thick lashes making his eyes stand out even more. "I love that café. When did this all

happen?”

“A-hem,” a sound came from beside Jay, and Leo’s attention moved to a guy who stood next to him, square shoulders and a burly sort of frame. He inched in with a level of protectiveness that made Leo wonder. Boyfriend, maybe? A slight pang of disappointment knocked him square in the chest, coming as a complete surprise. He’d run into Jay out of the blue, but a little part of him had hoped to occupy Jay’s attention for a bit longer.

“Who’s this?” the guy next to Jay said, inserting himself into the conversation.

Jay’s cheeks flushed a delicious red, and Leo couldn’t help the amusement that thrummed in his chest. “Uh,” Jay said, jerking a thumb at Leo. “This is Leo. Met him at my cousin’s wedding.”

The guy arched a brow and glanced between the two of them. “Was this the hottie—”

“Shut up, Mal,” Jay muttered, scrubbing his face with his palms.

Leo’s lips curled into a smirk.

The other guy slid over, tall and muscular. He placed a hand on Mal’s shoulder. “Back off, sweetheart. You’re embarrassing him.”

His heart thumped a little faster. So, Mal wasn’t dating Jay. Didn’t mean he was single, but at least there was more of a chance he might be.

“What are you up to?” Leo asked Jay, wanting to hold on to this temporary connection for as long as he could.

“We’re just leaving,” Mal said with an extra-wide smile. Well damn, Leo liked the guy already.

“What do you mean?” Jay said, glancing to his friend. “We only got one game in—”

Before he could finish, Mal patted him on the shoulder and fixed a look to Leo. “He’s got the afternoon free, if you’re searching for someone to show you around town.”

Jay rolled his eyes, a cute-as-fuck flush rising to his cheeks again. “Don’t push him into hanging out with me.”

“I was planning on asking if you wanted to, if that makes a difference,” Leo swept in, before Jay’s embarrassment carried him in the opposite direction than Leo wanted.

Jay blinked. “Oh, you were?”

God, this guy’s reactions were delicious. So earnest and open, and Leo hadn’t forgotten how the man had melted at his touch, how obedient and eager he’d been during their hookup. Even though it had been a few years back, Jay had stood out.

“Absolutely,” he said. “I’d be an idiot to turn down the company of a gorgeous guy like you.” Leo couldn’t help but flirt—it was compulsory. If anything, Jay grew even redder, and his friend Mal grabbed his boyfriend’s hand and all but yanked him forward.

“See you later, Jay,” Mal said as they headed past them. “Have fun.” His friends scrambled out within moments, which

left the two of them standing here in the middle of Tabletop Tavern.

“Uh,” Jay said, glancing to the table and then to the door. “Did you want to play games? Or grab a bite to eat or a cup of coffee by the couches?”

Mere minutes around this man and the loneliness that had been aching in his bones as of late ebbed. Leo would claim as much time as Jay was willing to give.

“I want to catch up with you,” Leo said. “Let me grab us some coffees. What would you like? You can snag us a seat.”

Jay licked his lips before bobbing his head. “Just a latte would be great.”

“Perfect,” Leo responded, taking quick strides toward the counter to place his order.

Mase stepped up and flashed a grin. “Need anything?” Their blonde hair was spiked out, and they emitted a bright sort of energy that contrasted with all the black they wore.

“Just a latte and a cappuccino,” he said, snagging his wallet and then his card. “We’ll be sitting over—” He paused to look to where Jay had moved to. By a snug purple loveseat against the wall. “—there.” He pointed in the direction. “Tell Jas the place is gorgeous too,” he added. “It took me long enough to get over here.”

“You’ve been busy over at Land and Hearth,” they said, accepting his card and ringing him up. “It’s great to see you

over here though. Matt's been saying such sweet things about you ever since you bought into the business."

"Is he capable of saying bad things though?" Leo teased. "The man's a total sweetheart."

"You're not wrong," Mase responded. "I love seeing him and Jas together just to watch my boss's snarky exterior melt." They printed the ticket and lifted it up. "I'll go grab your coffees."

"Thanks," Leo said before turning on his heel to lock his focus back on Jay. The man waited for him over by the couch, a slight hunch to his shoulders that betrayed his nerves. Leo strode over and took a seat, close enough that he could knock knees with him if he wanted but with enough space in case Jay needed it. While Jay might've told his friend about him, that didn't mean he was interested in a repeat.

Though Leo definitely wouldn't say no.

Sure, he'd indulged in the occasional hookup since he'd moved to the area, but those guys didn't scratch the itch the way random flings used to. His old job had been consuming him alive both body and soul, so hookups had been all he'd been able to offer in the past. However, ever since he'd restarted his life with a career he loved, the rush of joy he got from running Land and Hearth made him realize just how lonely he'd been.

"So, are you baking at the cafe now?" Jay asked, diving into conversation first.

“It’s always been a passion of mine, one that got buried after years in the finance world,” Leo said, playing it off like this wasn’t a massive vulnerable point for him. As if it hadn’t taken a month of breakdowns and starting therapy to see his job was killing him slowly.

“That’s so damn cool,” Jay gushed, and a knot in Leo’s chest unraveled at his appreciation.

“Do you still have your corgi, Peter Parker?” Leo asked, curious. While a lot of hookups faded into the background for him, he remembered every detail of his night with Jay. The guy had been funny and charming, and the chemistry between them was off the charts. Based on the way his pulse had quickened ever since he spotted the guy, clearly, their chemistry hadn’t dissipated in the slightest.

“He’s my constant companion,” Jay said, his eyes lighting up. “He’s been giving me tons of extra snuggles lately.”

“Oh yeah?” Leo asked. “Any reason why?”

“Breakup,” Jay said with a shrug, as if it didn’t affect him, even though Leo didn’t miss the flicker of darkness in his eyes.

“Is it terrible to say I’m not upset that you’re single?” Leo asked, lifting a brow.

“Turn off the charm right now,” Jay said, pointing a finger at him. “That’s what drew me in the first time.”

“What’s to say I don’t want to draw you in again?” Leo responded, his grin widening.

Jay shook his head. “I’m not a hookup kind of guy anymore. Only relationships here. A guy’s got to get to know me first before I put out.”

Ouch. Leo licked his lips, not sure how to rebound from that one. He’d been wanting more than a fling too as of late, but Jay wasn’t wrong—Leo barely knew him. A little premature to dive in and say “date me.”

Mase stepped in front of them with their cups of coffee and placed them on the polished wood table. “Here you go,” they said. “Enjoy!” With that, they swept away, but thankfully it had been enough time for Leo to find his footing.

“Maybe I’m just happy to see a friendly face,” he said, trying a little more honesty on for size. “I don’t know a damn person in this city. Just hopped over here chasing a dream.”

Jay beamed at him as he clutched his latte, looking so fucking adorable that Leo wanted to do dirty, dirty things to him. “Lucky for you, I know this city very well, and I’m always in the market for friends.”

“What about more” was poised on his lips, but Leo swallowed it back. Jay had just pulled himself through a breakup, which meant he didn’t need Leo sniffing around like a thirsty bitch. He’d be lying if he said he wasn’t interested though.

Getting to know Jay for real would be step one.

If anything bloomed from that...well, he could hope.

Leo leaned back in the comfortable sofa and settled in. “Hope you’re aware of what you’re taking on,” he murmured. “I’m a very needy friend.”

Jay snorted and shook his head. “You’re incapable of turning the flirting off, aren’t you.”

“Only around guys I find hot,” Leo teased, enjoying himself.

“Well, if this isn’t the ego boost I needed,” Jay said, lifting his coffee in salute. “I’m not going to complain. My ex broke up and leapt to dating someone new the same day.”

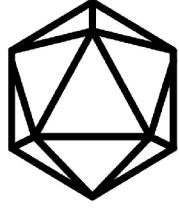
“Screw that guy,” Leo said.

Jay wrinkled his nose. “Been there, unfortunately done that.”

“Perfect timing at least.” Leo jumped in again. “To spend more time with your very new, very needy friend.”

Jay full-out laughed, and god. The way his face lit up, the brightness he bubbled with, Leo found himself captivated.

He might still be finding his way in a new city, a new career, a new life, but this moment here felt like the right step forward.



Chapter Three

“**W**hy did I decide a hike would be a great idea tonight?” Jay muttered, walking side by side with Leo up yet another steep winding pathway. The cooler wind iced at his cheeks, reminding him that it was winter and a stupid time for a jaunt to Ina Coolbrith Park.

“Because you wanted to show me the views,” Leo said, wagging his brows as he kept up, barely even breaking a sweat. Bastard.

Jay wasn't going to be winning any medals for athleticism any time soon, what with his desk job and penchant for staying indoors, but he and Leo had been talking nonstop all week, ever since they'd run into each other at Tabletop Tavern. Since Leo wasn't familiar with most of the town, Jay had taken it upon himself to show Leo the sights of the city. A true hardship, what with the way the man wore the hell out of his jeans and those tight, sexy Henleys. Jay bit his lip as he snuck another glance to the prominent curve of Leo's ass as he outpaced him for a moment.

Nngh.

Bad Jay. He'd drawn the line between them as friends, mostly because he was already in a fragile place dysphoria-wise post the breakup. Except a stupid, hopeful part of his brain remembered how good Leo had made him feel when he was spiraling. That the man had somehow treated him the exact way he needed on a night when he'd been going through hell, fresh into being out with his family as trans.

They'd started to ascend pretty high up at the park, which had some beautiful views of the city, and Jay's heart was thumping hard. Everything involving Leo came far easier than he ever could've anticipated. Like the magic of the night they'd met when the conversation had flowed and they'd just collided, since they'd reunited, Jay could talk to him without hesitation. The pesky attraction hadn't gone away and had intensified instead, but that was a him problem.

After all, he doubted someone as hot and charming as Leo had lost any sleep about not getting another chance with him. Jay swallowed, trying to bat down the flare of negativity. Something about seeing how fast Dan had moved on had wormed its way into his head a little more than normal. Stupid thoughts like how Dan's new boyfriend wasn't trans and how sometimes Dan used to get impatient when Jay needed to strap on his cock when he wanted to fuck or how Dan also didn't offer to go down on him much.

“What's the thunderstorm about?” Leo asked, flicking him in the shoulder.

Jay glanced over to him. Damn, the man was perceptive. Another checkmark for why Leo was fucking perfect. “Just mulling over all the crap I’ve got the next few weeks,” Jay muttered, slipping into a light lie.

“Lots of Christmas plans?” Leo asked, his voice dipping a bit.

Jay couldn’t help but linger on Leo, noticing the slight drag to his gaze, how his mouth tightened. Maybe Jay shouldn’t be complaining about plans—the guy had just moved to the area and probably didn’t have a lot on the agenda. “Are you going to visit your folks back home?” Jay asked, not answering Leo’s question.

Leo shook his head, a furrow deepening between his brows. “We catch up once in a while, but we’re not a tight family. And they’re doing their own thing for Christmas back in Chicago.”

Jay’s heart squeezed hard. As much as his extended family could be a pain in the ass sometimes, his parents were the most supportive people on the planet. He loved seeing them for the holidays and couldn’t imagine what it’d be like to spend Christmas without their traditions—very nutmeggy and slightly dangerous eggnog, a loud and delicious brunch during the morning when they opened gifts, and then just chilling for the rest of the day.

The thought of Leo sitting alone in his apartment had him capsizing.

Jay's brain started racing, and he jammed his hands into his pockets. This was a bad idea. A terrible idea, but before he could stop himself, his mouth dove in. "Want to be my plus one?"

"Plus one?" Leo countered, confusion written all across his expression.

"So, my ex Dan was supposed to come with me to my work party, the family shindig, and even my usual friend one. If you wanted..."

"You thinking a fake boyfriend deal?" Leo asked, a low amusement in his voice.

Jay scrubbed at his face with his palms, his cheeks bursting into flame. "Fuck, now that you say it out loud, this sounds like a terrible idea. Who the hell would want to go to all those annoying obligations? My family's noisy, and I'm so new at the job that I barely know my coworkers, and...well, you've already gotten a taste of my friends."

"I'm in," Leo said.

Jay stopped still and just stared at Leo, his jaw dropping. He must've misheard him. Except Leo was watching him, all fucking gorgeous, his dark brown hair windswept and those blue eyes radiating the sort of warmth Jay didn't want to look away from. "You're kidding me."

Leo shrugged and reached down to grab Jay's hand, giving him a slight tug forward to continue their walk along this

stupidly rugged path. The skin-to-skin contact raced through him, pure electricity, and he couldn't help the internal swoon.

“I don't have plans,” Leo said, “and I enjoy your company. It sounds like a win-win in my book. Meeting people doesn't scare me.”

“Ugh, an extrovert,” Jay teased. The idea of launching himself into getting to know a ton of strangers was usually a terrifying experience, involving a fuckton of anxiety. However, he could already imagine Leo weaving through the crowd like he belonged there because this man had a natural assurance to him that Jay had gravitated toward the moment they first locked gazes.

Jay's breaths came out a little faster as they reached one of the curves that offered a stunning view of San Francisco. “Look out at that,” he said, pointing. The cityscape stretched far, and despite the way the city lights smothered the stars in the sky, there was something gorgeous about how the buildings lit up in competition, how in the far distance lay the darkened line of the sea.

Leo's even breaths sounded beside him, the low noise igniting his veins. This close, he could almost feel the heat emanating off him, and Jay fought the urge to lean in. Maybe if he were a little more stable, if he knew Leo better—fuck, part of him still wanted to dive in, damn the consequences. But he'd toned down his recklessness over the past few years, needing to find solid ground.

“Fucking gorgeous,” Leo murmured, his voice low and deep.

“Yeah,” Jay rasped, staring out at the city before him, even though every ounce of him longed to turn to look at the man by his side. Something about being around Leo lit his synapses up, and if he were honest, even he and Dan hadn’t had chemistry this strong. He swallowed the lump in his throat as he soaked in the slight musk of Leo’s cologne, the crisp taste of the fierce winds up here, and the velvet night that surrounded them like a blanket.

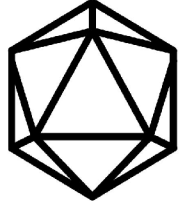
“You’ll have to fill me in on what my boyfriend responsibilities entail,” Leo said, his tone sultry, and Jay sucked in a sharp breath. The man’s voice alone sent a bolt of lust thundering through him, and imagining all the filthy things they could get up to in a bedroom—goddamn.

“You know, pretend to like me, that sort of thing,” Jay joked, his fingers growing slightly numb in his pockets.

“No need to pretend,” Leo responded, the rumble of his voice traveling bone-deep. Butterflies exploded in Jay’s chest, stupid hopeful butterflies. He was too battered to dive in right now, but maybe if they spent more time together— He swallowed hard.

“Come on,” he said, rallying his nerves. “We only have a little more ways to the top, and then we can head back.”

Enough with the fantasies. Jay needed to take this one step at a time.



Chapter Four

The first day Leo had entered Land and Hearth, he'd known this place was where he needed to end up.

Leo stepped inside the café, flicking the lights on. The early-ass hours were a bit rough, but if he were being honest, they beat the twelve-hour or more shifts he'd been pulling six days a week at his old job, which had been wearing him to the bone more and more. There was a relaxed pace to working at Land and Hearth that he loved, and losing himself to the process of making bread offered the best sort of stress relief. He adored the quiet time in the morning to accomplish this task, but he also loved chatting with the customers and getting to know everyone.

The details stood out to him in here—the drop Edison bulbs scattered throughout, all the polished wooden surfaces that emanated warmth, and the sharp scent of cedarwood and flour and bread that lingered. He slipped into the back where a beautiful kitchen he'd only dreamed of working in waited for him, filled with stainless steel backsplashes and industrial-

sized machines. And now he was here, the exact place he'd wanted to be.

He shouldn't have a single complaint.

And honestly, he didn't on the work front. Sure, he and Matt bitched about the occasional asshole customer and the normal frustrations that cropped up with running a business, but overall his job was a breeze.

It was the evenings at home, once he finished work for the day, or heading to the bar to sit there alone. When he got approached, usually a guy was looking to hook up, nothing more. And while Leo loved a good couple of orgasms as much as anyone, he also hadn't realized how empty his life had been until he upheaved it. He lined up the ingredients on the countertop for the rye he'd be making, and he set to task, the process coming automatically.

Turned out working himself to the bone had filled in the hours, but it had also ridden him to the point that he had nothing left. And he wasn't just rebuilding a career here—no, it was a whole life. Already though, he'd seen Jay three times this week. Ever since he'd run into him at Tabletop Tavern, they talked nonstop, and part of Leo wanted to dive headfirst into the chemistry that still sparked and sizzled between them.

The other part of him was too scared to lose the one connection away from work that he'd formed in the area.

He'd buckle in and enjoy the ride of parading around on Jay's arm for the next few weeks. It'd make the holidays a hell

of a lot less lonelier. He'd been dreading them until Jay tossed the fake boyfriend idea out there.

The creak of the door opening caught him by surprise, right while he was in the middle of getting his dough ready to proof. His shoulders tightened slightly, even though only one person would be entering the building while they were closed.

"It's just me," Matt called out, announcing himself before he rounded the corner and entered the kitchen. "The holiday orders for specialty breads are out of control, and I came in to get ahead of the game for the ones due tomorrow night."

Matt stepped into view, the big bear of a guy sweetness incarnate. He was broad-shouldered with a ginger beard, and his eyes were always warm. Leo had never met a more genuine person, and having him for a business partner meant casual camaraderie, none of the vicious competition he was used to from his coworkers.

"The special orders were a brilliant idea," Leo said, stretching the plastic wrap over the bowl with his dough. He didn't pause before snagging a fresh bowl and starting the process all over again, this time to bake a roasted red pepper bread they used in one of their popular sandwiches. "We're going to make a killing for the holiday season from those alone."

"I'm so excited," Matt said, beaming as he washed up and carved out a spot for himself on the stainless-steel countertop. He began a similar process to Leo and fell into the rhythm just as easily. "I love Ryan to pieces, but he wasn't into the baking

side of things, so he never wanted to explore a lot of these options.”

Leo had met Ryan a few times—the original co-owner and Matt’s best friend. The guy was peppy and fun, but he’d switched careers when he’d moved home to the East Coast, and clearly, running a cafe hadn’t been his dream. Leo counted himself lucky every day that he’d swooped in at the right time.

“I just have to make sure not to overload myself,” Matt murmured. “Between my family’s Christmas plans and Jasper’s five million arrangements with the Tabletop Tavern crew, my calendar’s going to get crazy. Did you know they’re doing a holiday D&D one-shot featuring Krampus?”

Leo snorted. He’d always been geek adjacent, barely having time to find a hookup let alone have hobbies, so in the brief period he’d lived in San Francisco, he’d already accumulated a lot more knowledge about board games, D&D, and sci-fi and fantasy franchises. He didn’t mind it in the slightest—especially when Jay’s eyes lit up while he babbled on about everything from comic book movies to worker placement board games.

“I’m guessing you’ll be playing in that?” Leo asked, pounding into the dough.

“I’m hoping to. Jas made threats to Cal about both of us getting included in the game.” Matt’s eyes crinkled, and the warmth that shone through them was the sort Leo envied. After spending mere minutes around Matt and Jas, he could

see how sickeningly in love they both were, and fuck, he was so jealous.

Somewhere along the way, he'd come to want that. Not accolades, not cash in the bank, but a partner to come home to at the end of the day.

“Shit, I’m being a jerk. What are your Christmas plans? You know you’re always welcome to join in with ours,” Matt said, looking up with an apologetic grin.

Goddamn, Leo was so grateful to count this guy as a business partner and a friend. “Well, I booked up my schedule for the next few weeks. I’ve got some fake boyfriending to do.”

Matt arched a brow, even though he didn’t stop moving as he rolled out his loaf, a cranberry studded bread that the customers had been ordering by the dozen. “For who? And why fake? Anyone would be lucky to have you.”

Man, Matt was a little too sweet at times. Leo needed some bite to his interactions, and Jay’s mix of blushes and sarcasm ticked his boxes. Of course, his brain kept gravitating back to the guy who’d been forefront on his mind ever since they’d reconnected.

“My former hookup,” he said. He’d already filled Matt in on the situation, since they talked every day, whether it was about business shit or geeking out about artisanal salt. “We’ve been hanging a lot, and his boyfriend just dumped him, leaving him single for a ton of different parties.”

“Are you interested in the guy?” Matt asked, his focus carefully trained on his bread.

“Yeah,” Leo admitted, since there was no point in lying. “But he’s fresh off a breakup and made it pretty clear he wasn’t looking for a fling or rebound.”

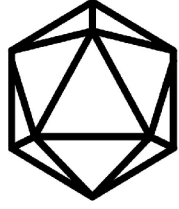
“Are you?” Matt asked pointedly, and Leo rolled his eyes. In a short amount of time, the guy had gotten to understand him better than most.

“Maybe not,” Leo admitted, a weight coming off his shoulders. “But I also don’t know him—not enough that he’d trust me, and this is a great opportunity to see if we might fit together.”

“Just be careful,” Matt warned, casting him another glance. He paused mid-knead of bread. “I get that you’re trying to make accommodations for him and his feelings, but you’re important too. Don’t lose sight of that in the process.”

Leo tore his gaze away and pounded on his ball of dough a little harder. Matt might be right, but he didn’t want to admit it.

He’d already gotten invested, and if Jay decided after their spree of fake dates that Leo wasn’t worth pursuing anything real with, he’d end up even lonelier than before.



Chapter Five

As much as Jay had hung out with Leo all over San Francisco over the past two weeks, Leo had never been to his apartment.

That changed tonight.

Jay poked at the salmon he'd just pulled out of the oven. He'd compiled a healthy meal for them while they discussed the attack plan for their fake relationship, which would debut tomorrow night at Jay's work party. TechLife Associates had a pretty solid crew of geeks, which was usually the case in the IT department, so Jay had already been blending well there, but the work party would be the entire company. The prospect had him feeling more than a little overwhelmed.

A knock sounded on the door, and he almost slammed his elbow into the piping hot Pyrex with the salmon. His heart thumped hard as he wiped his sweaty palms on his jeans, and Peter Parker let out a bark from the bedroom. Jay might've tried on three different pairs of pants for their casual hang tonight, which didn't help with convincing himself this was

not a date. Hanging out this much with Leo was hazardous for his heart, because he found it far too easy to forget Dan and the damage he'd done when around Leo.

The quiet moments hit the hardest—when he was lying down at night by his lonesome or getting dressed in the morning for work. He'd been avoiding mirrors a little bit more for sanity's sake, and he'd been talking with his therapist once a week since the breakup. All good steps, but the last thing he needed would be to launch into a fling with Leo, then find himself single again and even more heartbroken.

Not a date. Just a very, very hot man all up in his space. He could do this.

Jay headed for the door and reached it right as another knock sounded again.

He grabbed the handle and yanked the door open. His breath got stuck in his throat.

Leo filled up his doorway, dressed in a navy open button-down and a white undershirt that clung to his chest all too well. With the black slacks he was wearing, how his dark brown hair was swept to the side with a bit of product, Leo looked slick in the sexiest sort of way, and Jay was definitely staring.

“Uh, come inside,” Jay said, before a blush swarmed his face. The double entendre there flashed like a neon sign in his brain, and he couldn't shut it off. Based on the heat in Leo's eyes and the subtle smirk on his lips, he hadn't missed it either.

“I’d be happy to,” Leo responded, that rich, sultry voice doing things to his insides. Fuck.

Jay scrubbed at his cheeks as if that might make the blush go away. “I made dinner if you’re hungry, but if you’re not, it’s no big deal. I mean, I should’ve asked you first before going and preparing something—”

A hand rested on his shoulder, stopping him mid-babble. The heat from Leo’s touch was incendiary, and at this point Jay was three steps from finding the closest surface to bend over and offer himself up.

“Dinner would be great,” Leo said. “I was going to suggest ordering out because I wasn’t coming here under any presumptions, but whatever you’ve got cooking smells fantastic.”

“It’s just maple glazed salmon with lemon rice pilaf and green beans,” Jay said, not pulling away from Leo’s hand on his shoulder, even though it was probably weird at this point. Whatever, the touch felt so good right now that they could stay frozen here for the rest of the night and he wouldn’t care.

“There’s nothing ‘just’ about that meal,” Leo said, drawing his hand back. He strode past Jay, heading to the kitchen like he’d been here a thousand times before and wasn’t over for the first time. Jay envied his confidence a ton—nothing he’d ever been gifted with—but even more than that, the way Leo carried himself reminded him of those two little words from their hookup that had awakened a whole different part of his sexuality.

Good boy.

Who knew a kinkster had been hiding underneath the surface waiting to come out? Well, he sure as hell hadn't realized at the time, but he did now. Not like he'd done anything crazy with partners, but he definitely preferred to find ones who liked a D/s dynamic.

Jay swallowed as he followed Leo into his kitchen and then swept past him to grab plates. Everything already lay out on the stovetop, so they might as well eat while they discussed an attack plan for Operation Fake Holiday Boyfriend. Which seemed like a stupider idea by the second, but until he was on more stable ground after the breakup, he couldn't face another rejection so soon.

Especially not from a guy he was starting to care about.

"Can I help?" Leo asked, stepping up behind him. That close, Jay got a crisp inhale of Leo's cologne, and the punch of lust that followed was undeniable. He adored how tall and broad the guy was and just how small he made him feel. That was such a huge turn-on, and his partner didn't even need to be big physically—but the presence, the power was everything.

"You can fill up some glasses of water," Jay said, nodding toward the cabinet on his right. "I'll bring the plates over to the table." His apartment wasn't huge, so they strode the quick couple of steps over to his rarely used two-seater kitchen table, and he set the plates down with a gentle clink. Leo had gotten to work fast and followed him over with two glasses.

Jay realized his mistake in their seating the moment they both settled in, their legs tangled together from the small size of his circular kitchen table. Leo didn't seem fazed at all, and Jay was jealous over the nonchalance while his pathetic heart was doing a samba over here. Maybe if he were a little more confident, a little less of an anxious mess, he could go after someone like Leo for real. He wouldn't need to take all this time after a breakup to put himself back together again.

Leo had already started eating, so Jay dove in as well, too aware of the low hum of appreciation that rumbled from Leo's throat. The sound was viciously sexy. Jay reached down and adjusted his packer, his nether regions a hot mess right now.

"So," Leo said, placing his fork down for a moment. "Do we have a background story lined up and everything? What are these coworkers of yours like?"

Jay shrugged, his cheeks heating. "I figured we could go with a little of the truth? We met at a wedding and reconnected."

Leo's eyes grew darker, and Jay wished he could understand his expression, to read what he was thinking.

"Sounds good to me" was all Leo said before he took another bite of salmon.

Jay ran fingers through his hair, trying to keep his gaze away from Leo's chest, his sharp jaw, his too-pretty eyes. "As for my coworkers, the ones in the IT department with me are all geeks. They've been easy to get to know. It's the higher-ups

that are intimidating—the executives who work in upper management.”

Leo arched a brow. “And yet you do just fine around me.”

Jay’s eyes widened. “Is that what you did back in Chicago? All I knew was you had some finance job.”

“Some finance job,” Leo said, clutching his chest. “Is that how little you paid attention to me?”

Jay pursed his lips. “To be fair, we weren’t doing a whole lot of talking about work. Or a whole lot of talking at all.”

“And yet I remembered Peter Parker,” Leo pointed out as he peered around. “Speaking of, where is the little guy?”

Jay’s grin came bright and immediately. “I kept him in my room while I prepared dinner because he likes to get underfoot and sometimes tries to leap for the oven. Not the brightest of the batch.” He pushed up to get Peter Parker out, trying to ignore his stupidly hopeful heart that Leo had brought up his dog and wanted to meet him. That meant more than he could say, and he gauged a lot about a person by their interactions with Peter Parker.

Once he headed toward the door, he could already hear the movement coming from his room. Jay hadn’t even nudged the door open an inch when Peter Parker muscled his way past, letting out excited yips as he bounded farther into the apartment. Within seconds, he was gunning for Leo and nosing around his legs.

Leo let out a snort and reached down to allow Peter Parker to sniff his hand. It didn't take long for the tentative sniffs to switch into puppy licks, and within minutes, Leo was crouching on the ground, running his fingers through Peter Parker's fur. Jay found himself jealous, because he wanted those fingers all over him instead.

But that was his own problem. Maybe if they were still hanging out in a bit, when the breakup wasn't so fresh, he'd be in the right place to take a risk. Leo was already gorgeous and charming enough to get him halfway there, and the more he discovered about the guy, the more he genuinely liked. Nothing he'd ever expected from a one-night stand.

"Damn, he's super sweet," Leo murmured as Peter Parker shed over his nice dress pants. Not like Leo even glanced to the mess—instead, he let the pup lick his face with affectionate kisses, and something tight unwound in Jay's chest.

Maybe these fake dates offered a chance to get to know Leo for real. Without the pressure of dating, to see if he was the sort of guy Jay might want to keep. Cowardly? Sure, but he operated in self-preservation mode hard, and this was a life raft he could cling to.

"Okay, so since I apparently know nothing about you," Jay said, sliding back into his seat, "why don't you tell me what you did in Chicago."

"Finance executive for Starr Industries," Leo said with a shrug. "Huge firm in Chicago and the job was what I'd gone to

college for.” Jay didn’t miss the way his gaze darkened when he spoke or how his words got a little shorter.

“But it made you miserable,” Jay finished, his voice growing soft.

Leo’s gaze locked with his, and the charm, the flirtatiousness was lightyears away. Here, Jay saw him stripped down, and he couldn’t tear himself from this gift of vulnerability.

“Yeah,” Leo said, carding fingers through his hair as he sat back in his seat at the table. “After one breakdown too many, I decided on a career shift. I’d always loved baking even though I hadn’t pursued it professionally, and I had all this fucking money. So, I cast my feelers out all over the country—didn’t care where I ended up. I didn’t have the skill to start a bakery from scratch, but the Land and Hearth situation? It was perfect. And Matt’s been filling in my gaps in knowledge ever since I stepped in.”

Jay’s heart stopped and restarted again at seeing the sheer passion pouring off the man. It was clear he’d been suffering, and the career shift might have meant a bit more than he was letting on. “Well, I’m grateful you saved one of my favorite cafes,” Jay said, digging into his piece of salmon with his fork. “I’ll have to go on a day you’re working so I can get a taste.”

Leo’s brows lifted at that, an amused grin rising on his lips again.

Jay shot him a glare and ignored the ruddy flush of his cheeks. “Come on, you know what I mean.”

“Mmm, no, what do you mean?” Leo teased, his voice all rich and soothing.

Jay kicked his shin under the table. “If that’s how you’re going to be, maybe I don’t want to try your bread.”

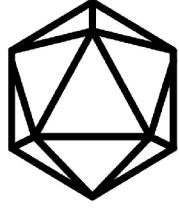
Leo leaned back and crossed his arms in a stance that was cocky and hot as fuck. “Don’t cheat yourself. You definitely want to try my...bread.”

Jay couldn’t help himself. A laugh slipped from his lips, breaking through the tension percolating between them. “You can’t tell me lines like that have ever worked for you.”

Leo wagged his brows. “You let me know,” he said, a genuine grin rolling to his face. “They working?”

Jay just shook his head, not trusting himself to answer the statement—mostly because it worked too damn well.

“Okay, so let’s go over details,” he said, trying to drag his attention back to the reason for their meetup tonight. Mostly to dissuade his stupid, overeager heart from leaping before it should. Confident charmer Leo had drawn him in like a moth to flame for a quick fling, but this guy? Self-deprecating, teasing, and genuine? Jay was falling so fast he was guaranteed to wreck.



Chapter Six

It was clear from the moment Leo showed up at Jay's to pick him up that the guy was nervous, and once they rolled in front of the Hyatt in town, he started to babble a bit more. Jay rambled about everything from obscure issues of the current run of Spiderman to the splashy divorce his coworker Sheena was going through or that Jerry in accounting always smelled like fish. Leo just rolled with it—honestly, everything about this guy was cute as fuck.

He'd been enjoying Jay's company more than he could say, even if all the time spent in close proximity had him jerking off every night at the thought of burying his cock into that pert ass. Jay's ass was round and perfect, and maybe Leo should stop staring, but he was pretending to be the guy's fake boyfriend, so he'd take what he could get.

Even more than that though, every affectionate grin Jay bestowed, every time he'd roll his eyes at a flirt from Leo chipped away at some of the ache in Leo's chest that had existed there for far too long. He shouldn't be this invested in

the guy after such a short while, but something about Jay made it so easy to be around him, so easy to get to know him.

“The Christmas party won’t be scary,” Leo said, walking in time with Jay through the lobby of the Hyatt. Jay was power walking fast enough that he might as well be jogging, and Leo attempted to hide his amusement.

“So says Mr. Swankified Incorporated,” Jay shot back while gunning for the elevators.

“Is there an award for who gets there the fastest?” Leo teased.

“No, but the sooner I get to the alcohol, the better I’ll be,” Jay mumbled, running fingers through his wavy chestnut strands for the thousandth time. He looked damn good in the purple suit jacket and black slacks he wore, the more formal attire working in a big way for Leo. Not like the geek chic didn’t have the same effect—it did—but there was something unique about suits that turned Leo the hell on.

Jay made it to the elevator first—the party was on an event space up on the 36th floor—and Leo stole the opportunity to place a hand on his shoulder. He leaned in and whispered, “You’ll be just fine.” A shudder rippled through Jay, one Leo could feel, and lust jolted through his system.

The elevator doors opened, and they both entered, Leo staying in close proximity. Jay still buzzed beside him, which gave Leo the nudge. He reached down and laced his fingers through Jay’s, feeling the man’s sweaty palm press against his.

Jay blinked up at him.

“Boyfriends, remember?” Leo reminded him, seizing any excuse for contact that he could.

“Yeah, but I’m all clammy and freaking out right now,” Jay muttered, his gaze veering toward the floor.

“Does it look like I care?” Leo asked, arching an eyebrow.

“No, and I’m incredibly jealous at how you’re not even breaking a sweat over being in a place this fancy and meeting a room full of strangers.”

Leo bit back his laugh. This wasn’t remotely fancy compared to the business dinners and events he’d gone to back in Chicago, and he’d cut his teeth in the industry on meeting and connecting with rooms full of strangers. Seeing Jay try so hard disarmed him in a way he wouldn’t have thought though—he’d become so jaded to all the fanfare over the years, just another black-tie dinner, just some more forgettable faces. Through Jay’s eyes, it felt brand new and exciting again, a little spark traveling through him.

The elevator dinged as it soared past floor after floor, heading up to the 36th.

“We should come up with a signal or something,” Leo teased. “Tug your ear if it’s too much and you need me to make a distraction.”

“What kind of distraction were you planning?” Jay asked, his brow arched.

“Throw a drink at the CEO, trip the fire alarm, streak through the main area—the possibilities are endless.” Leo squeezed Jay’s hand, amused by the glare he got shot a moment later.

“All of those options are going to get me fired,” Jay murmured, even though a grin tugged at his lips. Mission accomplished. Leo wanted to help him in whatever way possible. Something about Jay had called to him from the moment they’d met, and each time they hung out, he couldn’t help the protective urges that surged to the surface, not just because the guy was cuter than words, but because a part of him wanted—well, Jay.

The elevator settled, and the doors clicked open, revealing their destination. Leo all but tugged Jay out with him, since his “boyfriend” had become rooted to the spot. When he stepped into the room, the low, mellow music washed over him along with the dim lighting, which added to the elegant ambiance. The space was gorgeous, a wide-open view of the city from the expansive windows, pale wooden flooring polished until it reflected, and modern citrine lights that cast gentle beams on the crowd. There was a large swell of people in attendance, but everyone seemed to have separated into throngs—clearly, the normal office cliques in action.

“All right,” Leo said, holding Jay’s hand as he stepped farther in. “Do you want to lead me to the coworkers you want to talk to, or do you want me to start introducing myself to folks?”

Jay shook his head. “I still can’t comprehend how you do that.”

Leo shrugged. “Either they’ll want to chat or they won’t. If not, I’ll just move to the next person.”

“Yeah, my attempt ends after the first rejection where I’m replaying the thousand ways I could’ve gone wrong in the conversation the rest of the night,” Jay responded, tugging Leo’s hand to make it clear he’d decided. Leo followed suit—he was just here for the ride tonight. Unfortunately, not the sort of sexy-as-fuck ride his brain kept circling back to.

Leo could already scope out the folks Jay headed toward—not the ones dressed in Burberry or Prada but the crew who looked somewhat out of place and wearing dresses from H&M or Dress for Less. Leo didn’t give a damn whether folks wore designer or not—he’d left that life behind—but years of being around that environment had taught him to notice the details, and people’s attire marked them out. Not having to try to keep up anymore was one of the biggest reliefs upon quitting, and he’d found a hell of a lot more happiness with his lifestyle here.

“This is my department,” Jay said as they closed in on the circle of folks who milled around talking, drinks in hand. Some were seated in the bright blue chairs, while a few others perched on the white sofa lining the wall. The rest all stood around, the way company Christmas parties normally unfolded. It seemed relatively on the tamer side, more casual

conversation than some of the shitfests Leo had attended, so he'd just take Jay's cues here.

“Ready to introduce your boyfriend?” Leo said, tugging on Jay's hand again. He couldn't help but love how Jay hadn't bothered to yank it back, the physical connection between them something Leo was living for right now. The connection between them in general felt so tangible, a current that surprised him every time they saw each other.

“More like convince them you're actually my boyfriend and not some guy I paid to be here,” Jay muttered.

“You mean I could've gotten paid?” Leo teased.

Jay rolled his eyes, but he was tensing up, shoulders inching in like he prepared for battle, not to talk to his coworkers. “Hey, all,” he said, announcing their arrival and letting go of Leo's hand.

A few of the closest guys looked their way, and smiles spread on faces.

“Who's this?” a tall, lanky man asked, pointing to Leo.

“Hey, Leo Whitlock,” he said, swooping in with the handshake. “Jay's boyfriend.”

“So he is real,” the guy teased, adjusting his glasses. “We were wondering if Jay made him up with how vague he was being.”

“Thanks, guys,” Jay muttered, carding fingers through his hair. Leo didn't point out that he'd already mussed it up after

the time he'd taken to style it, because honestly, Jay was hot either way. "I'm glad you have such faith in me."

"No, you're just really dodgy about personal details," another girl came over, this one a brunette with a quick smile. "We're trying to get to know you, not interrogate you."

"So, you've sussed out his CIA background," Leo said with a grin.

Lanky guy snorted. "Now it all makes sense. The secrecy, the nebulous answers."

"Yes, not at all because I'm socially awkward on my best day," Jay responded, his lips quirking again.

"I don't know," Leo responded. "You're pretty chatty with me." Seeing how little Jay's coworkers had learned about him was a bit eye-opening considering the ease to which Jay chatted with Leo. Whether it was random texts and memes throughout the day or just hours sitting on Jay's couch with Peter Parker underfoot or going on a walk and talking about each other's days, the words flowed nonstop. Warmth spread in Leo's chest at realizing that Jay didn't give that out to everyone.

"I'd hope so," the brunette girl responded. "If you can't give your boyfriend your secrets, who can you trust?"

Leo's heart thumped harder, mostly because he longed for this fantasy to be real. He wanted to be the person Jay confided in, the one he trusted enough to talk to share both the minutiae and the big things.

“Well, he badgers me until I tell him,” Jay said, a flash of warmth in his stunning eyes that had Leo staring a little more intensely. He’d survived off reading people well, and that seemed authentic as it came, but Leo wasn’t about to push.

“Oh, so that’s what we need to do?” Lanky guy responded. “You won’t even invite us to your Pathfinder game. Rude.”

“You know when there’s an opening I’ll let you in,” Jay said with a pointed look.

“Should I be worried?” Leo responded, amusement welling in his chest. “And why’s he getting a spot when I’m not even in your game?”

Jay flicked him in the arm, a playfulness there that belied comfort, and Leo loved it. Pretending to be Jay’s boyfriend was effortless, and that intensified the ache in his chest for this to be real. “You called that my geek shit,” Jay responded.

“Yeah, but I like your geek shit.” Leo brought out the charm, flashing him a broad smile. Jay’s cheeks took on the slight flush that signaled he was turned on, and fuck, Leo wanted to bury inside Jay’s tight body so badly.

“Fine,” Jay said with a shrug. “If you want to play so much, then you can fight Garrett for a spot.” He jerked a thumb in Lanky Guy’s direction.

“Cold-blooded,” Leo teased back. “Don’t I get an automatic boyfriend spot?”

“Gaming’s cutthroat,” Jay said sweetly in response.

Leo's grin widened, and despite the room full of people around them, they all seemed to fade away when Jay was with him. "I see how it is," he murmured, breezing his palm across Jay's shoulder. The man full-body shivered at the touch, and Leo loved how responsive he was. He'd settled down enough to feel comfortable, which was exactly why Leo had been recruited as fake boyfriend—though he'd just jumped on the chance to spend more time with Jay.

"I'm going to get us drinks, sweetheart," he said. "What can I grab for you?"

Jay's eyes widened, those long lashes fluttering. Fuck, he was too damn gorgeous.

"Uh," Jay said, trying to rally his composure. Leo bit back a smirk. "Gin and tonic, please."

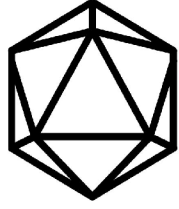
"I'll be back," Leo said, dropping his palm from Jay's shoulder. He swept away, seamlessly heading in the direction of the bar to his left. There was one stationed on either side of the room and lines to both as well, which didn't shock him. Most folks headed to Christmas parties for the chance to drink their faces off. The Christmas decorations threaded through the place were tasteful—garlands, velvety red ribbons, and soft white lights, but Leo found himself yearning for the garish ones he'd grown up with, when he and his folks had been closer.

He settled into the line and couldn't help but look back at Jay.

For as much as Jay had been worrying his ass off from the moment Leo had picked him up, he'd gotten comfortable quickly. He stood around with his new coworkers, chatting and laughing, the brightness in his eyes visible even from here. With the purple suit jacket, black button-down, and black slacks, he looked so fucking tempting, and his thick brown hair had been tamed for the night, which made Leo want to muss it up.

Leo's heart thudded hard at the sight. The more time they spent together was dangerous because with every teasing nudge, every flirt, every blush, one thing was becoming apparent.

He wanted this to be real.



Chapter Seven

Jay glanced over toward the bar for the five millionth time since Leo had walked away to get them drinks. The line was long, so he'd been gone for a while, and it surprised Jay to realize how he missed the guy's presence so fast.

The jitters had faded quickly with Leo paving the way, all charming smiles and dulcet words, like conversations weren't the slightest speed bump. And by the time he'd stepped away to get them drinks, Jay had been fully at ease with his coworkers, people he'd gotten to know better since he'd started a few months ago. He was surprised that they acted so friendly—not like they weren't at work, but they were stuck in the same place together there. Here, they'd have to options to break off into cliques, to ignore the new kid, i.e., him.

However, they'd welcomed him in, and he'd been in a conversation about Pathfinder with both Ellie and Garrett for the past five minutes that wasn't stressing him out.

What was stressing him out was the guy who'd swept up next to Leo. Jay vaguely placed him as someone from the

marketing department, but the way he sidled up to his fake boyfriend made piping-hot irritation bubble in his chest. Marketing Guy was all *GQ* attractive and wore a charcoal suit well, way better than Jay with the outfit he'd scraped together. With Marketing Guy standing next to Leo, the pair looked all suave and important.

So different from Leo and Jay, which was probably the oddest pairing folks could imagine. Leo, who was successful, charming, witty, and pretty much fucking perfect, and Jay, who was a ball of social anxiety, short and skinny, sarcastic, and forever rambling about whatever geeky thing snagged his attention.

Jay squeezed the back of his neck, trying to ignore the ugly flip of his stomach. Why had Leo even agreed to come with him at all? He tore his gaze away to see Ellie scrutinizing him.

“Is Harry trying to move in on your territory?” she asked, tilting her head in the direction of Leo. Harry stepped in closer, and the guy reached over to place his hand on Leo's shoulder in what was definitely a power move.

Jay swallowed down his rage.

“Go save him,” Garrett said, giving an up-nod. “Not that your guy can't handle himself, but seriously, Harry gets pushy as shit.”

Jay tugged at the bottom of his suit jacket, as if he could bolster himself somehow. He hated confrontations, but he hated the idea of Harry plastering himself all over Leo even more. Not like Jay had a real claim, but Leo had come here

with him, goddamnit, and there was only one person he'd be going home with. "Yeah, I'll be back," Jay said before striding in the direction of the bar.

His heart thumped a little harder as he approached, not just from the idea of cutting in here but on the off chance his interruption wasn't welcome. What if Leo was enjoying Harry's attention, and Jay was getting in the way? Not like he could blame the guy. Leo had definitely been interested when they'd first reconnected, but Jay had been the idiot to shut that shit down. They'd known each other for a single night, and Jay had needed more tethers before risking his heart so soon.

Except Leo had given him more.

And with every passing hangout, every deeper conversation, Jay regretted that he hadn't leapt at the first chance.

He neared, mere feet away, but Leo wasn't even looking at him, just responding to something Harry was saying. Harry's hand remained on his shoulder, and Jay was swallowing down the bile rising in his throat.

"Hey," Jay announced himself, hoping beyond hope that Leo wanted him there.

When Leo turned around and fixed him with that spellbinding grin, all Jay's nerves melted away. Harry dropped his hand at once, a guilty look flashing on his features. Which meant Leo must've mentioned he was seeing someone and Harry had persevered anyway. Jay's stomach clenched in irritation, but he focused on Leo.

“Got tired of waiting, sweetheart?” Leo asked, extending his hand.

Jay’s heart did a backflip at the gesture, and he slipped his hand in Leo’s, the touch grounding him like nothing else. Why he’d wasted a second on jealousy seemed ridiculous at this point, but now he was brimming with all these big feelings, and the need to unload them somewhere, somehow burned inside him. “Figured I’d wait with you,” he responded, squeezing Leo’s hand in response.

“I’ll see you around,” Harry said with a wink in Leo’s direction, but this close, Jay could see Leo didn’t offer anything but politeness. Of course Jay’s jealousy had been for nothing.

The moment Harry stepped to the side, Leo leaned in. “Any reason you felt the need to come over here and stake your claim?”

“I just didn’t want Harry bothering you,” Jay muttered, realizing how paper-thin that sounded.

Leo’s eyes glittered. “Because clearly I’m incapable of fending for myself. Pure damsel here.”

The person standing in front of them swept away with their glass of wine, and Leo stepped up to the bar to order their drinks. A second later, the bartender had a Manhattan and a gin and tonic out on the bar waiting for them. Jay picked up his drink and started walking, though not in the direction of his coworkers in IT. No, his heart was thudding, pulse bouncing,

and he needed to find a space away to cool down, to somehow collect himself after all the adrenaline had burst through him.

Flashbacks of the first time he and Leo met came rushing back to him—the fancy attire, the crowd of people around them, the swanky skyline views. It swirled in his mind, pumping lust through his system. The condensation of the gin and tonic pressed against his palm as he dodged around groups he barely recognized.

Jay turned a corner, which led to another stretch of the 36th floor, this part quieter. Only a few throngs milled about by the windows here, and Jay spotted what looked like a small meeting room.

The door lay open, and along the back wall were a bunch of tables set up with guest books, raffles, prizes to be handed out later. The company was using this room for storage until the latter part of the party. Jay placed his drink on the nearest table, and Leo followed suit.

“Mm, secluded,” Leo said, mirth in his voice. “This is bringing back memories.”

Jay’s face blazed at the reminder of the way the man kissed, the feel of his heavy cock in his mouth. Fuck. He whipped around to face Leo. “Fine, maybe I was jealous,” he mumbled. “I know I have no right to be, but Harry had his hands all over you.”

Leo’s eyebrow ticked up. “I’m here with you, Jay. I wouldn’t just jet off with another guy.”

Shame flushed through him. “Except that’s pretty much what my last boyfriend did.” The realization crashed in on Jay as to why he’d gotten riled so fast. The situation and the fact that he wanted to take that leap with Leo—however, he was still tripping over minefields like this, and dragging in all his baggage wasn’t fair to Leo.

“What would be the boyfriend move here?” Leo murmured, stepping in closer, enough that they were inches apart. The man towered over him, all broad shoulders and heat, looking far too fine in his fitted suit with the pristine white button-down. Everything about Leo appeared sharp and refined like this, so out of his league, and yet the guy staring down at him was familiar, warm.

Jay’s gaze zeroed in on those lips, plush and perfect and inviting. The swirl of adrenaline crashed at him, daring him to desperation. “Kiss me,” he murmured, the low rasp barely sounding like him.

For a moment, he thought Leo would move away. That was a bridge too far for their fake-boyfriend agreement—taking it the step beyond casual.

Except then he closed the distance between them.

Leo’s hand slipped to his nape, and he found a grip there before crushing their mouths together. This might not be their first kiss, but it was just as powerful as Jay remembered, filled with the sort of intensity that scorched right through his bones. Jay surrendered to Leo’s firm hold, the possessiveness sending a bolt of lust through him like he remembered. The sharp scent

of Leo's cologne wafted his way, and Jay couldn't help how he lit the fuck up from it.

Their lips crashed together again and again as they made out like they were teenagers, heated breaths, sensual nips, and tongue and teeth. Jay couldn't help the low moan bubbling up his throat. Leo towered over him, and with the tight grip on the back of his neck, he felt caged in the best way. Jay tilted his head back and soaked up the bliss rushing through him as Leo plunged his tongue into Jay's mouth, and Jay returned the kiss as ferociously, trying to nip and suck at his lips.

His hands settled on the flat of Leo's chest, the fabric of his shirt smooth under his palms. His mind dizzied from the force of these drugging kisses, and Jay didn't want to stop. He'd been ready to burst for weeks now, and everything he'd been holding back slammed right into him tenfold. Jay let out a low whimper, and he resisted the urge to hump against Leo's leg until he found his release. He couldn't. They were in the middle of his work Christmas party.

That delivered a bucket of ice water, and Jay pulled himself out of the kiss, even though he was loathe to break it.

His breath came out sharp and staggered, and Leo stared down at him, his lips red and swollen from their fevered kisses. Jay was sure he looked the same damn way, though his hair wasn't as perfect as Leo's—most likely, it had gotten tousled and messy, which would just be more incriminating.

“Work party,” Jay rushed out, so Leo didn't think something was wrong. “Those are my coworkers out there.”

Leo's lips curled into a wolfish grin. "I'm only following orders."

Jay hid his face in his palms, scrubbing it for a moment, as if he could reset. "Right. This isn't the time for a repeat."

Leo's eyes widened, and if Jay read him right, there was a flash of interest there. "You're telling me there will be time for a repeat?"

Jay ran fingers through his hair, ruining any chance of looking presentable, and he let out a low breath. "Look, I know I'm being a whole mess of contradictory here," he admitted, dragging his gaze away from Leo. "One moment I'm telling you I'm getting over my ex and the next I'm asking you to kiss me."

Leo shrugged. "Can't say it's been clear, but neither are breakups. My timing wasn't great."

Or it was perfect. Because Leo had swept in and been everything Dan hadn't. He'd not only surprised Jay with every turn but had all but vaulted him past Dan, even if Jay was still picking out the shrapnel.

Almost.

Because with the family party next weekend followed by the friends' party on Christmas Eve, Jay could barely even think on those events let alone make a major decision.

Jay glanced to the door, hearing the shuffle of footsteps outside it. Their privacy was coming to an end. He fixed Leo with a look because the man deserved a little bravery from

him. “After all the holiday chaos is through, we’ll talk,” he murmured. “If you want.”

The soft smile that spread to Leo’s features had butterflies flapping to life in his chest.

“I want,” Leo responded, brushing a thumb across his lower lip. A shiver rolled through Jay’s spine at the casual yet affectionate touch.

Before he could get more drawn into this man’s orbit, a woman in a cute red dress poked her head in through the door.

“This isn’t the restroom,” she announced loudly, her cheeks flushed since she was clearly three sheets to the wind.

A low laugh rumbled from Leo. “Opposite side of the hall. You’re almost there.”

“Thanks,” she called out, tossing a hand up in the air. “Carry on.”

Jay snorted, unable to help himself. Clearly, even a ragingly drunk chick was able to tell they’d been making out. “Maybe we should make a bathroom stop too.”

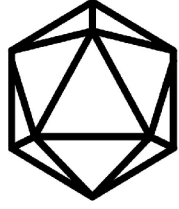
“Don’t tempt me,” Leo responded, running his fingertips along Jay’s shoulder. Jay bit down on his lower lip to restrain the moan rising up.

“Okay, back into the fray it is,” Jay responded, trying to collect himself before he lost his mind. He clutched his gin and tonic like a shield against Leo’s scorching energy and started to take the first steps toward the door.

He'd only made it a few paces before the enormity of what had happened slammed through his veins.

Leo had kissed him.

Leo had kissed him, and after the holidays, maybe this wouldn't be a fake relationship anymore.



Chapter Eight

Three days after Jay's office Christmas party, and their kiss was all Leo could think about.

Fucking ridiculous considering the rate he used to hook up on a regular basis.

However, he'd gotten an invite to the one-shot D&D Christmas session at Tabletop Tavern, and Matt being the sweetheart he was said Leo could bring Jay. Clearly, the guy attempted to play matchmaker, but hell, Leo didn't need convincing. He was already smitten with Jay Barlowe. He only hoped Jay was on the same page. That night...he'd seemed like he might be—the jealousy, the intense as fuck make-out session—but Leo wasn't taking anything for granted.

He leaned outside of Tabletop Tavern, the cool breeze causing him to tug his navy blue peacoat a little tighter. This weekend would bring more events with Jay—the family one, which would include fake boyfriend duties and the friend one, which Jay had just invited him to for something to do on Christmas Eve.

Leo wasn't about to pass on more time with Jay. Plus, this was the least lonely he'd felt for the holidays in years.

He glanced to the right, and the sight of Jay approaching delivered a knockout punch to the sternum.

Jay's chestnut strands were windswept, and his eyes lit up the second their gazes locked, making Leo's heart race. He was wearing an oversized Captain America hoodie and baggy jeans, but that didn't hide his fucking hotness for a second.

"I still can't believe you got me an invite to this," Jay said upon approach.

Leo's lips twitched, and he resisted the urge to close the space between them and kiss Jay in greeting. Physical touch came so naturally between them, and truth be told, Leo was addicted. He hadn't realized how touch-starved he'd been until he'd started hanging out with Jay. "See, you're not the only one with fun holiday plans."

"Uh, this beats all my holiday plans in a hot second," Jay said, stepping in closer and throwing his arms around Leo for a hug. Leo soaked in the feel of Jay's slight body pressed against his, and he wrapped his arms around him in return, squeezing tight, as if he could draw every ounce of warmth from this moment. Jay pulled back and flashed him a bright smile. "Office parties and family parties are obligation things. You're just keeping me sane."

"Well, let's get in," Leo said, tilting his head toward the door. "I think Cal's going to murder us if we take any longer."

“Crap, am I late?” Jay asked, zooming past Leo to all but dart inside. A laugh escaped Leo as he followed him in, the warmth from inside melting him the moment he entered. While the regular gaming tables were filled downstairs, they headed for the upstairs loft. A gorgeous girl dressed all rockabilly chic waved at them from the front desk.

“You’re Leo, Matt’s business partner, right?” she asked.

Leo bobbed his head.

“Kelly,” she introduced herself before pointing toward the loft. “Everyone’s already up there.”

“We’re not late,” Leo murmured to Jay, who was all but vibrating at this point.

“You’re not,” Kelly responded. “They’re just overeager to start and arguing with Cal.”

“Thanks for the heads-up,” Leo said, grabbing a hold of Jay’s hand and guiding him in the direction of the steps. They reached the loft in no time, and once Leo got a good look at the place, he couldn’t help but be impressed. The fake stone stretching from floor to ceiling gave it a castle sort of vibe, accented by a massive mahogany gaming table in the center. The dim lighting of a chandelier created the perfect tavern ambiance, and a prickle of excitement burst to light inside him.

Truth be told, Leo had never played D&D before—the time and drive hadn’t been there. However, with the group sitting around the table and the unique setting, he already felt like

he'd been transported somewhere else, and he surprisingly dug it. Jay tugged on his hand, and one glance to his fake boyfriend made the excitement spark even brighter. Jay was all but beaming as they walked over to the table, and Leo couldn't help but get swept up in his enthusiasm.

"You made it." Matt's voice was warm as he pushed up from his seat and walked over. A second later, both he and Jay were on the receiving end of his bear hugs, literally, since the guy was big and burly in the best ways. Gratitude washed over Leo again that he'd lucked out with such a great business partner. He'd expected the relationship to be all professional, but Matt had established from the start that he was determined to be friends.

"I'm completely new at this," Leo warned. "So I'm going to need to be walked through the rules."

"Pre-made characters make this a lot easier, and I'll tell you when and what to roll." A voice came from behind Matt as a tall guy approached, broad-shouldered and wearing flannel.

"Funny, I usually don't like being told what to do," Leo responded with a smirk.

The guy's eyes crinkled with a grin as he extended a hand. "Cal," he said. "Nice to meet you."

Leo shook his hand and caught a glimpse of the other folks at the table. Matt's boyfriend Jasper was there, the guy eye-catchingly gorgeous with his thick black hair swept to the side and a runner's frame that made most clothes look good. The other three he didn't know—a femme guy with long brown

hair pulled into a bun, a redheaded chick who looked far too chipper, and a short-haired butch girl who leaned back in the seat, all confidence.

“I’m Leo,” he said, introducing himself. “And this is Jay.”

“Great to meet you guys,” Butch girl said, jerking a thumb at her herself. “I’m Tabby. Ready to go kill Krampus?”

“Oh, so that’s how this game is going to be?” Jay said, sliding into one of the open seats. Leo blinked, surprised at the easy tone coming from Jay when moments before he’d been jittering.

“I’m Julian,” the femme guy said, “Cal’s boyfriend, but he’s a jerk of a DM who won’t take it easy on me anyway.”

“At least he’s not evil like Roxie,” the redhead muttered. “My name’s Mel. So glad you two could join us.”

Leo took the seat next to Jay, and a second later, a piece of paper got shoved in front of his face filled with a whole lot of stats and numbers he had no idea how to discern.

“Here’s your character sheet,” Cal said before he swept back over to his place at the head of the table. “Want some explanations first, or would you prefer to dive in?”

“Dive in,” Leo said, not wanting to hold everyone up since he was the only newbie here.

“Don’t worry,” Jay whispered, nudging Leo’s knee with his. “I’ll help you out.” Leo’s heart squeezed tight at the way Jay left his knee there, touching him.

“All right,” Cal said as he settled into his seat. “Let’s get started.”

“Krampus needs to die,” Tabby complained, slapping the table.

“I don’t know,” Jas said with a shrug. “I think I’m siding with Krampus.”

“He just terrorized the children of an entire town,” Julian argued. “I’m pretty sure that means we should stop him.”

“If little Jimmy wanted me to swoop in as his savior, he shouldn’t have spat on me when we entered town,” Jas shot back.

Leo hadn’t been piping in as much while he soaked in the game itself and how everyone played, but watching this tennis match of everyone bickering was perfection. What he hadn’t expected was how much Jay came to life while he played D&D. Whereas Leo hung back and absorbed right now, this setting was clearly where Jay thrived.

“I mean, all he did was drop some spider swarms in on them, change their toys to skeletons, and leave some subterranean goo throughout their houses. It’s just mischief,” Jay jumped in, his expression lighting up. “That’d be like killing Jack Skellington.”

“Well, damn,” Julian responded, his eyes gleaming. “When you put it that way...”

Cal heaved out a sigh, and Leo bit back a laugh. The train was clearly going off the rails.

“Yeah, but there are kids going missing,” Mel launched in to argue. From sitting and watching, Leo could see none of the answers were what their DM was searching for, since Cal didn’t have much of a game face. No one seemed to be paying attention to Cal though while they all debated on what to do.

“What about going to talk to Krampus?” Leo suggested.

“Thank fuck,” Cal muttered, scrubbing at his face.

“Why would we negotiate with a child murderer?” Tabby responded, even though features danced with amusement. Clearly, someone was stirring the pot for shits and giggles.

“Why are we even getting involved if there’s no money?” Jas shot back.

“Maybe because there’s a town full of concerned parents whose children are going missing?” Matt hedged. Jas rolled his eyes and leaned in to give him a kiss on the cheek.

“So, what you’re saying is make an alliance with Krampus,” Jay said, casting a glance to Leo. Based on the quirk of his lips, he was just fucking around too. The more Leo saw of the game, the more he could see the appeal. The trappings didn’t matter as much as the chance to let loose and get silly about shit—at least with this crew.

“I mean, if Krampus is open to alliances, that seems like a good move to make,” Leo responded, tapping his character

sheet. “Is that what a...” He squinted and stared at the sheet again. “An elven bard would do?”

“Nah, you’d most likely try to fuck Krampus,” Julian commented, his eyes glittering. Cal shot him a glare.

A grin spread on Leo’s lips. “Well now, no one told me that was an option.”

“Mostly because we wanted this Christmas game to be a fun jaunt into solving a mystery,” Cal muttered. “Now we’ve got the choices between a murderfest or a fuckfest.”

“Isn’t that always the case though?” Tabby said.

“With you lot, yeah,” Cal said. “Okay, before we head to visit Krampus, let’s take a quick five-minute break. If you need to grab a drink, food, whatever, do so now.”

Leo pushed up from the table, because he’d been jonesing for a cup of coffee. He hadn’t made it a few paces when a hand slipped in his. Leo’s heart stumbled as he looked down to Jay at his side, holding his hand like they were dating for real. Like this was just his life now. Fuck, if only.

After Christmas.

They’d be able to talk after Christmas.

“Want a coffee?” Leo asked as he and Jay walked hand in hand down the stairs, squeezing there a little awkwardly. Not like he’d pull his hand away though. Jay had given it to him, and he wanted to hold onto this warmth, this comfort for as long as he could.

“Yeah, I’d love one,” Jay responded, looking up at Leo with the sort of affection that made his heart squeeze tight. “Are you having fun so far?”

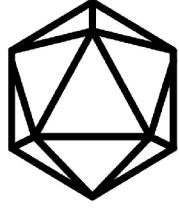
“You know, if someone had told me I’d be tabletop gaming for the holidays a year or two ago, I probably would’ve called them crazy, but I’m entertained,” Leo said as they reached the bottom of the staircase and headed toward the front counter. “The crew here is fun.”

“I’m glad you invited me,” Jay said, a sweet-as-fuck blush on his cheeks. “Not just because it’s a fun-as-hell one-shot, but that you thought of me...it means a lot.”

Leo bit back the words that jumped to his lips, how Jay was pretty much all he could think of as of late. The way Jay had filled in Leo’s empty spaces, how he’d broken up the monotony of those lonely evenings at home with laughter and warmth and affection—there was no way he couldn’t have fallen.

“You’re easily my number one” was what he said instead, hoping Jay could understand the meaning Leo conveyed there without overwhelming him. What had started as a hookup at a wedding had quickly shifted upon reuniting. And Leo was dying for more.

“Same,” Jay murmured, so quietly Leo almost missed it. Those words kept the hearth fire in his chest going, the hazy promise that what they were building piece by piece might stand a chance.



Chapter Nine

When Jay had recruited Leo to be his fake boyfriend for the work party and the family function, he'd forgotten one important fact.

He'd met Leo at his cousin Luke's wedding.

However, Luke lived out in Chicago, which was how he and Leo had become friends, and the chance of his cousin being at Aunt Lorrie's tonight was slim.

Slim, but not impossible, which was why Jay brimmed with anxiety yet again. If his brain came with an off switch, that'd be great, but no such luck.

"What do I need to know?" Leo asked as Jay pulled in front of Aunt Lorrie's house behind one of the dozens of vehicles lining the street.

"I'm just hoping no one remembers you," Jay muttered, trying to ignore the sweat accumulating on his palms.

"Ouch, cruel," Leo teased back.

Jay shot him a look. “I mean from the wedding. You know, the one you were a groomsman at.”

“Sweetheart, very few cousins showed up to the bachelor party, and I spent one night with these individuals, most of who were drunk as fuck,” Leo responded. “Besides, I snuck off during the reception with you for the rest of that night.”

Jay’s cheeks colored at the memory. This week had been an agony of masturbation and trying to not text Leo to come over and fuck his brains out. Waiting until the end of the holidays sounded worse with every passing day, but that was probably stupid amounts of lust calling the shots, not his brain.

“Right,” Jay muttered. “Fine, well, since we’re going by the story that we’ve only been dating a little bit and you haven’t met my folks yet, they’ll be the nosiest. The rest of the family can be back and forth.” His stomach churned a little. Part of the reason he’d wanted a security person to cling to tonight was due to the family. Most of them had adjusted to the fact that he’d transitioned, that he was Jay now. But occasionally a deadname would slip out or his old pronouns, and while the intent wasn’t malicious, it threw him off-kilter either way.

The dysphoria had been back and forth as of late, the pitch to his stomach when he looked in the mirror, how he wanted to crawl out of his skin sometimes. Even picking an outfit for tonight had been a longer than average process. After he’d gotten top surgery, a lot of the more severe dysphoria faded to the background, but it still flared up at times. The frequency

was due to the breakup and his insecurities afterwards, but one thing that had been helping was spending time with Leo.

The man wasn't as simple as a distraction. He brought Jay to life in ways that former relationships never had, maybe with his implicit acceptance, the way Leo saw him, or how his outgoing attitude encouraged him to be more.

“All I need is the cover story,” Leo responded, reaching over to squeeze his shoulder. “Handling a bunch of your relatives doesn't scare me.” The touch sent a shiver through Jay, just as much of a turn-on as the sheer confidence rolling off Leo. Heading in to see the fam wasn't the time to be getting hot and fucking bothered, but here he was anyway.

“Okay, well, I'd say stick by me, but you're distractingly hot, and you're probably going to do better with my relatives than I will,” Jay said, tugging his keys from the ignition.

“Oh, distractingly hot?” Leo responded, his eyes dancing as he pushed the car door open and stepped out.

Jay escaped as well, unprepared for how brisk the evening was, even though he'd been in San Francisco his entire life. “Don't give me the aw, shucks routine like you don't know you are,” Jay responded as he stepped in line with Leo. They walked side by side up the sloping drive leading to Aunt Lorrie's house, and Jay couldn't help but sneak glances along the way. He hadn't been lying—Leo was the most gorgeous man he'd ever met, and the more he got to know him, the more beautiful he became.

“Yeah, but coming from you, it means something,” Leo murmured, his voice a low rasp.

Jay swallowed hard and dared to look up. Those blue eyes set him ablaze with the sheer longing and need brewing in them. He wanted a repeat of their kiss so badly—it had been all he could think about—but right in front of Aunt Lorrie’s house wasn’t the place.

“Then I’ll keep telling you,” Jay said, his heart beating a little faster from the honesty passing his lips. He wanted to say more, give more of himself, hell, give everything, but waiting until after the holiday chaos was the smart move. Aunt Lorrie’s front door loomed in front of him, a signal of what would come with the obnoxious crocheted Santa décor all over the surface. “Ready for this?”

“Let’s go, boyfriend,” Leo said, sliding his palm against Jay’s to hold his hand. The contact sent an immediate rush through Jay, and he tried to focus on opening the door and stepping inside, rather than the man he wanted to fuck into oblivion.

The second the door creaked open, the familiar scent of too much cinnamon overpowering everything slammed into him. Like usual, Aunt Lorrie had gone all out with her Christmas decorating, except there was no rhyme or reason to anything. Big stuffed Santas dangled from the ceiling, and a random reindeer sleigh hung out right next to the door, close enough to trip on. A parade of multicolored lights were strung around the

staircase railing, and blinking candles were stationed on almost every available end table.

Already, Jay spotted three of his aunts still milling around the foyer with glasses of wine. Game time.

“Hey,” he announced himself, lifting a hand and striding forward. Leo remained by his side, this beacon of confidence that he just gravitated toward, even here.

Aunt Fi, Aunt Drea, and Aunt Irene all looked up, and their eyes brightened as they spotted Leo by his side. Jay swallowed hard. Maybe it had been stupid to do the whole fake-boyfriend thing. He wanted to introduce Leo as his boyfriend for real, to let the swell of pride for the man at his side sink bone-deep. Too late now.

“Who’s this?” Aunt Drea asked, approaching first. Based on the way she smoothed down her chignon, she was well aware of Leo’s handsomeness.

“Uh, my boyfriend,” Jay said, squeezing Leo’s hand before letting go.

Leo offered the hand at once to shake, and Aunt Drea stared at him all starry-eyed. Jay resisted the urge to roll his eyes as Aunt Fi and Irene swept in as well, eager to meet him. After they lavished Leo with attention, Jay was on the receiving end of hugs that smelled like fabric softener and berry perfume, and a part of him settled at the familiarity. As much as family events could be walking over glass on occasion, a level of warmth existed there that made them worth braving.

“Come on,” Aunt Irene said, her bright green Christmas sweater blaring as she placed a hand on his shoulder and swept him forward. “Your mom and dad are in the other room, and they’re dying to meet this mysterious boyfriend of yours.”

While some of his family had struggled when he came out as trans and still struggled a bit, at least they’d adapted very easily to him being pan with a leaning toward guys. He’d take each win as they came. No one was openly hostile, and even his old and stubborn aunts and uncles seemed to be trying. It did help that his parents had threatened all of them. Fuck, he loved his folks so much.

His heart thudded a bit harder as he rounded the corner into the living room. Aunt Lorrie’s house had been plucked straight out of the seventies with an ugly orange shag carpet and a whole messload of wooden paneling everywhere. The whole place kind of smelled like a basement, a little musty, but she’d been hosting the family Christmas party for as long as he could remember, and no one else wanted to take on the effort.

“So, who are your parents?” Leo asked, his breath hot against Jay’s ear. A shiver rolled through him, and lust prickled to the surface again, inconvenient timing and all.

Jay scanned the room, most folks hanging around the food table, while a few others clustered around the drinks. Aunt Lorrie’s balcony was cracked a smidge, and it was clear two of his uncles were out there smoking cigars. Christmas had thrown up all over this room as well, and he had to look past the flashing lights, blow-up Grinches—like, an alarming

number—and tinsel garland to focus on who had shown up. He spotted his parents in the corner by the dips, and he reached down and grabbed Leo's hand to drag him over.

He hated lying to his folks about Leo, which made him question for the thousandth time why he'd even brought him tonight. But he hadn't told his family about the breakup with Dan, and they'd been so excited he was finally bringing someone to Christmas that he hadn't wanted to let them down.

Mom looked up and met his eyes, a huge smile rolling to her face. She was on the small side, which made the maroon sweater she wore look massive. Dad dressed in his normal jeans and T-shirt attire, though this time he tossed in some holiday flair by throwing on a red one. He adjusted his glasses before approaching.

Dad stopped right in front of Jay and Leo and thrust a hand out. "Pleased to meet you."

"This is Leo," Jay said, a blush rising to his cheeks. Fuck, but he really wanted his parents to like him. If there was even the slightest chance after the holidays were over that Jay wasn't imagining Leo's interest, that he wanted to pursue something too—this meant more than he could put into words.

Mom swept in and clutched at Leo's hand. "We're so happy you're here," Mom gushed, her eyes bright and the excitement palpable. "Jay's been so secretive about you that we weren't sure if you were some Canadian boyfriend."

Jay scrubbed his face with his palms, embarrassment flooding through him from multiple sources. He loved his

parents, but he hadn't inherited their high energy and intensity, and they weren't wrong—Leo was a fake boyfriend. “Well he's not likely to stick around now,” Jay grumbled, trying to throw the heat off the situation.

“Oh, I definitely am,” Leo said, flashing one of those knee-weakening grins. Damn him. “So let's get the dirt out of the way now. I want his ridiculous childhood stories.”

Mom all but bounced on her heels as she dragged Leo away, toward the drinks.

Jay heaved a huge sigh. “Great. Now I'll get dumped the second we leave.”

Dad met Jay's eyes with a smile. “I doubt that,” he murmured. “Not with the way the guy looks at you.”

Jay's heart thudded a little faster. “And how's that?” he asked, trying not to belie that he was fishing. Because of course, he'd expect a real boyfriend to look at him a certain way—at least he'd hope—but Leo wasn't. They were just friends. Friends who flirted incessantly, hung out all the time, and hinted at more. And yes, Jay was the one to pump the brakes until the holidays were over, but hell, part of him still waited for the other shoe to drop, for Leo to decide he'd gotten bored.

“He stares at you like there's no one else in the room, Jay,” Dad said, his eyes crinkling. “Anyone who looks at you like that is guaranteed going to treat you well. I approve.”

Jay swallowed hard and glanced over to Leo who was nodding and smiling at something Mom said. The rapt attention he paid her, the softness in his gaze, had Jay falling hard. And then he saw Leo gesture to the bowl of eggnog on the table, which was an avoid-at-all-costs measure. Everyone who drank it ended up with stomachaches.

“Oh no,” Jay said, heading into motion. “Let me go save him.”

A few hours into the party, and Jay was feeling the most relaxed he ever had at a family shindig. And he'd only had one cider, unlike normally when he'd tip back glass after glass of wine to numb the conversations that slipped under his skin or the deadnaming that would crop up. Maybe it was because seeing him with a boyfriend solidified that he was queer in his family's eyes or maybe it was because Leo was so damn charming he drew all the attention his way, but this had been one of the smoothest family parties he'd attended in years.

And Jay knew who was to thank for that.

“He's definitely a keeper,” Mom whispered far too loudly because she'd already gotten drunk. Her cheeks were rosy and her eyes twinkling.

Jay sucked in a breath, hoping Leo hadn't heard that one. One glance in his direction said he did. They were seated on the sofa, and he'd been regaling Aunt Irene and Uncle Steve

with a story about a party in Chicago where someone had brought a boa constrictor that got loose.

Leo reached over and placed a hand on Jay's thigh, all casual-like, as if they did this whenever. Which would probably be normal if they were boyfriends, but instead, Jay was burning up inside. Watching Leo in his element always got him hot, and he'd been wanting this man from the moment they reconnected, to the point that the next time they were by themselves, he was tempted to drop to his knees and let Leo take the reins.

Voices sounded from the other room, and a familiar one had Jay sitting up from his slouch.

His cousin Luke wasn't supposed to be here.

Luke, who was still in contact with Leo and could blow their whole pretense out of the water. Jay's pulse leapt, and his mind began whirring.

They needed to leave, but Luke had entered through the front door, which was the main entrance and exit.

Jay placed his hand on Leo's to snag his attention. When Leo's eyes met his, he tilted his head in the direction of the bathroom, down another corridor of his aunt's rancher.

"Luke," Jay mouthed, and Leo's eyes widened.

"Come here," Jay said, rising from his seat and offering a hand to Leo.

"Sure thing, sweetheart," Leo said, grabbing his hand and coming to a stand. Jay led the way toward the corridor, his

heart thumping so loud it drowned out the noises of his relatives making small talk around him. Luke's voice was getting louder, which meant any minute he'd be stepping in, and he'd see the guy who'd been a groomsman in his wedding. Why had Jay thought this was a good idea again?

The hallway lay only a few feet away.

"Oh, Jay," Aunt Lorrie said, stepping in front of them. He resisted the urge to scream.

"Jay's just showing me where the bathroom is, if you'll excuse us," Leo said smoothly, tugging them past her. Jay stumbled after Leo as they burst into the hallway before Aunt Lorrie could say anything else.

"How are we going to get out?" Leo whisper-hissed as they strode deeper into the hallway. "Does she have a backdoor we can escape through?"

Jay worried his lower lip as he glanced behind them. Only one avenue he could think of. "Let's go to the bathroom."

He tugged Leo with him and all but vaulted himself into the door on the right.

Leo shut the door behind him, which left both of them squished into Aunt Lorrie's cramped bathroom. "I don't think waiting in here until he leaves is going to work."

Jay tilted his head toward the window facing her backyard. "Waiting wasn't my plan."

Leo blinked at him, then blinked again. "We're climbing out the bathroom window?"

Jay shrugged. “Do you have a better idea?”

Silence spread between them for a moment as Leo seemed to try to process the plan, but Jay wasn't wasting time. He pulled up the blinds and cranked the window open. The brisk wind filtered their way at once.

“Fuck, you are serious,” Leo muttered, swiping a hand through his perfect strands. “Look, this is your family function. If you want to climb out the window, I'll follow your lead.”

Jay's heart was thumping a million miles a minute, and adrenaline prickled through his veins as he gripped tight to the windowsill. “I'll just tell my folks I got sick and we had to rush out. Word'll spread fast.”

Leo shook his head, a blinder of a grin rising to his lips. “With you, it's never boring, sweetheart.”

Jay's heart stumbled at the endearment in private, not one for show as a fake boyfriend. Fuck, he wanted that. But right now, he needed to focus on getting the hell out of Aunt Lorrie's house undetected. “Let's go,” he said, pushing himself up to the windowsill.

He managed to slide his leg through with ease and gripped tight as he dragged the other one out. The wind burned his cheeks, and a low curse escaped with the realization that he'd left his jacket in Aunt Lorrie's closet. He'd have to come back for it another time. The drop was only a few feet to the grass, so he let go, his feet hitting the ground with a thump that reverberated up his shins.

He took steps back to make room for Leo, casting a glance toward the street to make sure family members weren't milling around. He guessed that everyone was stuffed somewhere in the house at this point, but who knew. Sometimes folks liked to slip outside for a smoke.

Leo thrust a leg out and tried to swing the other one out as well, but he found it harder to squeeze through.

"Want me to pull your legs?" Jay asked, wrinkling his nose. His heart thrummed at a hummingbird's pace, and he kept glancing around, as if someone would walk around the back of the house at any moment and they'd be busted. Trying to explain escaping through Aunt Lorrie's windows would be next-level ridiculous.

"I'm fine," Leo muttered as he shimmied out of the window. Jay reached into his pocket and grabbed his keys, ready to bolt the second Leo landed.

A knock sounded from inside on the bathroom door. "Someone in there?"

Jay's eyes widened. Oh fuck.

Leo scrambled, pushing out the rest of the way to slam onto the ground beside Jay with a thump. Jay was frozen, and Leo stood stock-still as well while the creak of the bathroom door echoed even to here. If anyone decided to look through the window, they were busted.

A droplet of sweat trickled down Jay's temple, and his hands balled into fists.

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

“Who the hell left the window open?” Uncle Steve’s voice drifted from overhead. Jay stared at Leo who met his eyes, slightly widening them to make it clear they were in a ridiculous predicament of Jay’s own making. The urge to giggle bubbled up in his chest, light, buoyant, and not what he needed. He kept swallowing in the hopes of stifling it while rustling came from above him. He didn’t dare look up or even breathe at this point lest he burst into laughter.

The window creaked shut at last, but Jay didn’t budge. He waited another moment or two, the sounds in the bathroom muted. After it seemed like his uncle wasn’t going to bust through the doors again, he tilted his head in the direction of the front yard. Leo nodded, and together, they took slow, measured steps away from the house.

Jay’s chest ached with the need to laugh, but he forced it back down. Still, the urge kept rising up, like shaking a bottle of champagne over and over again. He peered around the front of the house—no one was in the yard.

Jay took the first steps forward, scampering across the lawn as fast as he possibly could. He didn’t bother looking back, assuming Leo followed behind, as he raced across the grass toward his car. He’d parked far enough down the street that he didn’t worry about being caught getting in—he just had to make it there first.

The moment he collided against the side of his Subaru, the laugh that had been bubbling inside him ripped the hell out.

He leaned against his passenger's side door, heaving with the laughs that escaped, one after another, the dominoes finally falling.

How the hell was he here, sneaking out the window of his aunt's house to avoid blowing the secret that Leo was his fake boyfriend?

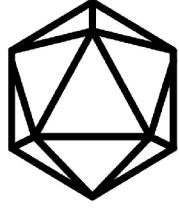
Leo settled beside him against the car, and when Jay looked up, Leo's eyes were twinkling with mirth.

"Always interesting with you," Leo murmured, his lips curling up. "Let's get out of here."

"Want to go back to my place?" escaped before Jay could stop himself.

Leo's eyes widened, but his nod and flare of heat in his eyes confirmed it.

Oh, they were so going to fuck.



Chapter Ten

The car ride over to Jay's apartment buzzed with tension.

Leo was still amped up from their ridiculous escape, and if he were being honest, he'd been in a perpetual state of turned on from the moment he reconnected with Jay and started hanging out so much. Every casual touch, every bit of fake boyfriend PDA had his need ramping higher, and he was dying to explore this man's body.

Not that Jay had explicitly stated they were going to hook up, but based on the fuck-me eyes he'd been giving Leo all night, if Leo had to guess, the odds were in his favor. Jay pulled to a park outside of his place and tugged the keys out of the ignition.

Jay looked over at him. "If we do this," he said, licking his lower lip in a distracting way. "This isn't just a hookup for me."

Leo sucked in a sharp breath, surprised by the honesty. They needed to have a sit-down talk, but hell, if Jay was even

willing to remotely cross the line into relationship territory, Leo would take what was offered in a heartbeat. “Me neither,” he responded, his heart thudding hard.

A small smile burst onto Jay’s face, his eyes lighting up. The man stole his breath away, and Leo found himself overwhelmed at the sight. Those hazel eyes were bright, his chestnut waves a tousled mess from the wind and running, and his cheeks were flushed in the sexiest way.

But Leo wanted him spread out on the bed, wanted to take him apart piece by piece until the flush covered his whole body.

“What are we waiting for then?” Leo prompted, and they set into motion. Jay hopped out of the car, and Leo followed close behind as they made their way to Jay’s apartment. They hiked up a flight of steps and through the scuffed linoleum of the hallways until landing in front of Jay’s green door. Even Leo’s skin was buzzing from the tension, from the need percolating through him that had been ramping up over the weeks.

The idea of getting to taste and feel Jay again, especially in the wake of their kiss, not only set those coals ablaze but also unwound some tightness around his heart.

Jay unlocked his apartment and stepped inside, gesturing for Leo to follow. He didn’t need more of an invite than that. Leo all but prowled through the doorway as Jay flipped the lights on.

The urge to claim this man roared fast and deep, and Leo closed the space between them in a few quick steps. He tilted

Jay's chin up with his finger and kissed him hard.

This kiss was need, pure and simple, and Jay melted against him. Leo wrapped his palm around Jay's nape, gripping him there tight as he devoured the man's mouth, sweet from the cider he'd drunk and hot and tempting. The brush of their lips together was explosive, chemistry that Leo had been chasing ever since their first collision. Except unlike the first time, this felt so different. He'd gotten to see Jay's sheepish smiles, the dry wit that he lobbed at Leo, the way he instinctively leaned in to Leo's touch, a trust Leo was honored by.

Leo slipped his tongue in, and Jay moaned as he deepened the kiss, messy and hot, full of nips and bites and sucking on Jay's lip until he bucked his hips against Leo's.

"Bedroom?" Jay asked once they broke for breath.

"Hell yes," Leo said, not pausing as he scooped Jay into his arms in one quick movement. He'd worked out back in Chicago, but nothing had bulked him up like this job as a baker, oddly enough. Carrying sacks of flour, working on his feet constantly, he was building solid muscle, and he liked the strength that came with it. Jay clutched at the lapels of Leo's button-down, as if he was a half second from just ripping it open.

Leo brought them into Jay's bedroom and nudged the light on with his elbow. Peter Parker yipped his head off, leaping up to greet them, and Leo let him nudge around his legs before he bolted out of the room. Leo shut the door before carrying Jay

to the bed. He deposited him there with a whump, and Jay sprawled out, looking debauched and gorgeous.

“Hey, so,” Jay started, glancing to the side as he smoothed a rumpled bit of his sheets. “Not to kill the vibe and all, but I’ve been kinda dysphoric recently. I’d love to get fucked in the ass, and I’d love my T-dick played with, but I don’t want my other hole touched.”

Leo sank onto the mattress, kneeling in front of Jay, and he placed a finger under his chin again, tipping Jay’s eyes up to meet his. “That sounds hot as fuck to me. I only top, so I’d love to wreck that sexy ass, and when I play with kink, I’m a Dom, if you’re open to any of that.”

Jay bit his lower lip, looking up at him with a fevered gaze, and Leo wanted to pin his arms overhead and taste and suck every inch of his body.

“I want that,” Jay murmured, his voice husky with need. “I’m on an IUD and I’m negative too.”

“I’m negative as well,” Leo said, loving the way Jay was looking up at him right now. “Strip for me.” He took control on autopilot. He’d been dying for another chance with Jay, whatever way he could have him, and he wasn’t going to waste a moment.

Jay nodded and slowly began peeling his sweater up and over his head. It grew clear some of the speed was due to hesitation, which made the need to just lavish every inch of his body with attention burn that much greater. Jay finally pulled the sweater off and tossed it to the ground, exposing his

gorgeous chest. He was pale and slender, the light scars from his top surgery silhouetting his pecs—fucking perfection.

“So damn sexy,” Leo said, his cock stiffening at the sight of Jay lying on the bed in front of him, who now fumbled with the top button of his jeans. He began peeling them down, along with his boxer-briefs, to reveal long, sensual legs and his T-dick all flushed and erect between his folds. Leo’s mouth watered to taste him, to just worship his gorgeous body and hear all the sinful moans that exploded out of him.

Leo started undoing the buttons of his shirt at a rapid pace, needing to feel this man skin to skin more than ever. “Start touching your cock, gorgeous,” he commanded while he peeled his shirt off. Jay never drew his eyes away from Leo, but he reached between his legs and began rubbing at his cock, teasing it until he was writhing on the bed. Leo shunted his pants off and was stepping out of his boxer-briefs a moment later as he headed to join Jay, completely stripped down.

He prowled toward him, the mattress creaking with his movements as he moved in closer and closer, sliding between Jay’s spread legs. Leo ducked down and nipped at those creamy thighs, loving the explosive sounds that came out of Jay in response. He continued to explore his way up, around the ridges of his hips, purposefully avoiding Jay’s needy cock. Jay continued to toy with it while Leo set to doing exactly what he’d wanted to—tasting every square inch of this luscious body.

Jay's skin was velvet and hot, and he smelled like sandalwood and sex. Leo's cock hung heavy between his legs, every sensitized brush against his thighs making him want to rut against Jay.

"So damn hot," Leo murmured as he continued to nip and suck his way up Jay's body, to his flat stomach, up to his pecs where Leo licked at one nipple and then the other. The sound Jay made was from deep in his throat, and Leo did it again, just to savor the reaction. When he moved off, Jay let out a low noise of complaint, and Leo couldn't help his grin as he continued up to sink his teeth into Jay's shoulder.

"Oh fuck," Jay moaned. Leo could feel how his arm movement quickened as he played with his cock. Hell no.

"You're coming on my cock or not at all, sweet boy," Leo murmured into Jay's ear as he reached down to grab his arm and yank it up overhead. He repeated the motion with the other, pinning them up so he couldn't keep touching himself.

Jay looked up at him, those hazel eyes glassy with lust. "What if I don't listen?" He pushed against Leo's grip, writhing beneath him.

"If you can't be good, then you're earning yourself a spanking," Leo said, a grin spreading on his face.

"You think that's a punishment?" Jay teased, even though his breath quickened, and he licked his lips.

"It will be," Leo warned.

"Unf," Jay moaned.

Leo pushed up to maneuver next to Jay, keeping his hand around his wrists. He knelt beside him, lowering down onto his heels to settle into position. Jay watched, his expression rapt, and the way that pink tongue slipped out to lick those fuckable lips had Leo's libido revving higher. His cock was a heavy weight between his legs, but he focused on Jay right now.

He let go of his wrists and reached for Jay's hip and flipped him in a swift move. The guy was short enough to manhandle, which Leo fucking adored, and he had Jay bent over his lap in no time.

Jay's smooth, peach-perfect ass was exposed like this, ripe for the taking, and Leo couldn't help but run his palm over one cheek. A shudder rippled through Jay, and lust punched through Leo at the motion. His cock was dripping pre-cum at this point, but he wasn't going to pass up the chance to get a crack at that ass—in both ways.

“Does the stoplight system work for you?” Leo asked.

“Mmph,” Jay responded as he rutted against Leo's lap.

Leo arched a brow and gripped his hip hard, stilling him. “Use your words.”

“Green is good, yellow for nearing a limit, red to stop,” Jay rushed out in a fast babble.

Fuck, the man looked so stunning splayed out across his thighs, his chestnut hair tousled, his cheeks flushed. Soon, his ass cheeks would match in color. Anticipation thrummed

through Leo as he ran his palm up and down Jay's cheek in teasing strokes. Jay stared up at him, those pretty hazel eyes pleading, and Leo unleashed a wicked grin.

He raised his palm, loving the sight before him of the beautiful boy bent over his lap, the heady feeling that soaked through him whenever he sank into Dom mode. Leo brought his palm down with a crack that resounded around the room.

Jay let out a little yelp but writhed on his lap, clearly enjoying it. Leo didn't wait, bringing his palm down on the other side to even it out.

"Think you've learned your lesson?" he asked, his tone calm, even though the need to just bury his face between Jay's cheeks and devour the furred skin of his pucker was growing more overwhelming by the second.

"No," Jay shot back, the bit of brat in him surprising Leo. He fucking adored it.

"Well then we'll work on that," Leo responded, his palm landing with another crack that echoed through the room. He didn't hesitate, alternating impact on either cheek as his hand and arm got a workout. He fell into the rhythm of the motion, the sound addictive. Jay continued to wriggle around over his thighs, moaning louder and louder, like he was seconds away from release. Leo's breaths came in a little choppier as he watched redness bloom on those smooth cheeks, which would be sore in the morning. He began to slow down, alternating each spank with a soothing touch, and Jay's lashes fluttered as he sank into total bliss.

Leo swallowed hard at the sight. Perfection. Jay was absolute perfection.

“All right,” Leo murmured. “Hands and knees for me.”

Jay took his time pushing up off Leo’s lap, clearly already feeling the strength of the spanks to his ass. Leo couldn’t wait to pry those blazing cheeks open and sink deep inside him. Jay lowered his chest to the bed, leaving his ass high in the air, and Leo sucked in a sharp breath.

“Condoms and lube are in the top drawer,” Jay murmured, nuzzling against his own arm.

Leo couldn’t help the satisfaction that surged in his chest—the guy had gone from needy to blissed out midway through the spanking, and that was addictive as hell. He reached over to the top drawer and grabbed a condom, ripping the foil open and rolling it onto his desperate cock. He’d grown so hard at this point it was torture, but he didn’t have a problem with patience. Leo squeezed out the lube, first slicking Jay’s pretty exposed hole, veering away from the front one as requested. Then he lubed up his cock and settled onto his knees behind Jay.

“Need something, sweet boy?” Leo asked.

“Your cock,” Jay moaned out, the words breathless. “Daddy.”

The term on Jay’s lips was like finding the right key to a lock, and lust flared through his system in one wild, consuming sweep.

Fuuuuck, he liked that too much.

“How much prep do you need?” Leo asked, bringing his finger to Jay’s pucker to start testing things.

“Not much,” Jay murmured. “I want the sting.”

Leo slid one finger into his tight heat—consuming and sure to be his undoing. Within moments, he was adding a second, and Jay was riding back against his fingers with abandon. He pulled them out and brought the tip of his cock up to that hungry hole. Their first encounter had been mind-searingly hot, but it couldn’t even compare to this. The layers had been stripped back between them, and lust weighted the air, hot and heavy.

He slowly sank inside Jay’s hole, and his eyes rolled back, lashes fluttering. Jay felt so damn good. The clench of him around his length, the searing heat was more than he could handle, and he took a moment to settle, just to keep from blowing his load.

“Such a good boy,” Leo purred, and he reached forward to card his fingers through Jay’s tousled hair, finding a grip. A tremble wracked through Jay, and Leo could feel it all, buried inside him. He started to move, drawing his hips back only to drive forward, which unleashed one moan after another from Jay. With Jay’s head canted back, the slender slope of his spine on clear display, he looked like a pure fantasy.

Leo didn’t hold back, gripping him tight near the scalp and beginning to pick up the pace as he fucked into Jay harder. Sweat beaded on his temple, and his breaths came out a bit

shallower. Jay's moans were a melody he wanted to memorize, the kind of thing he hadn't gotten to appreciate their first time together, when the man was on his knees, mouth stuffed with his cock. Though that painted another too damn pretty picture.

Every time he thrust in, the slap of skin to skin echoed through the room, Jay's plush ass giving a delicious bounce. His cheeks were nice and red from the spanking, and the visual as Leo drove his cock between them was enough to make him delirious, if the sinful feel of his hole wasn't already pushing Leo close to the edge.

He wasn't going to come until Jay did though.

Leo tugged at Jay's hair, guiding him up from where he was splayed forward. "Come here, sweet boy."

Jay slowly drew himself up while Leo continued to drive into him, each thrust heaven. When Jay was upright enough that he almost leaned against Leo's chest, Leo let go of his hair. Instead, he rested his palm around Jay's throat, using that to hold him in place. He didn't put any pressure behind it since they hadn't discussed playing rough in that regard, but the way he braced Jay upright gave him perfect access. He thrust harder inside Jay, loving the feel of his moans reverberating against his palm, and with his free hand, Leo reached down to play with his cock.

Jay's cheeks were flushed, and his head was tipped back, those lips looking lush and sensual as he panted. The scent of sex and sweat grew heady between them, and each time Leo collided with him, the brush of their slicked skin was sensory

overload. He rubbed against Jay's cock, stroking him over and over again just to push him over the edge.

Jay's panting grew a little more frantic while he all but chased Leo's hand, and Leo lost himself in the feel of Jay's tight hole squeezing his girth, of the heat prickling through the air between them, of the tickle of Jay's hair as it brushed against his chest.

"Daddy," he gasped out, the term vaulting Leo to the edge.

Leo gave one more stroke and then Jay's cock was pulsing as he came, noisy exhales and gasps while his whole body trembled.

That was all it took—Leo followed him over on the next thrust, his cock throbbing, and he emptied into Jay's ass. White-hot bliss exploded through him in one fierce sweep, enough to rob him of his senses as he surrendered to oblivion.

Leo let the intensity of his orgasm carry him away, everything in him going boneless, lax in the wake of those powerful sensations. Jay sank against him, his sweaty back against Leo's front, and Leo lowered his hand from around his throat. He pushed Jay down onto the mattress and brought his weight overtop the man, blanketing him with his body.

"Mmm, never leave," Jay murmured, and the contentedness in his tone, the sweetness there wrapped right around Leo's heart and squeezed. He never wanted to. Hell, even pulling out felt like too much right now—he loved being connected to Jay like this.

“Let me get the condom off,” he murmured in Jay’s ear, even though pulling out of that snug heaven was the last thing he wanted to do. He took his time, aware of Jay’s slight hiss as he brushed against his cheeks, and then he tied the condom. Leo pushed himself up off the bed, despite every molecule in his body magnetized to be near Jay, and he headed over to the bathroom across the hall. He made quick work of tossing out the condom and wetting a washcloth he found.

When he came back in, Jay was sprawled onto his side, looking flushed, sleepy, and fucking gorgeous.

“There you go, beautiful.” Leo handed him the washcloth—as much as he wanted to take care of Jay the whole way, he also didn’t want to trigger dysphoria as they came down from this—and he settled beside him, wrapping an arm around his waist. Jay cleaned himself up fast and tossed the washcloth over the side of the bed.

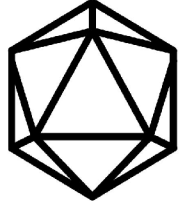
“You’re staying, right?” Jay mumbled, inching his ass back so it brushed against Leo’s spent cock.

“You’re not going to kick me out now, are you?” Leo murmured, giving his ear a light nip.

“No, never,” Jay said, the words already sleep slurred. Still, they traveled straight into Leo’s heart as he rested his head on the pillow beside Jay, clutching this precious man tight.

Because he wanted this—fucking Jay until they were both delirious, falling asleep beside him, spending every moment he could with him.

Leo had fallen hard for the man, to the point that if Jay cast him aside at the end of the holidays, his heart wouldn't break—it'd shatter.



Chapter Eleven

Jay regretted putting “the talk” off until after the holidays.

Last night had been the best sex of his life, hands down, and waking up with Leo by his side was everything he could’ve hoped for. They’d jerked each other off in bed until they both came, eventually dragging themselves up for coffee, and if Jay could’ve, he would’ve preferred to spend the rest of the day curled up with Leo.

Except duty called.

He heaved out another petulant sigh, well aware he was sulking as he pulled into the spot outside of Mal and Omari’s house. Leo had headed home to get ready and would meet him here, but Jay wished they were arriving together. Hell, he wished he’d summoned enough courage to talk with Leo before this, because showing up as just friends was crawling under his skin. If anyone hit on Leo, he would internally scream.

Or find a corner to sob into over missed chances.

Jay strode up the walkway to Mal and Omari's house, the multicolored string lights twinkling on their side of the twin. Even from here, he could hear the loud-as-hell music and chatter from inside, which meant they'd invited everyone they knew again. His stomach flip-flopped. He always had a great time—hell, most Christmas Eve parties ended with drunken board gaming or Mario Kart—but nerves crept up on him regardless.

When he'd run into Leo again just a few weeks ago, the idea of a fake boyfriend had seemed perfect. Mal had insisted Jay invite Leo to the party, all while berating him for not locking Leo down. Jay had extended the invite, mostly because Jay wanted to spend more time with the guy.

However, he'd never anticipated how quickly Leo would sink under his skin. The way he teased Jay, how he made him feel secure when he'd been floundering, how he just owned who he was with no damn fear. Somehow, Jay had fallen in love hard and fast, enough that made Leo worth the risk to his heart.

He heaved out a sigh and hauled himself up the steps to their house. The moment he cracked open the door, Trans-Siberian Orchestra blasted at him, along with a wave of chatter and warmth. Mal and Omari had gone all out for their Christmas Eve party like usual, a big tree in the corner, Christmas lights strung along the interior so it looked like twinkling stars up above, and so, so many cookies, from gingerbread to kifli, spread across the back table.

“And he’s here,” Mal’s voice called over the rock rendition of Carol of the Bells.

Jay wrinkled his nose, tempted to walk back out. At least until he saw who’d already arrived.

Leo stood beside Mal who was hunkered down by his bar, a motley assortment of mostly rum. Only hours had passed since they’d been together in his apartment, but the sight of Leo struck him dumb. Those broad shoulders filled out another goddamn Henley, this one a soft gray, like the man was trying to tempt him on purpose. And the way his black jeans molded to his thick thighs was nothing short of perfection. When Leo looked his way and their gazes met, the heat that flooded Jay’s chest grew so potent, so powerful that his knees trembled.

Leo offered him one of those heartbreaker grins, his white teeth flashing, his blue eyes bright and filled with affection, and Jay headed his way automatically, like a model train on a track.

“Hey,” Omari said, stepping in front of him to envelop him in a hug. Jay squeezed back fast, anxious to keep en route toward Leo, like the man might vanish if left alone for too long. Or might get swept away by some other guy who wasn’t afraid to proudly declare they were together. His skin prickled as he pulled away from Omari, warring between the urge of hurling himself into Leo’s arms or just playing it cool.

“Merry Christmas,” Jay said to Omari as he stepped past, noticing how Mal was smirking beside Leo like he could see how thirsty Jay was from where he stood. He recognized a few

faces of the folks clustered around the heaps of cookies table, and there were some unfamiliar ones over in the living room on the couches, but Jay didn't have time for introductions. He just wanted to stake a spot next to Leo and hiss at anyone who tried to swoop in.

Maybe tonight he'd summon the nerve to tell Leo how he felt.

"You need a drink," Mal said with a shit-eating grin as he deliberately blocked him, shoving a glass of something in front of his face. It smelled like the gingerbread man nugged in a cup.

Jay took a sip to appease his best friend, the drink sweet and nutmeggy, and he gripped it tight as he swerved around Mal to finally reach Leo.

Standing in front of him, the nerves descended like this was their first time meeting again. Leo looked down at him with a twinkle in his blue eyes, amusement curling his lips.

"Long time no see," Leo murmured, the private smile just for him. Jay's heart stuttered as the rest of the chaos faded away—the blaring strains of TSO playing in the background, whatever Mal was chattering at him, and the dozen or so people crowding up the small place. Leo's scent surrounded him, his sharp cologne intoxicating, and the sheer warmth he emanated like standing beside a campfire.

"How the hell did you get here first?" Jay asked, slipping his hands into his pockets so he didn't just lob himself at Leo. All he wanted to do was lean in and kiss him as a greeting, which

was another sign that he was in trouble when it came to this man. The ease at which these emotions had slipped in startled him almost as much as the comfort he felt around Leo.

He'd stumbled through enough bad relationships and friendships that were a struggle to recognize a good thing, and he didn't want to let it go.

"My place is close to here," Leo responded as he leaned against the wall, casual as anything, even plunked in the middle of a party where he knew no one but Jay.

Jay swallowed. "Well, I'd know that if you'd ever invited me over," he shot back, attempting haughty and coming out snarky instead.

Leo's grin widened. "You want an invitation?"

"How about tonight?" Jay challenged, heat flaring to life in his chest. Sure, it was Christmas Eve, and he had plans with his family tomorrow morning, but the idea of spending another night in bed with Leo was something he couldn't pass up.

Leo's lips curled into a sexy smirk, and he grabbed his phone from his pocket, typing out a quick message. A second later, Jay's phone buzzed. "There. You've got my address now."

Jay's heart thumped hard. Spending Christmas Eve together, waking up on Christmas morning beside Leo—it was everything he'd never dared to hope for. And a thousand times better than his prospects at the beginning of the month when he'd been in a listless relationship with Dan, who'd clearly set his sights on other guys.

“Are you both in for Mario Kart?” Mal interrupted, stepping close enough that they couldn’t ignore him. “How about you, Leo?”

Leo crooked an eyebrow. “Is this a trick question?” His voice was smooth and steady, the sort Jay wanted to listen to forever. “Like, if I say no, am I immediately disqualified from future hangouts?”

“Yes,” Mal said at the same time Jay burst out, “No.”

Jay clutched his drink a little tighter. Whatever Mal had planned for Leo, it couldn’t be good. Not like he didn’t love his best friend—he did—but he didn’t trust him to be chill around the guy Jay was smitten with.

“I’ll drop in on a game,” Leo said, taking a few strides forward. Jay wrinkled his nose, ready to follow like a lost puppy. Omari slid next to Leo, already showing him over to the empty spot on the couch, but before Jay could move, Mal placed a hand on his shoulder.

“Nuh-uh,” Mal said, tilting his head toward the mostly rum bar right where the speaker was blaring TSO the loudest.

Jay heaved a sigh and stole Leo’s former leaning spot against the wall. “Why do I feel like I’m about to get lectured?”

“Why isn’t he here as your boyfriend?” Mal crossed his arms. “Your *real* boyfriend.”

Jay flushed and cast a quick glance in the direction of the living room, but Leo was out of earshot, seated and playing Mario Kart with a few of the folks still hanging in there.

“Because I just got dumped at the beginning of the month,” Jay hissed.

“So?” Mal wasn’t budging, giving him one of those knowing looks that annoyed the piss out of him. Just because the guy had a healthy relationship that had spanned years didn’t mean he was the font of relationship wisdom. Even though he had a valid point.

“So, I don’t want to launch from one failed relationship only to get my heart broken again,” Jay mumbled. “Shouldn’t we be celebrating the holiday and not talking about my single status?”

“Your tricks won’t work,” Mal responded. “My holiday gossip’s all going to hit tomorrow anyway. Aunt Geraldine is bringing her new bendy boyfriend, and my cousin Randall’s in jail. Which means tonight, I’m happy to focus on you.”

“Bully for me,” Jay murmured weakly. He couldn’t help but linger as he gazed over to where Leo hunched over on the couch, the controller in hand and the fabric of his Henley strained over those broad shoulders. Last night, he’d felt better than he had in a long, long while, and hell, every time he was around Leo, he found parts of him knitting back together.

“What’s holding you back?” Mal asked, his tone softening along with his dark eyes.

Jay heaved out a sigh. “Honestly, just my own nerves. I... hadn’t wanted to get hurt so soon after Dan, so I tried to keep things casual.”

“Based on the heart eyes you were sending his way, I’m guessing that plan didn’t work,” Mal said, picking up one of the bottles of rum and taking a swig.

Jay shook his head, a wry grin on his face. “Not in the slightest.”

Mal nudged shoulders with him. “The man’s a catch, and he’s just as smitten. Dan was never fully in the relationship with you and doesn’t deserve a mourning period. Take the chance, Jay.”

Jay swallowed a swig from the Christmas spice in a cup drink Mal had handed him, spluttering a little from the sheer volume of alcohol that had been crammed in there. He’d need the liquid courage.

“Jay,” Omari called, beckoning him over. “Come sub in for Leo.”

“I suck at this,” Leo called over, a bright look in his eyes that Jay wanted to memorize.

Jay gave Mal a nod. “Wish me luck.”

Mal smirked in response as Jay headed over to the living room to join them. He settled into the empty spot on the couch beside Leo, prepared to dive into some shit-talking with him when Leo rose, his phone buzzing.

“Be right back,” he said, stepping away from the couch.

Jay turned toward the screen and grabbed the controller, trying to focus even though he wanted to pay attention to what Leo was up to.

“Want to go a round?” a blue-haired chick said from the other couch as she leaned forward to snag one of the controllers.

“You’re on,” Jay said, nerves jittering through him. He’d figured he would maybe play a few rounds of Mario Kart with Leo and then find somewhere private to have a conversation, but already his plan was going off the rails. He buzzed with the energy, even as he focused on tossing banana peels onto Rainbow Road.

He chanced a glance behind him, but Leo was nowhere in sight. He must’ve stepped outside to take the phone call. Jay returned his focus onto the game, even though he only half paid attention. The other part of him waited for Leo to come back in so he could steal him away for a private moment.

The talk would either go disastrously or better than he could imagine.

Jay’s fingers moved automatically on the controller as he veered his little cart in through the finish line. Before he could make up an excuse, Mal plunked into the spot Leo had been in.

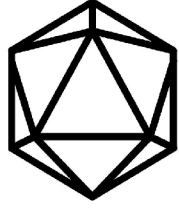
“What happened?” Mal asked, his brows drawn together, his expression serious enough that Jay’s pulse sped.

“What do you mean?” Jay asked, placing the controller down on the coffee table in front of him.

“Leo just left.”

The punch to the gut felt like a physical blow.

Guess Jay wasn't going to get that chance.



Chapter Twelve

The alarms at Land and Hearth had been tripped.

Leo had the system synced to his phone, and he got an alert the moment it happened. His heart raced with a thousand different scenarios as he zipped down the streets in the direction of his workplace.

Who would break in on Christmas fucking Eve?”

Regret pounded in time with his pulse as he zipped around turns haphazardly, determined to get to his cafe as soon as fucking possible. He'd tried to call Matt at least six times on the way over, but his business partner wasn't picking up his phone. The night with Jay had seemed so full of promise, like given the chance they might've taken steps forward. Instead, he'd bailed without a word—not his best move, but fuck. First and foremost, he needed to make sure no one had shattered the windows of the shop or set it on fire.

He'd poured his life's savings into buying in on Land and Hearth, risked everything to come here when he hadn't known

a soul, and he could be losing all of that. Nausea churned in his stomach as he gripped the steering wheel a little tighter.

Only a few streets away now.

The streetlights flashed by as he zoomed down the road, needing to be there, to see that Land and Hearth was okay with his own two eyes. That it wasn't shattered wreckage where he'd been building a home.

Leo turned the corner, and there lay Land and Hearth at the end of the block.

The cops hadn't arrived yet, but based on the triggered alarm, they would probably show soon.

He zipped up into the street parking in front of the shop, trying to discern any signs of intruders. The wide-paned glass front of the shop was intact, and the lights were off, which he supposed made sense for a break-in. They always deposited money at the end of the day, so it wasn't like they had a big safe to bust into, and most of their expensive equipment in the kitchen wasn't easily transportable, but who the hell knew what someone would've been after.

Leo launched out of his car and made his way up to the door before hesitating. If a thief had broken in, they might still be inside, and he wasn't sure if they were armed or not.

He sucked in a sharp breath and tested the door. It was open.

Leo couldn't help but peer inside and listen in, trying to catch any strain of voices.

Muffled ones carried all the way from the back, where the kitchen was, and Leo's pulse picked up. Someone was here.

Before he could duck back out, footsteps sounded, heading in his direction.

Leo tried to move fast enough, but two figures stepped from the back, and there was no way they didn't spot him standing by the glass door and peering in.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Leo?" one of the figures said, the voice strikingly familiar.

A second later, a burly frame he recognized walked into view.

"Matt?" Leo responded, his brows drawing together. His feet carried him a few paces in so the door shut behind him.

"Oh shit," Matt said, closing the distance between them. From behind him, Jasper approached, looking anywhere but at him. "Did you get the alert on your phone too? I already called the cops off—we're okay."

The words hadn't quite reached him yet, but he vaguely processed them as he tried to piece together the situation. His arms were still buzzing, his mind numb and fuzzy from the panic.

"I'm sorry," Jasper muttered, glaring at the ground like it owed him money. "I had a stupid idea that was poorly executed, and fuck, now I've ruined your Christmas Eve too."

Matt reached over to clutch Jasper's hand, threading their fingers together. "It was a sweet idea," he murmured with an affectionate grin. "Though I won't argue on the poor execution front."

Leo blinked and blinked again. "So, what were you doing breaking into our café?" he asked, his heart rate starting to calm as the reality settled in. Land and Hearth wasn't burning to the ground or vandalized. Jasper had just accidentally tripped the alarm.

"I was trying to decorate the kitchen," Jasper muttered, scratching at his nape. "Matt was going to swing in tomorrow morning to grab the pastries we're taking to his family Christmas, and I wanted to surprise him. Clearly, a stellar move on my part."

"I'm so sorry we disrupted your Christmas Eve," Matt apologized again, turning those puppydog eyes on Leo. "I hope this didn't pull you away from anything important."

In the wake of the crashing adrenaline rush, the reality sank into Leo's veins. He'd been rude as fuck, bolting out of Jay's friends' party without even saying goodbye. While part of him wanted to see if Jay still lingered there, the pall of his impending lonely holiday tomorrow had already started to settle over him. His chest sank. All the hopes for a cozy night with Jay quickly swirled down the drain.

"Shit, we did," Jasper filled in the blanks without Leo saying anything. "Hey, man. If you want to join us, we're heading

over to Roxie and Mel's to celebrate with some of the crew. You're always welcome."

Leo heaved out a sigh. As much as the offer was sweet, he was better off licking his wounds in private tonight. He'd had his heart set on a night with Jay, and he'd be a shit guest, distracted the whole time. "I'm good, guys," he murmured, not wanting to worry either of them. "It was just a quick detour."

Matt stepped up and wrapped his arms around Leo, enfolding him in a massive hug. Leo might've leaned into it a little more than normal with the way reality was crashing in on him big-time. Jasper stepped in next, offering a quick hug as well, the polar opposite of his gushy boyfriend.

"Look, you can yell at me, tell me what a bitch I am," Jasper said. "I fucking own a store—you'd think I'd know better than to trip an alarm."

"You're fine," Leo reassured him as he stepped back. "Merry Christmas, guys. I hope you have a wonderful day tomorrow."

"You too," Matt said, concern shining in his eyes that Leo wanted to shy away from.

"The invite's still open for tonight," Jasper said, fixing him with a knowing look. "We'll be up late into the night."

"Thanks," Leo murmured as he took the few steps out the door again, leaving Matt and Jasper back in the shop. The brisk air iced his cheeks, and the brittle wind traveled straight through him. He headed the few paces toward his car, checking his phone along the way. No messages.

His stomach sank.

Not like he should've expected any with how he'd left, but part of him had hoped Jay might reach out regardless. Any remaining inclination to return to the party vanished with that. Their fake dating was over, and he didn't have an excuse to keep chasing after Jay. Leo had made his desire to talk clear, so if the man wanted him, the ball was in his court. He could shoot Jay a message to explain the situation once he got home, but staring down a lonely Christmas day tomorrow, he just planned on heading to his apartment to crash out now.

Leo settled into the driver's seat of his car, starting the ignition. The drive sank into his bones like defeat. Not like he'd had glorious and warm Christmases in the past—most of the time filling the gaps with work, but after experiencing the comfort and warmth of having Jay by the side for the holidays, the loneliness sliced a bit sharper tonight.

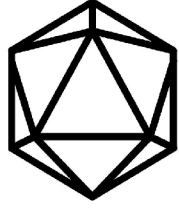
He headed down the street on the short drive to his apartment, one he'd found that was close to Land and Hearth. Tomorrow, he'd heat up the leftovers he'd brought home from the cafe earlier today and maybe do a movie marathon to distract from the ache that would bloom in his chest every time he glanced to social media to see yet another picture of a happy family he wasn't a part of.

The pit in his stomach deepened. He'd throw back a beer and crash out early. No point in waiting up on Christmas Eve for yet another disappointing holiday. No matter all the changes

he'd made in his life to get into a better place—the career and location shift—he was still alone at the end of the day.

Leo pulled into the usual spot near his apartment, and he shut off the car, bracing himself for the chill this time. It hit him just as bitterly as he stepped out of the car, the sort of ache he couldn't easily dismiss. He cut the distance with quick strides toward his apartment only to stop still when he glanced to his door.

Jay was waiting for him.



Chapter Thirteen

Jay should've worn warmer clothes.

He had no idea how long he'd be out here waiting for Leo to come home—he figured the guy would have to return eventually, but Jay didn't want to let tonight pass him by without telling Leo what he'd been holding back.

He tugged his thin-as-fuck denim jacket tighter, wishing he had more than that and a sweater to brace against the winds sweeping through the streets tonight. Leo's street wasn't busy, but the shadows drifted, and the occasional car brought the coronas of bright headlights into focus. Each one that passed by had him popping up with the hope that it was Leo. Jay had left the party a little after Leo had—Mal understood, and Jay swore to fill his best friend in on everything.

Jay leaned against the cool wall, not sure if this was romantic or a stroke of insanity. Probably the latter, but he was too cold at this point to tell.

Another car traveled down the road, but this one pulled up right into one of the open parking spots along the street.

Jay's heart sped up as he craned his neck, trying to spot who sat in the driver's seat. Watch, it was probably some nurse on a night shift and not the guy whose apartment he loitered outside.

The car door echoed with a slam, and Jay's heart stuttered as he caught sight of Leo. The man's expression was somber—so different from the way his eyes constantly crinkled in amusement when they were together, and Jay's chest tangled in knots. What if he'd gotten terrible news and Jay was just wedging himself in where he was unwanted? His palms began to sweat, and he glanced to either side to see if he could find somewhere to hide.

He couldn't.

Leo glanced in his direction, and the moment their eyes met, he froze on the spot. The man seemed to have the uncanny ability to do that to him.

“Jay?” Leo said as he closed the space between them, a hushed tone to his voice that had Jay paying attention.

“You left,” Jay said, ripping his gaze away as he speared fingers through his hair. “And if I'm overstepping, tell me to leave, but I...I'd been hoping to speak to you tonight.”

“You're here,” he said, stepping in front of Jay. Leo brought his palm up to Jay's cheek reverently, the tender motion giving Jay the bolstering he needed.

“I know we said we’d talk after the holidays, but I don’t want to wait,” Jay said, speeding ahead before he lost his nerve. “Maybe I’m crazy and imagining all of this chemistry between us, that there’s this connection I’ve never experienced before—”

“You’re not,” Leo murmured, the warmth of his hand melting Jay’s iced-over cheek and filtering all the way through to his heart. “I feel it too.”

“I never wanted you to be fake because none of this has been fake for me,” Jay admitted, forcing the words out, even with the accelerated thump, thump, thump of his heart. “I know it’s soon after a breakup, but my feelings for Dan didn’t even compare to what you summon to life in me. I’ve completely fallen, and if there’s any chance, any way you want this to be real too...well, I needed to take the leap. Because I want you, more than I’ve wanted anyone else.”

“Sweet boy,” Leo murmured, those two words filled with all the tenderness Jay was longing to hear. Leo brushed his thumb over Jay’s bottom lip. “I love you.”

Jay swallowed hard, his eyes pricking slightly with heat. “I love you too,” he murmured, barely able to believe this was real. That Leo had somehow chosen him too.

Leo dipped down and claimed his lips, the first brush sending a sinful shudder through him. Despite how cold Jay’s lips were, the heat from Leo’s mouth, his body, and the combustible way they came together soon swept over him. Jay clutched onto Leo’s shoulders tight as the man just hoisted him

up by the waist and backed him against the wall to make out like they were a pair of teenagers.

Jay surrendered to the bliss, how Leo's tongue slid in to glide against his own, and how his kisses were drugging, overwhelming him in the best way. The wall was firm against his back even as he twined his legs around Leo's hips, feeling weightless in his arms. Lust tingled through his entire body, making everything wake up as need began to overtake him. Leo's kisses grew hungrier, more demanding, and if they didn't get inside his apartment soon, Jay was tempted to just drop to his knees.

"Inside," Jay mumbled against Leo's mouth.

"Is that a request?" Leo said as he pulled back, arching a brow.

"I don't care what you do to me," Jay murmured, "but I don't want to spend Christmas arrested for public indecency."

"I can agree with that." Leo gripped Jay's legs tighter as he pulled away from the wall to carry Jay the feet toward the door. Jay held on, even though it didn't seem like Leo was struggling as he slipped his hand into his pocket and onehandedly snagged the keys. In a few quick motions, Leo got the door open, and he carried Jay inside. Jay's heart was careening out of control at the truths that had been shared between them.

Leo gently nudged Jay's legs down, and he settled onto the ground while Leo flicked the lights on. His apartment was what Jay had expected—pre-furnished and posh, what he'd

probably been used to in Chicago. However, Jay greedily drank in all the small signs of Leo that existed here, from the bookmarked medieval baking cookbook on his coffee table to the vintage absinthe posters on his wall. Before Jay could soak in any more, Leo was already closing the space between them.

Leo slid his fingers through Jay's hair to get a good grip and jerked his head up to look at him. Jay chewed on his lower lip, desire pulsing inside him at the way Leo manhandled him.

"I want to suck you off," Leo murmured, his lips mere inches away. "Is that something you'd want today?"

Jay sucked in a sharp breath, emotion stinging at the corners of his eyes. He hadn't realized how amazing it would feel for a partner to ask him something so simple, that he didn't always have to feel the need to explain himself or stop things if he was having a bad dysphoria day. "Hell yes," he murmured. "Please."

"Magic words, sweet boy," Leo said, crowding up against him until he started walking backward. After a few paces, the backs of his legs thumped against Leo's black leather couch. "Strip for me." The command in Leo's tone made him shiver, and he all but tossed off his denim jacket, following with his sweater.

The cold he'd been waiting in outside was long forgotten in the wake of the warmth of Leo's apartment and the wildfire blazing through him at the feelings they'd shared as well as the scorching look in Leo's eyes. Jay toed his sneakers off and yanked his jeans down, desperate to feel Leo on him in

whatever way possible. His heart overflowed with the comfort this man brought, and that got him hotter than ever before.

Around Leo, he could just be, and that was the best gift of all.

“Fucking gorgeous,” Leo murmured as he rested his fingertips on Jay’s chest before giving him a slight push onto the couch. Jay tumbled back and sprawled out for him, so turned on he could barely breathe.

Jay reached down to stroke over his T-dick, enjoying the sinful sensation that fluttered through him as he watched Leo lower to his knees in front of him.

“I’d say spread for me, but you’re a good little slut, aren’t you?” Leo murmured, a smirk rising to his lips.

Fuuuuck. Leo was sex on a stick any normal day, but when he got all dominant? Jay all but vibrated with need at this point.

“Yes, Daddy,” he shot back, wanting to crank up the volume. He hadn’t missed the way Leo’s eyes had flared every time he used the name.

“Goddamn,” Leo swore, bracing his big hands on Jay’s thighs to spread him open. He batted Jay’s hand away from his dick and a moment later replaced it with his mouth.

“Fuck,” Jay moaned, tipping his head back. The heat and suction on his T-dick had him reeling, the sensations pummeling him. Leo was all-in, not even hesitating as he licked along his dick, sucked it into his mouth, teased and

toyed with it. Leo tightened his grip on Jay's thighs while he took him apart at the seams, and he was pretty sure there'd be bruises—he fucking hoped.

Leo was a master with his mouth, alternating between nips and sucks and licks to see what made Jay writhe, and all Jay could do was roll along with this tide of pleasure. He played with his body like he was trying to memorize every response, and the care innate in those actions, the careful attention he paid, had Jay falling even harder.

Jay sagged against the couch, his arms splayed out as Leo devoured his dick, working him relentlessly. He normally didn't have a hard time coming this way, and Leo tortured him with such precision that Jay was already on the brink, the tingling sensation fast becoming a roar. Sweat pricked on his brow, and his breaths sawed out of him, erratic and desperate.

Leo began a strong suction that hit him in the perfect way, and he could feel his orgasm ready to slam in like a freight train.

“Oh god, I'm going to come,” Jay moaned, his fingers curling into the couch cushions beneath him. His thighs tensed up as his dick throbbed with his release. He moaned out long and loud, a guttural sound as he came and came and came, the sensation unending. Leo didn't ease up in the slightest, devouring his dick while Jay lost himself to bliss. He floated on wave after wave of the fireworks exploding through him, turning him to jelly.

He descended back into his own body, completely fucking sated, and when he looked down to see Leo's swollen lips, his spit-slicked mouth, Jay about died and went to heaven. The man's dark hair was tousled, a light smattering of scruff on his jaw, and he was so goddamn sexy that Jay couldn't stand it.

"What about you?" he murmured, his voice coming out husky. Jay bit his lip, a jolt of want flashing through him. "Come on me."

Leo arched a brow, and a sexy smirk followed. He slowly rose from his knees to tower over Jay, just the way he liked. "God, you're perfect," he said, his voice gravel and sin as he unzipped his black slacks and brought his cock out. The sight of the thick length with the perfect flared head had Jay salivating a bit, a reflex response after having it inside him.

"It's not going to take much," Leo muttered, beginning to stroke himself overtop Jay. Hell, Jay didn't care if it took five seconds or forever. He lay there boneless on the couch watching the quick motions as Leo jerked himself off. A few flecks of pre-cum splashed on his skin as a precursor, and hell, that was already hotter than he could handle.

The shuttling sounds of Leo's hand to his cock, how his brows drew together in concentration was so damn seductive. The tendons of Leo's neck stood out as he worked his cock faster, and Jay licked his lips, not sure if he wanted this more or another chance to taste Leo.

"Fuuuuck," Leo groaned out as his eyes closed and he came.

Hot cum splashed on Jay's chest, the sensation startling and sexy as fuck at the same time. Leo's head tilted back in surrender, and his hand was still around his cock, a little bit dribbling out. Jay shot forward to catch those drops on his tongue, savoring the salty bursts. The cum on his chest began to drip down, pooling in his lap, and he dipped his finger in before sucking the cum off the tip.

"You're the hottest thing I've ever seen," Leo said, his voice hoarse as he lowered down in front of Jay again. Their lips met at once, and Leo sucked Jay's tongue into his mouth, as if sharing the flavor of the cum he'd just tasted. The wetness was about to slide off his body and onto the sofa, so Jay pulled back.

Before Jay could say anything, Leo grinned. "Let me clean you up."

He reached in from the side and scooped Jay up off the couch, his arm under his knees and against his back. In one swift movement he had him up and was carrying him in a different direction.

"It's going to get on your shirt," Jay murmured, resisting the urge to crash against Leo's chest.

"Don't care," Leo said, doing it for him as he brought Jay in close. "We're getting clean together anyway." A door creaked, and a second later, the lights were flicking on in this room, revealing Leo's bathroom. His shower and tub combo was much nicer than Jay's, and if they were together, he would take ruthless advantage of that.

The realization slammed into him, and a giddy smile spread on his lips.

“What’s that about?” Leo asked, his tone wry as he helped Jay down, onto his feet.

“Just...we’re boyfriends, right?” he said, the feeling in his chest too joyful to contain as his soles settled on the cool tile.

Leo’s eyes crinkled as he offered one of those rare soft grins that wasn’t part of his charm initiative. “Yeah, we are.”

“Good,” Jay said, his heart thumping hard. “Fuck, better than good. You’re more than I could’ve ever hoped for, Leo Whitlock.”

“The same could be said of you, Jay Barlowe,” Leo said, sneaking a quick kiss to his nose before tugging off his stained Henley and dropping his slacks to the ground. “Now get in the shower. I have a boyfriend to take care of.”

Jay stepped in behind him and just leaned against his back for a moment before wrapping his arms around Leo’s middle. Despite the bravado Leo exuded, Jay hadn’t missed the signs that the man had been hurting too. That they’d both been searching for something—that they’d ended up finding in each other.

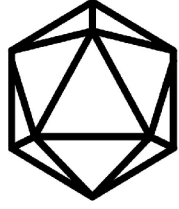
Leo was the ache in his chest when he lay down at night, the sense of fullness he’d sought out for years, the stable ground he’d been searching for.

“I love you,” Jay murmured against Leo’s back, the skin hot and soft against his lips.

“I love you too,” Leo said, placing his hands over Jay’s arms around him. “I’ve been alone for a really long time, throwing myself into one distraction after another, but you’re the first person to break through those walls. When I think of a future with you, I don’t want to miss a damn second, because you’ve filled my life with pure light, sweetheart.”

“I feel the same,” Jay responded. Leo made him feel seen in the best damn way, how he’d always dreamed of when he’d thought of a partner. He pressed a tender kiss to Leo’s back, hoping that communicated just how much he’d come to mean to him. His lips quirked. “Now get the shower on—your cum’s starting to dry on my skin.”

Leo let out a bark of a laugh. “As you wish.”



Chapter Fourteen

For the first time since Leo was a kid, he felt giddy on Christmas morning.

His arms tightened around Jay who'd snuggled against him the entire night, his body so warm and comfortable that Leo didn't want to budge.

He and Jay had showered and then cuddled in his bed, watching proper Christmas movies like Gremlins and Die Hard until they passed out. And Jay had invited him to Christmas with his parents today. Since Leo had already met them under the guise of boyfriend and they'd mentioned it to him, he leapt on the idea of spending the day with Jay and his family rather than at his apartment by his lonesome.

Leo buried his nose in the crook of Jay's neck and just took a deep inhale, all musk and cedarwood from his shampoo.

This hearthfire warmth in his chest was new, a blaze he didn't want to relinquish. He'd spent so long running from his loneliness that the ache was all that had existed. However, this

—this bliss was exactly what he'd imagined when he stared from the outside in on other people's cozy holidays and family get-togethers.

And he knew who was the cause.

He nosed in against Jay's neck again, and Jay stirred, those long lashes fluttering. The man was sexy as hell and fit against him like he belonged there.

"Don't tell me you're a morning person," Jay murmured, and Leo pressed a kiss against the side of his neck just to watch him shiver.

"Okay, I won't tell you," Leo responded, amusement welling in his chest.

"Ugh, well, I guess I can get over that if there's coffee," Jay responded, reaching down to trace his fingertips along Leo's forearms. The motion was sweet and sent Leo's heart tumbling. After years of hooking up, this casual affection was foreign, but with Jay it felt right.

"Look, I can even offer breakfast," Leo said, giving Jay a tight squeeze. Jay ground his ass against Leo's morning wood, glancing back with an impish grin. "Bad boy," Leo murmured, nipping at Jay's ear. "Not that kind of breakfast."

"Is there bacon?" Jay asked, pouting slightly. The slight bratty side that had emerged was an incredibly fun development that had Leo wanting to dive in and play.

"I do have bacon," Leo responded, unable to restrain his grin.

“At least there’ll be some meat in my mouth,” Jay grumbled, and Leo reached down to squeeze his ass, hard enough for him to yelp. Jay pushed himself upright to seated and rubbed at his bleary eyes. Leo propped himself up at the elbow, just watching him. He’d never been this in love before, but he wanted to catalog every little thing about Jay—all of it made him giddy.

“Oh, shit,” Jay said, glancing his way. “Merry Christmas.”

Those words curled around Leo’s heart and squeezed. Here in the warmth of his bedroom with this beautiful man in his bed, this was the hazy Christmas morning he’d always dreamed of. One filled with the sort of bone-deep comfort he’d been longing for.

Leo pushed up to close the distance between them and pressed a tender kiss to Jay’s lips. His heart raced fast, like they were kissing for the first time, and the electricity that surged through his veins was something he hoped would never leave. Running into Jay again in San Francisco felt a little bit like fate, and he’d cling tight to the win with all his might. Because the joy bubbling inside him was the sort worth fighting for.

When he pulled back, a grin tugged at his lips, raw, real, and everything he’d been restraining for far too long. In Jay’s eyes, he saw every hope and dream reflected back at him, shining there and bared for him to witness. His chest clenched tight as he overflowed with all that unbidden happiness pouring out of him. Fuck, it was beautiful.

Leo leaned in to press his lips against Jay's forehead. "Merry Christmas, sweet boy."

Afterword

Thank you for reading Leo and Jay's book, the final installment in the Dungeons and Dating series...but not the last in that universe. Coming next for the San Francisco crowd will be *Leather and Lattes*, more geeky found family...just a little (or a lot) kinkier.

I'm super grateful for friends who sensitivity read Jay's character, and I'm thrilled to add another trans lead to the mix in my Dungeons and Dating series. Jay and Leo surprised me with the splash of Daddy kink too, but it fit them well, and it felt right for the shift into *Leather and Lattes*, my crew over at Whipped, the kink café. It's bittersweet leaving behind the Tabletop Tavern folks—I'm going to miss the D&D chapters—but there are some amazing new things on the horizon with *Leather and Lattes*. Plus, it's one of my series, so there'll still be geek references in abundance.

You can meet the cast of *Leather and Lattes* early in these two spicy free reads: [Play Night](#) and [Play Night 2](#)

If you enjoyed the book, leave a review. Kind words are what us authors survive on, and I can tell you personally I treasure each and every one.

Want to keep up with my latest books? Either sign up for my newsletter or hop on over to my reader group, McIntyre's Mayhem!

Also By

Coming Next:

Immersion Play (Leather and Lattes #1)

One bratty boy searching for somewhere to call home, one damaged Daddy Dom looking to escape his grief, and one kinky found family ready to help them both heal.

Micah's starting over. He left his old life in the middle of the night and showed up in San Francisco on a job tip from a friend. However, when Meg hires him at Whipped, he not only enters a new city but also a whole new world with this cozy crew of kinksters. And one man continues to catch his attention again and again.

Parker doesn't do relationships. After his mom died and his father became a shell of himself, he swore never to let anyone wreck him like that. Except Micah's gotten under his skin. The hot new barista at Whipped isn't as vanilla as they all thought, and he's the brattiest boy that Parker could've ever dreamed of playing with. The connection between them? Incendiary.

However, the deeper their relationship grows, the more Micah's realizing he can't just be casual with Parker—not anymore. The man's made a mark on his soul, inspired dreams Micah had never even thought to reach for. But if Parker isn't

willing to bend his rules to risk his heart, the two of them are definitely going to break.

Enter Whipped, a unique cafe that caters to coffee and kink addicts alike...

Also By

Want a low angst, high heat series featuring geeky found family, bears, and blue collar workers? Start the Hot Under the Collar series today with [Sweat Connection!](#)

One disaster bi single dad. One sexy plumber on a house call. One hot-as-hell romance....

Rhys

If I was a hot mess before becoming a single dad, my life's pretty much an on-fire garbage can now.

Okay, maybe that's a tad melodramatic—my bestie/baby momma/ex-girlfriend is still awesome, currently in the throuple of her dreams. And my kiddo Sammy's amazing, albeit exhausting. I'm the one who's too intense and rambling, too obsessed with random trivia, too liable to set dinner on

fire. Essentially, too much for any relationship.

However, when a hottie plumber drops by to fix our toilet—thanks, Sammy—and gives me his number? My luck might just be turning around.

Cole

After my dad moved to a retirement community, he left me with the big, old house I grew up in and a whole lot of loneliness.

I thought by now I'd be settled down, but no one's looking for the guy who likes long hikes with his dog, stargazing, and fixing shit around the house. They want fun, entertaining, flashy—not me.

Except when I give Rhys my private line for an emergency house call, I show up for the job to discover it's a date. It seems like I might've met the one man on earth who's just as interested as I am—if only we can find the guts to admit it.

Also By

Want hurt/comfort romances featuring a geeky, queer found family? Read across the rainbow with the Dungeons and Dating series today!

Strength Check (Dungeons and Dating #1):

Roller derby, board games, and love collide in this roommates to lovers romance.

Wisdom Check (Dungeons and Dating #2):

Julian's boss is newly single, ridiculously hot, and looking his way. He's so screwed.

Intelligence Check (Dungeons and Dating #3):

Mason gives people too many chances, Hunter gives too few, but are they willing to take a chance on each other?

Constitution Check (Dungeons and Dating #4):

One night was all Kelly promised. One night was all Tabby offered. And yet one night wasn't nearly enough...

Dexterity Check (Dungeons and Dating #5):

Eli's sworn off irresponsible flirts, and Arjun's one of the worst—aggravating, provoking, and everything Eli can't resist.

Charisma Check (Dungeons and Dating #6):

Never fall for the straight guy—Jasper knows better. At least until his straight guy crush starts crushing back...

About the Author

Katherine McIntyre is a feisty chick with a big attitude despite her short stature. She writes stories featuring snarky women, ragtag crews, and men with bad attitudes—high chance for a passionate speech thrown into the mix. As an eternal geek and tomboy who's always stepped to her own beat, she's made it her mission to write stories that represent the broad spectrum of people out there. Easily distracted by cats and sugar.