

# LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



*Don't Read in the Closet 2014*

## FIVE DATES

Amy Jo Cousins

## **Table of Contents**

Love’s Landscapes..... 3

Five Dates – Information ..... 5

Dedication ..... 6

Acknowledgements..... 7

Five Dates ..... 8

Chapter One ..... 9

Chapter Two..... 17

Chapter Three..... 31

Chapter Four ..... 40

Chapter Five..... 52

Chapter Six..... 63

Author Bio ..... 74

# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## FIVE DATES

**By Amy Jo Cousins**

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

Five Dates, Copyright © 2014 Amy Jo Cousins

Cover Design by Goodreads M/M Romance Group

Photographs from Public Domain Pictures.net

[Sunset](#); [Sunset on the beach](#); [Smooth sunset](#);

[Morning mist background 6](#);

[Blue sunset and boat](#); [Sunset](#); [Sunset 15](#)

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

# FIVE DATES

By Amy Jo Cousins

## Photo Description

A good-looking, young blond man leans back against exposed pipework. He is shirtless and his jeans look a little old-fashioned with their light wash. His arms are huge and he sports a six-pack, although he's already looking the tiniest bit soft around the waistline. As if that six-pack might not quite be there in ten years...

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I lost a bet with my sister. I was so sure the Broncos would win. Now it is time for me to pay up. She has decided I need a man in my life. She submitted a profile for me at Guys4Guys.com and set up five dates. I haven't been on five dates in the past five years. And if the thought of five first dates isn't scary enough, check out the photo she put in my profile.*

*Yes, that hot, young, guy really is me... thirteen years ago! To be twenty-two again. I miss my thirty-two-inch waist and six-pack.*

*\* No BDSM please. \* Humor a plus. \* HEA a must.*

*Sincerely,*

*Susan A*

## Story Info

**Genre:** contemporary

**Tags:** age gap, blind dates, humorous, slow burn/UST

**Word Count:** 25,278

*Dedication*

To all of the amazing M/M romance authors who have inspired my love for this genre, and to Kaje Harper, whose *Into Deep Waters* moved me and led me to the Goodreads M/M Romance group's Don't Read in the Closet events.

*Acknowledgements*

Thank you, Susan A, for writing a terrific story prompt that sparked all kinds of ideas in my brain! I'm so grateful your idea gave me the chance to get to know these guys. And this story would be a mess, a lumbering hodgepodge of too many f-bombs and not enough biting, without the best bunch of betas and CPs an author could have. Thank you Piper, Liz, Tamsen, Annabeth, and Susan! You made it better.

**FIVE DATES**  
**By Amy Jo Cousins**



## Chapter One

The minute the punt returner crossed the thick white line into the end zone after a ninety-seven-yard run, Devin's phone lit up. The twisty strains of *Evil Woman* blared in the suddenly silent room as he thumbed the off button on the remote control.

Damn it.

He flopped back on the couch and draped an arm over his face, as if he could block out Lucy by limiting his sight. Bringing the phone to his ear, he started groaning even before he accepted her call. "I miss John Elway."

"Dude, you're crazy. Peyton is the bomb." His sister never wasted an ounce of sympathy on him when he lost a bet with her.

"Peyton Manning sucks."

"Hey, the Broncos won. You're the dummy who gave me points on the line."

"That's why I miss Elway. He would've gotten me the extra TD I needed to win even with points."

"Suck it up, loser."

"*You* suck." A thump rattled his floorboards. "Stop it."

The floorboards shook again as something slammed into them.

"Stop what?"

"Stop throwing your football at the ceiling. I hate you." Most of the time he loved living above his sister in the two-flat they shared. It made helping out with his nephew a breeze and when he wanted some privacy, or just to watch the Sunday football games in his underwear, he had plenty of space to himself.

*Thump.*

Sometimes, though, he wanted to move to the other side of town. To the suburbs. Back home to Colorado even, if it would get him away from her when she was preparing to rub his nose in a loss.

"You don't even know what I'm gonna make you do."

"I know it's gonna suck. Or be embarrassing. Or it's gonna suck *and* be embarrassing." Sometimes Devin wondered what those first three years of his

life must have been like. He didn't remember anything from that far back, but he imagined the time before his baby sister was born as taking place in a rosy glow of peacefulness and calm.

The pre-Lucy years must have been *fantastic*.

"That's not nice. Would I do that to my big brother?"

Aw, shit. He could hear it in her syrupy sweet voice, the giggles barely kept on lockdown.

This was going to be bad.

Epically bad.

"You were adopted." He held the phone further away from his head as her cackling laugh exploded in his ear. "We tried to sell you to some other family but no one wanted you. Also, why do I keep making bets with you? I never win."

"Beats me, dork. I wouldn't."

He didn't have anyone to blame but himself. He knew better. Their bets, whether they were on football or the next election or on what year the local supermarket chain was established, inevitably ended up with him as the loser. But he couldn't stop himself. His faith in the ultimate fairness of the universe meant he was convinced every time that it was finally his turn to win.

Not yet it wasn't.

*Damn it, Peyton Manning. You couldn't score one more fucking touchdown? Even a field goal or a safety would've done it, for crying out loud.*

Devin heaved a sigh and prepared to suck it up. "So, what's my forfeit, brat?"

"I need a little prep time. Are you coming down for dinner later?"

"Nah. I gotta go out."

"Hot date?"

As if. Between work and babysitting and trying to hit the gym, he hadn't had a decent date in... god, he didn't want to count how many years. Nearly anonymous hookups for sex? No problem. An actual *date*, with conversation and wondering about whether or not you were going to see that person again? Ha. No. "Slept in. I'll hit the gym, be home late."

"Tomorrow then. We'll do pizza. And I'll tell you all about it."

He groaned loudly enough to drown out Lucy's laugh as he ended the call. When the thunk of the football hit his floor again, he swung his legs off the long leather couch and drummed his heels on the floor. He imagined his sister's laughter rising through the heating grate and following him out of the living room as he got up to get dressed.

Four miles on the treadmill and an hour with free weights left his endorphins high and his biceps, triceps, and delts pleasantly loose. The soreness would come tomorrow, just in time to make him even more uncomfortable while Lucy detailed the lurid ways in which she planned to make him pay for his losing bet. Her last best idea had been for him to anchor the school play as the save-the-day superhero.

Three nights onstage in nothing but a spandex jumpsuit and a modified Lucha Libre wrestling mask, surrounded by nine year olds singing off key Christmas carols—scratch that, holiday songs—should have cured him of any lingering fondness for making bets with Lucy. He'd held out for a good six weeks since the last one.

If only he'd kept up that streak of wise decision making.

In the locker room, he stripped out of his sweaty workout clothes and pulled on a clean pair of sweats and a hoodie, feeling the eyes of another Sunday night regular roaming his naked ass. He considered it, the song and dance of glances, some casual conversation, the take-it-or-leave-it offer of a hookup, but he couldn't work up any enthusiasm for the idea. Slinging his gym bag over his shoulder, he nodded at the ripped lifter as he left and grinned at the shrug and wink he got in return.

*Next time, maybe.*

If he was still showing his face in public after whatever Luce had planned for him, that is.

\*\*\*\*

“Jesus. Holy—”

“Yeah.” Lucy's sigh was a symphony.

Devin tore his eyes away from the photo. He'd already negotiated Lucy down from ten dates with guys she pulled off the Internet—from dating websites and not from Grindr, thank god, which, please Jesus, she would never learn about—to five torture sessions. He meant dates. Sure he did. But he still had a funky feeling about the whole thing.

Something was off.

“*This guy* wants to go out with me?” Hey, he didn’t lack confidence, yeah? He might not have the no-body-fat six-pack of his youth, but he was big, nicely muscled from the lifting, and good-looking enough to pull at the nightclubs when he wanted to get laid.

But this kid.

Holy shit.

Maybe, *maybe*, he was twenty-five. Face like a fucking angel, midnight hair falling in his eyes, which were huge and dark and just a little bit wounded. Or wicked. Or both. Devin didn’t normally go for the über-twinks. Delicate and small weren’t his thing. He appreciated a man who could push back, give it as good as he got, not someone he had to worry about breaking in half.

But something about this guy lit him up like a sparkler, crackling and suddenly bright. The photo was lit like an art shot and Devin was jealous of the photographer for getting to stare at this guy live and in person.

“He’ll meet you at seven o’clock on Thursday at Iberico.” That was a bribe. Lucy knew he loved the tapas bar on LaSalle and she was clearly easing him into this insanity by offering up *jamón ibérico*, *queso manchego*, and the best damn olives this side of the Atlantic.

“Wait. Seriously. Is this guy, like, a hooker or something?”

“What the hell?”

“I’m just saying, guys like *that* don’t go out with guys like me. Unless he thinks I’m loaded or something.”

Lucy’s eyes flickered away from his face. “No! I wouldn’t lie about that.”

He caught the treasonous little word.

“That. You wouldn’t lie about *that*.” A strawberry-red flush crept over her cheeks. They were damned by their fair complexions, the both of them, to impossible-to-hide blushes. “So what *did* you lie about?”

“I, um, may have used an older picture of you when I set up your profile.”

He closed his eyes and counted to ten.

“How old, Luce?”

“Don’t be mad.”

Oh. Shit.

“How. Old.”

He pressed his lips together and waited. Lucy glared at him, mutinous, but if there was one thing he knew about his sister it was that she couldn't stand a conversational lull. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut and she wouldn't be able to resist—

“All right! I used that picture of you I took at the lake.”

He shook his head. What picture?

Lucy lifted her brows and stared at him as if he were an idiot.

Picture she'd taken at the lake? They'd spent a lot of time with Rowan on the Lake Michigan beaches over the last few years, but he couldn't remember any picture of himself alone that his sister could be referencing.

“Not this lake. The other one.” His sister grimaced and he could see the beginnings of regret in her pained smile.

Fuck. No.

They didn't talk about that lake any more. The summers spent at the cabin on the lake high in the mountains all throughout their childhood. Running wild in the woods, catching fish off the dock, the whirl of the Milky Way overhead after dark so bright it felt as if the sun never went down.

They'd lost all that when they left home, she and he. Well, maybe she could have gone back, even after the scandal of winding up pregnant at eighteen. But after what he'd done, he never could.

The easiest choice he'd ever made, deciding to turn his parents' anger away from his baby sister. She'd been so silent and cowed, sitting there on the couch, staring down at her lap, hands in a knot, hair curtaining her face. He could see the wetness on her fists and knew she was crying silently as their parents stood over her and raged about sin and sluts and the end of her college plans. He'd known she hadn't expected him to be able to do anything to save her, had only asked him to come with her to tell their parents because she hoped he'd pick up her shattered pieces when they were done and try to put her back together again.

But he couldn't stand it, watching them berate his bright, shiny sister and she was small and shuddering and nearly broken.

“I'm gay.”

In retrospect, the fact that he'd had to repeat himself six or seven times before his mom and dad stopped shouting long enough to hear him was mildly entertaining.

At the time, it had felt more like standing in the top of a tall, tall tree and chopping away at the trunk beneath him until he started to fall.

Lucy's out of wedlock pregnancy by a man whose name she refused to give was small potatoes compared to their son coming out as gay.

Devin realized he was holding his breath and let it out with a *whoosh*, shaking his head and rolling his shoulders to release the instant tension that hit him whenever he thought of their parents. Anger had mellowed into a general apathy and coldness after ten years, but little things could still bring him back in an instant to that afternoon of anger and fear and an overwhelming protectiveness. All of which had been followed swiftly by panic and nausea when he realized that he was totally responsible for the eighteen-year-old pregnant girl who helped him pack up his car with their combined belongings.

He might not have been as intimidating then as he could pull off now, but he'd been plenty big enough to stand guard at the door of his sister's room while she'd packed up her clothes.

That was the last summer they'd spent time at the mountain lake. He'd been halfway through his master's program for architecture and he knew Lucy still felt guilt about the fact that he'd had to quit before finishing to get a job as a draftsman, supporting the two of them during her rocky pregnancy.

He'd never regretted it for a minute.

That last summer though... that had been magical. He'd brought his boyfriend at the time to stay, although they'd kept everything on the down low, and only Lucy had been aware enough to see through their façade. Hours each day spent stripping down in high mountain meadows after sweaty hikes or on the dock before refreshing jumps in the lake, and no one had noticed how frequently his and Tommy's eyes fell on each other's naked skin. No one except Lucy.

She'd been obsessed with her camera that summer, taking hundreds of pictures a day and sorting through them all night long, discarding anything less than perfect. The one she'd caught of him, wearing only his jeans, leaning back on his elbows, the six-pack he'd been so proud of on display, with glowing gold skin and hair long enough to fall onto his forehead in lazy curls.

He'd been smiling up at Tommy, thinking about the hours they'd managed alone the day before on a drive into town for groceries, and Lucy had caught the hint of heat in his eyes.

The perfect summer photo. The perfect summer boy.

Thirteen years ago.

"You put that on..."

"Guys4Guys.com."

He curled forward until his forehead hit the kitchen table.

"I can't go."

"Of course you can."

"No. I can't. Do you have any idea how humiliating this is going to be?"

"What? You're still a fox. He's gonna love you. Besides, this is just your warm-up date."

"What?"

"Well, duh. This kid's a baby. Plus, a guy that good-looking and single has got to have something wrong with him, yeah? Probably an airhead or a stalker. But you need the practice and maybe you'll get some action out of it."

"Luce. He's not gonna... kiss me." He swallowed the word he'd almost said and shot a glance at Rowan, who'd slid in earbuds and pulled out his homework as soon as the pizza was boxed up and shoved in the fridge. "He's not going to stay long enough to eat dinner. That guy'll be out the door in ten seconds flat once he sees me."

"Oh, shut up. He will not. He seems really nice in his emails."

"You've been emailing him? About what?"

"Relax. I just set up the date after he liked your photo."

Devin groaned and banged his head on the table. "I'm not going."

"You're going to stand him up? Leave poor Jay sitting alone at the bar, by himself, for hours, feeling all rejected and shitty because his date didn't show?"

Now the rock star angel had a name.

*Jay.*

He tilted his head to skewer his sister with a glare as she reached over to clear his plate. "A guy like that won't be alone for long."

"You keep saying that. A guy like what?"

The word felt awkward in his mouth. "Beautiful."

Lucy's eyes softened. She stepped close and laid her small hand on the back of his neck and squeezed. "Go. Tell him your crazy sister set you up. Maybe it'll be fun."

"It's not going to be fun. It's going to be the worst date in the history of bad dates."

His baby sister ruffled his hair on her way out the door, leaving him at the kitchen table with her son, the tinny strains of some hip-hop song squeaking out of the boy's earbuds as he scribbled in a spiral notebook.

As always, Lucy waited until she was at a safe remove before delivering the killer blow.

"By the way, it doesn't count as a date for the bet unless you get a goodnight kiss."

There was always a catch.

\*\*\*\*



## Chapter Two

The tapas restaurant was slammed. Devin half-stood half-sat, the edge of the hardwood barstool barely under his ass, and protected the free seat next to him with his puffy, down coat and dirty looks at anyone who tried to claim it. Waves of sound rolled over him, conversations competing with the crash of dirty plates into bus tubs and the shouts of servers weaving their way through the crowd, trays held high, *Heads up! Coming through!*

He wrapped his hand around the beer he'd ordered, too uncomfortable to hold seats at the bar without buying something, and made himself stop rubbing obsessively at the corner of the label where it peeled up. His stomach flipped every time the glass door at the front of the room swung open.

Arriving twenty minutes early, to make sure that he got there before Jay had sounded like a great strategy when he was standing in front of his closet, trying to figure out what the hell to wear on a first date. Nothing sounded worse than walking in the door to a restaurant and scanning the room, trying to pick out a face he'd only seen in one photo.

Now the waiting was fucking killing him.

He probably ought to turn his head, let Jay find *him* when he arrived. But he was depressingly afraid that that would never happen. That Jay would look around, never connect him with the date he hoped to meet, and simply leave.

Odds were good the guy would leave as soon as Devin introduced himself anyway, but at least he'd get a minute or two to see if someone could really be that magnetic in person. Maybe it was just a *really* good camera lens...

The glass door swung open, Devin's head swiveled like it was tied by a damn string to the doorknob, and, swear to god, there was a fucking lull in the wall of sound as Jay walked in.

Taller than he'd looked in the photo. Not too far under Devin's own five foot eleven. But just as slim and even more beautiful. His black hair swooped up in what was damn near a pompadour and that, combined with maybe a tiny hint of guyliner, made him look like a rock star. Skinny dark jeans and a white V-neck T-shirt under a leather jacket. Motorcycle boots halfway up his calves. His skin was darker than most Chicagoans at the beginning of summer, rich and smooth, as if he was Latino maybe, or Middle Eastern. High cheekbones and a full mouth. A woman near the door, shrugging into her coat, almost elbowed

Devin's date and the young guy's grin, as he blocked her arm with an open palm and accepted her apologetic turn, was devastating even halfway across the room.

What would it feel like to have that smile turned on him up close?

Devin shivered and his cock woke up in his jeans.

The younger man pushed back his hair, sparkling a little with melting snowflakes, and scanned the room.

Devin held his breath.

*Wonder if he'll recognize me?*

The blow to the ego when his date's eyes skipped right past him without hesitating was enough to bring heat to his face, but when the kid's gaze traveled back across him, Devin managed to catch his eye.

He pointed at the open chair and half-pulled his coat off its back, raising his eyebrows. *Want it?*

The smile he got was brilliant.

Yup. That smile was a deadly. Devin's cheeks grew hot.

Jay made his way to the bar, sliding the barest inch of his ass onto the edge of the seat and sharing that killer smile with Devin, another casual blow to the heart when he saw it wasn't any different than the smile Jay had given the girl who'd elbowed him at the entrance.

"Thanks. I'm meeting a date, but I definitely need a drink first."

"No problem." Devin leaned over the counter until he caught the bartender's eye and lifted his chin. The woman nodded at him and held up a finger. His stomach fluttered as he eased back into his seat and angled himself toward the man at his side. Jay was unwrapping a skinny scarf that was looped around his neck and the swish of fabric through the air carried his scent to Devin, new leather and vanilla. Devin wanted to bury his nose against the delicate skin under his ear and breathe deep. He cleared his throat. "Bartender'll be here in a moment."

Another grin. "Thanks. Again. Dutch courage and all that."

He couldn't help torturing himself by asking. "Hot date?"

"God, I hope so. You never know with the online stuff, right? Red sangria, please." He smiled at the bartender. God, Jay smiled at everyone and it was like

white lightning up Devin's spine every time. "Thanks, hon." He turned toward Devin, looking past his shoulder at the front entrance, eyes bright and eager. "It's stupid to be this excited, I know. But my last boyfriend... well—" The light dimmed in those eyes for a moment. "—he made me feel pretty shitty. No more daddy-types for me, thank you. But a fun guy, my age, who makes me feel good? Sign. Me. Up."

God, he was sweet too. *Luce, I'm gonna kill you for making me wreck this kid's fantasy.* The happy chatter hadn't stopped.

"Sorry, that's really TMI, huh? You're probably all, *will Junior here ever stop talking about his date?* Shutting up now. I'm gonna watch the door. God, I hope this guy looks like his picture."

Junior. That made him Senior, he guessed. Ouch.

Devin lifted his beer bottle to his lips and took a swig. That was a conversational opening if he ever heard one—*Let me tell you about this crazy thing my sister did, ha ha*—but he didn't want to take it. He wasn't going to out and out lie, but he wished he could pretend for a few minutes more that when he told this guy who he was, this would be anything except a disaster.

"I hope I don't get stood up. That would suck."

"No way. Someone would have to be pretty dumb to stand you up," he said roughly and looked down at his hands when Jay's dark eyes met his. Their wrists rested close together on the bar rail, his skin pre-summer pasty next to the richer brown of Jay's hand.

When he risked a glance out of the corner of his eye, the sight of a blush staining Jay's cheeks made Devin bite his lip. He inhaled and tried to keep it from becoming a gasp. Was that because of his comment?

The surge of heat pushing from his balls, trying to reach out through the front of his jeans to rub his dick against this beautiful boy next to him, was born in the tiny grain of hope that sparked in his belly at the sight of that blush.

"So, you waiting for someone too?"

Fire extinguished.

Well, there you go. Moment of truth. The sixty seconds of fantasizing were all he was going to get. Devin settled further back in his seat. Might as well get comfortable. Odds on he'd be sitting at the bar by himself to finish off his beer and head home. "Yeah. You, actually."

Jay gifted him with another smile, probably the last one, and rolled his eyes at what he no doubt took as a cheesy compliment. "That's sweet."

"Yeah, no. You're Jay. I'm Devin Hollister." Embarrassment flared higher in his cheeks, his skin so hot it probably looked like his face was on fire. Jay was staring at him blankly. "Your date?"

Narrowed eyes locked on Devin's, pinning him in place like a bug to a mat, Jay dug in his pocket and pulled out his cell phone. The sweetness drained out of him like water swirling down a toilet bowl. Five seconds of finger tapping and the clearly less-than-pleased walking wet dream thrust his phone screen-first at Devin.

He'd pulled up the picture Lucy had posted and looked as if he wanted to beat Devin over the head with it until he was bleeding out his ears.

"Seriously, dude?" The kid's scorn dripped off his words like acid, as if Devin had flipped a switch with his confession. He didn't look surprised though. Just angry and resigned. As if his date's turning out to be a liar was merely confirmation for this kid that life was built to kick him in the teeth.

Devin stared at his own photo and winced. Fuck. Twenty-two-year-old him glowed with the youth and sparkle of a guy who hadn't yet been tarnished by anything more serious than never placing higher than second in his cross country races. There wasn't an ounce of body fat on his golden torso and his stomach fucking *rippled*.

Had he really had an eight-pack? Devin rubbed his stomach where a queasy ache had set in and consoled himself with the fact that his belly was still pretty much flat. But he'd never be ripped like that again. Grown-ups with jobs and kid sisters and nephews to support didn't have time to maintain that kind of thing.

"I'm *really* sorry. I can't apologize enough for this. Seriously." He shoved his hands in his pockets and hunched his shoulders. "It's a funny story actually. I lost a bet to my sister and she's the one..." Yeah, sex god man didn't look as if he gave a goddamn about Devin's sister.

Glass could have shattered from the cold in Jay's voice. Devin elbowed his beer further away, although he desperately wanted to chug his drink. "Listen, daddy, you do *not* want to tell me that not only did you troll me with a photo from, what, fifteen years ago, but that this whole mess of bullshit is because you lost a *bet*."

He didn't know if being called "daddy" was supposed to be an insult or a sort of compliment at this point. Mostly he screwed other guys from the gym. Or *at* the gym. He had no idea. "Please, let me buy you dinner at least."

Jay's scoff was so loud heads turned. "No way."

*You used to be fucking charming, asshole. Try harder.* Devin dug deep for his sense of the ridiculous and hit the jackpot when he was able to laugh at himself and mean it, his smile making his cheeks ache. "C'mon. You'll have one hell of a story at least, right?"

"I said *no*. What part of no do you not understand?" Color flew high in Jay's cheeks and the tips of his fingers where he was gripping the edge of the bar were white.

Devin flinched and backed up a step, hands spread at his shoulders. "You're absolutely right. It was just an offer, to make up for screwing with you. Totally your call."

The younger man closed his eyes for a moment and inhaled slowly. Exhaled. When he looked at Devin again, he'd found a way to paint cheerful on his face again, but the smile didn't reach his eyes.

"I'm going to order all of the really expensive shit, you know." Jay sounded like he was reaching for self-assurance and Devin didn't believe him for a minute. "And a *lot* of drinks."

"It's on me. Anything you want." Damn. He and Luce had stepped so far wrong with this one he wanted to crawl on his hands and knees out the door, just to make sure everyone in the room knew what a shit he was. He owed this kid more than a meal and some drinks to make up for whatever bad feelings they'd triggered here.

"Okay. But this isn't a damn date." Jay blinked hard, eyes bright. "Jesus. This is humiliating."

"Because you're out with me?" Ouch. That stung.

Jay waited a moment and then sighed heavily, like he was thinking about letting that stand. Then he sighed. "No. Because I went on and on to you about how excited I was. Shit. And because I got conned. By a *girl*."

Devin took that opportunity to step away and tell the host stand that his guest had arrived. They were eating early enough to avoid the inevitable wait for a table that would kick in by eight p.m., and a hostess walked them to a

table in the big room with cases of Spanish painted dishware lining the wall across from another long bar. Long rows of tables, easily pushed together or separated to seat groups of any size, crossed the room in parallel stripes. White light flashed in Devin's face as he sat down. He looked up to see Jay lowering his phone, already swiping away on it. The younger man looked up and scowled at him. Jay seemed to have settled on crankiness as his comfort zone, which was totally okay with Devin, who figured he'd have been more than just cranky in Jay's place. "I wouldn't normally take out my cell phone on a date, you know. But I want Toby to have your picture, in case you're a serial killer and drug my food. Plus, this isn't—"

"Got it." His own phone had buzzed in his pocket on the walk to the table. Devin figured the same leeway applied to him and pulled out his own phone for a quick glance. Rowan's nightly homework emergency. Fourth grade math was kicking all three of their asses, which was pissing Devin off because he used math for a living as a draftsman. But the way they taught it to the kids today, he couldn't make head or tails of his nephew's homework some nights.

He sent a best guess suggestion and apologized as he put his phone away.

"Homework emergency. Sorry."

Jay's head reared back so far it looked like it hurt. "You're an *actual* daddy? Aw, hell no. I don't do that."

"No!" For a moment, he thought Jay might actually get up and leave, his hands braced on the arms of his chair. Devin scrambled to explain. "I mean, I help my sister with her kid, a lot. But at the end of the day, I go home alone. By myself. To my own place." No matter how he said it, he sounded pathetic.

"God, okay. Okay."

"Not your thing, huh?" Devin said, foolishly wistful, because he already knew that he wasn't anything this kid wanted.

For the first time since he'd met Jay, the younger man's cheeks pinked up and he looked away, pretending to eyeball the dishes being delivered to the table next to them. "Something like that. What do you think those little meatball things are?"

Interesting.

"Albondigas." At Jay's blank look, Devin explained with a smile, "Little meatball things. Have you had tapas before?"

Jay shook his head and Devin's grin grew. "You're gonna love it. It's great. Everything's tiny plates, so we get to order a ton of stuff." He leaned forward and tilted his menu so they could both see it, pointing to the different sections. "There's cold and hot tapas and then other stuff, like paella, but I usually skip that because if you share a bunch of tapas, it's more fun. And they have specials, like *conejo*—that's rabbit—and *pincho de gambas*—a shrimp skewer. Those are usually really good, too. But we definitely have to get *queso manchego*, *jamón ibérico*, *aceitunas*, and *tortilla*."

Devin trailed to a stop as he realized that he'd just spewed a shitload of geeked out Spanish food lingo on someone who probably didn't give a shit.

But Jay was smiling at him, a small smile, but he might as well have stood on Devin's chest for all he could catch his breath at the sight.

"It's kinda cute how excited you get about this food. Makes me feel better about before."

"Cute?"

"Don't get any ideas. This is so not a date right now. But you can tell me more about whatever the hell it was that you said we should order."

Devin grabbed the edge of the table. Hard. *Not a date right now*. If that meant he had any chance at all with Jay... He tried to slow his mouth down and talk about his favorite tapas, the sharp creamy cheese, the cured ham sliced so thin it folded on itself like ribbon, the garlicky olives and the cold egg and potato pie of *tortilla*, but the server showed up halfway through his recitation.

When he nodded at Jay to order first, his not-a-date shook his head and waved at him. "Go wild, Tapas Man. This is clearly your thing."

Then he shrugged out of his leather jacket, threading his scarf into one sleeve before hanging it over the back of his chair with care.

"Tight."

After a moment, Devin blinked. Both Jay and the server were looking at him curiously as he pulled his brain back from the total wreck it had slammed into at the sight of Jay's tight, white T-shirt. The shirt was a plain V-neck, but he'd somehow gotten tangled up in the way it glowed against Jay's brown skin. In the etched silver bead on a rawhide cord that sat cupped in the hollow at the base of his throat. In trying to decide if he could actually see Jay's nipples through the fabric or if that was wishful thinking.

Shit. He'd said that out loud.

"Tight... um, call. Tough call. Hard to decide." *Please shut up, you idiot.*  
"Right. Ordering now."

The look Jay leveled at him, leaning back in his seat, one arm hooked over the chair back, wasn't exactly a smirk... but it was close. And if he didn't know spreading his legs until his booted foot nudged against Devin's below the table was a helluva turn-on, Devin would suck his own dick. Not that he could. But Jay obviously wasn't above making him want to try.

Jay waited until the server left and then lifted his chin at Devin. "So, tell me about this sister of yours."

"She's awesome. Except when she is evil." Siblings. Can't live with 'em, can't boil them and eat them when they're born. "We tend to bet on things. Don't look at me like that." Devin blew air out through pursed lips. "As if it would take a fucking bet for me to want to go out with a guy like you. Which we've already determined isn't on the menu. I should be so lucky." The compliment seemed to soothe Jay, whose brows had tugged together at the mention of that bet. "So we had a bet on the Broncos game."

"And you lost."

"I always lose."

"Always?"

Yeah, this part didn't make him look too bright. "It isn't possible that she can win every time. It isn't," he insisted.

"And yet here you are." Jay played with the bead on his necklace with one hand. Devin dragged his gaze back up to Jay's face when he kept talking. "I'm still waiting to hear how going out with me is what you have to do because you *lost*. I'm not usually a consolation prize. Feel free to make this flattering."

Devin got a brief reprieve when the server, a distractingly attractive Spanish guy who he and Jay both checked out before catching each other's eye and grinning, delivered the first of their cold tapas. He took a moment to point out that the white ovoids in the dish of olives were actually brined garlic cloves—*not that it matters, might as well chow down like you're heading into battle with Dracula*—before deciding he had nothing to lose with the full-on, strip himself bare and let the embarrassment rain on down, detailed list of forfeits paid to Lucy's devilish sense of humor.



“Should I start with the first time she made me streak the church picnic back home in Colorado? Or my most recent triumphant run as a lycra-clad superhero anchoring the elementary school holiday play?” He decided every time Jay laughed out loud counted as a win and set himself the goal of running up his point total until the whole night was a lock. Jay was gonna go home and tell his friends about the most charming fucking not-a-date he'd ever been on.

It turned out that Jay was a terrific listener, reacting dramatically to every story. His shell of crankiness cracked and finally fell away completely as he listened, clapping his hand over his mouth with big eyes at the really humiliating moments and giving good “Awww!” at the sweet ones.

Devin was halfway to being in love by the time the flan was served.

Jay didn't really care for any of the three flan flavors, but he liked breaking the crunchy caramelized sugar with his spoon. He poked at each ramekin in turn while Devin ate the custard he exposed. “Okay, okay. You win. I'm not mad at you,” he said, brushing his fingertips across the back of Devin's hand in passing. He might as well have unzipped Devin's pants and squeezed his dick, as every muscle in Devin's back froze while Jay kept chattering on as if fireworks weren't shooting off across the table from him. “I'm curious though. Lucy called this your warm-up date. Why's that?”

“I think she thought this would be a no-pressure date.” Jay tilted his head and raised his eyebrows. “Because you're... you. And I'm me. She thought if she set me up first with someone who was clearly not gonna happen, maybe I'd relax about it.”

“Well, that's kind of... thoughtless.”

“Nah, she didn't mean it like that. She just wants me to have a life that doesn't revolve around her and Rowan.”

“Cool name for a kid.” Jay opened his mouth for a moment, then shook his head and closed it. Devin watched, waiting to see if his date would change his mind and say whatever it was that he'd cut himself off from. But it looked like he was out of luck, because after another minute, Jay simply said, “Well, at least you've got one date crossed off the list, right?”

“Yeah, um, no. This still sucks because it's not gonna count. As a date.”

“What do you mean?”

“The deal is, I have to go on five dates. But they don't count as dates unless I, um,”—shit, this was awkward—“get a kiss.”

Silence.

Jay's eyebrow migrated north and got lost somewhere behind his hairline. "Oh, hell no." He sputtered for a second, which was funny, because Devin had expected more of a cool laugh and a *sucks to be you, dude*. "You... you... ate all that garlic!"

*You ate all that garlic was not no fucking way.*

He wasn't under any illusions here. He had exactly zero chance with this guy for anything real. But maybe... just maybe... a kiss wasn't totally out of the question. He'd caught the glances Jay snuck at him, at his arms and his chest, thick and broad, when he thought Devin wasn't looking. However irritated Jay might be to have been tricked into this date by an old photo, he wasn't totally turned off by thirty-five-year-old Devin.

And Devin would work it like a rent boy to get one kiss from Jay. He didn't even give a shit anymore about the bet with Lucy. But he was pretty sure he'd never meet anyone as magical as Jay again and he'd take what he could get.

*I'll remember this kiss for the rest of my damn life.*

"Do you have a sister, Jay?"

"Three."

Devin flinched. "Holy shit."

Jay gave him a look as if to say, *Right?*, and waved at their server for the check.

Time to move fast. "You love 'em, right?" Jay nodded, warily. "And if one of them asked you to do something...?"

"I'd tell her to mind her own sex life, heifer," Jay snapped, pulling his scarf out of his coat sleeve and looping it around his neck twice.

"But if it was important to her. If she was asking for your own good and you didn't want to let her down."

"I'd short-sheet her bed and put all her panties in the freezer."

Devin cracked a laugh and Jay started to smile. "Dude, she's merciless. I'm in for a world of a hurt if I go home without a kiss. Plus, I ordered those scallops for you."

"You picked those out!" Jay couldn't sputter his outrage fast enough.

Grinning, Devin leaned forward. "I picked them out for you. Because I could tell you wanted them but you're not really the kind of guy who orders all the expensive stuff, are you? So I did."

Jay flushed and turned his face away. Devin waited. Finally, the younger man threw his hands in the air. "Fine. Fine! You can kiss me. Jesus. Drama queen."

"That's daddy drama queen to you," Devin teased, and chalked up another point on the board when Jay crossed his arms and tried to pretend that wasn't a laugh twisting his lips into a smile. He settled back in his seat, content for the moment to wait for the server to return with the check. A low-grade hum of arousal vibrated under his skin. Jay wanted to kiss him. Protest all he wanted, his eyes were drawn to Devin—and not always to his face—and his cheeks were pink. His lips too, as he bit at them nervously.

"Man, this is so weird." Jay was sliding his jacket on as he muttered, as if he needed to arm himself even though they were still waiting for the check.

"What?"

"I don't normally *negotiate* a kiss before it happens."

"How do you normally do it?" Like he couldn't guess, but anything that kept the conversation on kissing was a win as far as Devin was concerned.

"It just—" a vague wave of a hand "—happens."

"That's not really helping me out here, Jay. I don't want to screw up my one chance to kiss you goodnight."

"Oh, shut up. How do *you* kiss on dates?"

Yeah, not going there. Devin's hookups didn't count as dates. Not even close. "Oh, no. You're not making this about me. I already talked about myself for two hours. You know a ton about me and I don't know squat about you."

"You think that's an accident?"

"Ouch."

Snarky comments aside, though, Jay was a nice guy. A genuine, deep-down nice guy who had listened to Devin's stories with his cheek on his fist and a smile on his mouth. And he couldn't let his own smartass remark stand for long. Heaving a sigh and crossing his arms again, he sat back in his chair. "Fine. What do you want to know?"

“Aside from what kind of kiss you like at the end of your dates?”

Jay confirmed Devin's suspicions that nervousness made him mouthy when he snapped out his answer. “The kind that's on my dick.”

Oh, hell yes. Devin could play. He leaned forward again and kept his voice low. “There's a bathroom downstairs that hardly anyone uses. I'll get on my knees and kiss you goodnight so hard you'll have to shove your fist in your mouth to keep from crying out, if that's what you want. Just say the word.”

Jay didn't say a word, only turned even more pink and stared at Devin's mouth. His pulse beat visibly in his throat and his lips were shiny when he licked them.

Eventually, Devin took pity on him. He didn't want to cross too many lines here. “Or you could tell me something about yourself. Where you work or what you do for fun. Not in a ‘tell me the address so I can stalk you way.’ Just, generally.” He sat up straight again and watched the color in Jay's cheeks ease.

“There's nothing much to tell. I have a big family in Pilsen.” The largely Hispanic neighborhood on the near south side, which might or might not be tied to the brown skin set off so perfectly by that white shirt. “I work in retail. A menswear boutique.” Jay paused and glanced at him—they were back to wary now—as if expecting some kind of comment.

“Do you like it?” Devin had worked at a Best Buy in high school. Knew how shitty and demanding customers could be. He'd done plenty of bitching.

That wasn't Jay's style.

“I do. I'm good at it.” Another one of those pauses, waiting. Maybe someone had done a number on him in the past about his job. Jay seemed ready to block verbal blows Devin had no intention of delivering. “I'm an assistant manager now, but our GM is angling for a district manager position, although she's so preggio they probably won't move her 'til after she pops. I figure I've got a decent chance at getting her job when she's promoted.”

“It's a tough job.”

A shrug and another stare over Devin's shoulder at nothing. “It's not rocket science. Pretty much anyone can do it.”

Devin shook his head and moved deliberately into Jay's line of sight. “I know for a fact that's not true.”

The server chose that moment to deliver the check and Devin couldn't decide if that was good or bad. Jay was clearly uncomfortable talking about

himself, but Devin was realizing exactly how little he'd learned about the other man during their meal. There wasn't much he could do about that though. If Jay didn't want to get to know him beyond funny stories about Lucy and ways in which Devin had been publicly embarrassed, that was his call.

Devin had known going into this not-a-date that the pleasure of Jay's company for a couple of hours was his best-case scenario.

He had nothing at all to complain about.

After adding twenty percent and signing the check, he left the fake leather folder on the edge of the table and stood up, shrugging into his puffy, down coat. Jay pursed his lips and shook his head a little and Devin assumed it was because his coat was vastly less cool than the leather jacket Jay sported. He smiled.

No one was ever going to pick him for his fashion sense, which could most charitably be called *basic*.

They made their way through the restaurant, dodging busboys and servers with trays carried high over their heads. The crowd in the bar had tripled and Devin eased more than one tipsy diner out of their path before they stumbled into Jay or himself. He knew from experience that a two-hour wait in the bar for a table was made more palatable by the generous application of sangria pitchers.

He pushed through the double glass doors to the street and held one open for Jay.

"Right. So."

"God, you gotta be freezing in that jacket," he said without thinking, shivering in his own down jacket.

The snark was back. Jay must be nervous. "I don't wear it because it's warm, Devin."

The shiver that ran over his skin when Jay said his name for the first time froze him in place. Traffic streamed by on LaSalle Boulevard when the light changed, surging wetly through the slush. Jay shifted his weight from one foot to the other. Devin stepped closer to him.

Although he'd thought of Jay as smaller all night, he really wasn't. Jay was almost the same height as him, just more slender, and the proof was that his face was right there in front of Devin's mouth. After every sexual innuendo at dinner—not that there had been a ton of them—after the nudges from Jay's

boots and the kissing conversation, he wanted to push Jay up against the wall of the florist shop next door and suck on his mouth until their lips were bruised and his dick was sore in his pants from too much friction.

He ran his hands from Jay's elbows to his shoulders and tugged him closer. Jay's eyes locked on his own. Big, dark eyes, blinking as Jay's narrow shoulders tensed under Devin's hands and Jay's breathing sped up until white puffs of air drifted like smoke signals down the sidewalk.

Devin leaned in and brushed his lips against Jay's, the barest butterfly kiss of a good-bye. When he pulled back, Jay's eyes were huge, one hand sliding up to press against his lips, as if he wanted to mimic Devin's kiss.

"This has been the best not-a-date of my life. If you ever want to not-date again, you should definitely call me." He squeezed Jay's shoulders gently and let his hands fall away.

"I don't have your number." The words tumbled out like puzzle pieces dumped out of a newly opened box, possibility and confusion both.

Devin bit the inside of his cheek so hard it bled. "You've got my sister's email. Just ask her."

Backing away, Jay shoved his hands in his jacket pockets. The wind ruffled his hair and he shivered in his thin coat. The most beautiful man Devin had ever seen, taken to dinner, and barely kissed, took another backwards step and shook his head.

"No way."

"She's gonna send me on the next date before too long, you know. You could help me out. Help me find something to wear that'll mean I get lucky."

"Don't hold your breath." But Jay was smiling as he walked backwards toward the corner. He waved good-bye as Devin watched, then turned to cross the intersection, probably heading toward the El station a block away. At the last second, as he passed out of sight, he looked back at Devin one last time. Then he kept walking and was gone.

Fuuuuuck.

Devin was completely and utterly wrecked. Screw Lucy's five dates.

He'd be lucky if he got over this one, ever.

\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Three

By Sunday afternoon, Jay's head was sore from all the metaphorically smacking of it he'd done and he forced himself to lock up his phone in his manager's desk. Which was risky, because Tracy wasn't above reading his incoming texts and emails if she thought it would give her dirt she could use to tease him during the slow hours, but he had to do something to keep his hands off the screen.

Desperate times...

His phone pulled at him like a magnet to true north, a tiny corner of his brain whispering to him as he received new inventory and updated the latest batch of markdowns.

*You could text him to say hi.*

Three days of that whisper and he was ready to throw himself in the compactor when it was his turn to roll a dolly of broken-down boxes and other trash down to the loading dock.

"No, I couldn't!" His shout echoed in the empty dock. Yelling at himself was so much more soothing when there wasn't anyone around to side-eye him for the cray-cray. He inserted his key and turned the activation switch to *On* before pressing the *Start* button. Then waited through the loud grinding as the machine mashed everything flat and he could remove his key again. The dock always reeked of rotting compost, courtesy of the restaurant trash that stank it up for the rest of the mall shops. The textured sheet metal platform vibrated under the soles of his boots and he set his teeth against the noise.

He felt as growly as the damn compactor.

Damn Devin Hollister for being everything he *used* to want in a man. Although it would probably be fairer to damn Carl, the man he'd thought was his forever guy. The man Jay had found last year when he realized the glitter was fading around the edges of the club scene. Guys his own age didn't seem to see that, so Jay had gone looking for someone outside his usual twenty-something crowd. And discovered, to his surprise, that older men really turned his fucking crank.

He'd thought he found what he was looking for in Carl. A man who wasn't in the club scene, a lawyer, hot as hell and with that commanding presence of

someone who didn't hesitate to define himself as an expert in his "professional community."

Jay rolled his eyes at his own naïveté. Bad call all around. It hadn't helped that every time he'd told Carl they were through, he'd ended up giving in to Carl's twist-your-brain-in-knots persuasive arguments and getting back together with him. Over and over again, like some damn dog that always found its way home to get kicked again, instead of staying out in the wilderness where it could get cocktails and hand jobs in club bathrooms.

*Okay, you've taken that metaphor down the wrong path. Ew.*

He shook off the self-recrimination. And the dog-sex imagery. Dragging the dolly back up to the back entrance of the shop, he keyed in with his card and parked the dolly in its place by the door.

The stockroom was empty, so he caved and unlocked the desk, planning a quick check of his text messages. He'd been dumb enough to email Devin's sister, Lucy, busting her for the photo scam and casually getting Devin's phone number from her, as if he barely cared whether or not she passed it on. He'd made her promise not to tell Devin that he'd asked for it though, saying she owed him for playing him. But he assumed her promise was bull and half-expected to see a text pop up any time now from Devin.

So far, he was about as popular with older, sort-of-architects as he was with his ex's legal eagle crowd. That is to say, not at all.

*Which is perfectly fine, because you're not changing your mind this time. So just stop it.*

He thumbed the security code into his phone and pulled up the dating site app. Devin's—Lucy's, he now knew—most recent message was at the top of the list, her brother's deceptive photo filling his screen when he touched it.

"Ooh, who's that? He's cute." Shit. Tracy might be approaching walrus-like proportions—which he would *never* say out loud because he wanted to keep his balls intact—but she could still be stealthy when she wanted. And after three years of working together, including half a dozen of overnight inventory sessions where they both got slaphappy with sleep deprivation and the gossip flew fast and furious, she didn't hesitate to grill him. "Where did you bang him?"

Jay flushed. Fair enough. Before last year, he hadn't exactly been... selective. But the club scene had gotten old. He'd started wishing he could walk



in a bar and not spot ten guys he'd already fucked. All the knowing looks and raised eyebrows as everyone watched each other negotiate their next hook ups were an insider's conversation he'd wished he weren't a part of anymore. "I didn't. We just went to dinner."

"Fancy." Right. With his track record, getting dinner first had felt halfway to a marriage proposal the first time he'd done it. "What's he do?"

"He's a draftsman." He wasn't exactly sure how that was different from being an architect, but he'd gotten the feeling Devin had taken a step down from whatever his original life dreams had been. It was clear though that he didn't regret a thing and would do whatever he could for his baby sister and nephew.

One of the things that made him so irresistible, damn it.

He tried to deflect Tracy's interest. "He doesn't even look like that actually. He's way older."

"Oh, no. Not another daddy." Tracy used his slang as if she'd been born going to Roscoe's and Sidetracks up on Halsted in Boystown. "Haven't you been burned enough already?"

"I know," he wailed, fingers clenching on his traitorous phone. Why didn't he have the screen set to black out faster? Devin's picture glowed at him, not going anywhere. "I'm not going out with him again." He'd already promised himself, even though he was pretty sure if Devin stood still long enough, Jay would end up humping him like his mama's Yorkie assaulted the couch corner.

"Yeah, right. That's what you said the last time." Tracy could lift an eyebrow like a weight lifter bench-pressing cotton candy. Effortlessly.

"I mean it this time. I'm *not* changing my mind."

"Then stop staring at his photo like you want to lick your phone."

"I can't help it."

"And that's not even a recent picture?"

He explained about Devin's sister, who Jay sort of admired for her manipulative scheming, even if she'd put him in the middle of this shit. "He's maybe ten or fifteen years older than that now." And damn if he didn't just push all of Jay's buttons.

"Still looks good though, huh?"

“Hell, yes.” He pulled his phone away from her grabby hands. “Like, he doesn’t have that six-pack anymore, I bet. He’s a little softer. But bigger. More... manly.” Such a stupid, silly word for something that made his stomach roll as if he’d crested a hill in a fast car. He searched for better words. “He doesn’t look like a boy anymore.”

He couldn’t stop thinking about Devin’s next date. No way would that man have been up for another outing over the weekend. Mondays sucked everyone’s balls, so that was safe too. But by Tuesday, certainly no later than Thursday, Devin would be meeting his next guy in a bar or restaurant somewhere. In his suburban soccer dad clothes. Not terribly out of fashion, really, but khakis and a denim shirt were no man’s ticket to ride, Jay believed firmly.

“Don’t do it.” Tracy was shaking her head, the corner of her mouth pulled back.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Bitch, please.” The pang in his chest stopped his breath. For a moment, he had his girl back. It had been weeks since she’d been able to focus on a conversation that didn’t revolve around the hassle of finding gender-neutral baby clothes and which baby bottle nipples were best at minimizing gas. Too gross for words. Tracy smiled at him and pointed to his phone. “You just looked at your phone for the seven hundredth time this hour. Don’t do it.”

He couldn’t decide if she meant it or if she knew that the fastest way to get him to do something was to tell him not to. Either way, his thumbs were moving over the screen before he had a chance to second-guess himself.

*Did you go out on your next date yet?*

A minute later, his text notification chimed. Tracy rolled her eyes and headed out to the counter.

*Jay? Hi! Not yet. Tuesday. :)*

Damn, he was good. Devin’s next date was in forty-eight hours.

*What are you gonna wear?*

Jay typed the message before he could convince himself not to and put the phone down on the desk. Lecturing himself on showing restraint, he resumed tagging the wooden-wicked candles that had arrived the day before. He wouldn’t text back for at least fifteen minutes, no matter how quickly—

His phone chimed.

Nope. Jay pulled the trigger on the pricing gun, the loud, chunking plastic mechanics of it not nearly enough to drown out the sound of his phone chiming a second time. Or to distract him from the little blue light blinking on it.

He lasted a minute and a half.

*Meeting him for a drink after work. Khakis and a button down?*

A second text bubble below.

*Do you think I need help?*

Jay clapped a hand over his eyes. He could picture it. There'd be a brown leather belt and some comfortable loafers. Thank god he could text one handed and blindfolded.

*You may be beyond my help. Beyond anyone's.*

He didn't even pretend to put the phone down.

*Nah. You could save me from sartorial embarrassment.*

Shit. He barely knew what that meant. Jay held the phone out at arm's length and squinted so he could pretend not to see what he was typing. Giving a drowning man a helping hand via some pants that would show off his ass was not the same as changing his mind about not dating him. It wasn't.

*Busy now? Come by the shop.*

Holy crap. He was the dumbest asshole in the greater Chicagoland metropolitan area. Hell, he could probably take in downstate Illinois too and still top the list.

*On my way to the gym. 1.5 hrs ok?*

*Hurry. We need all the time we can get.*

For an hour and a half, Jay showed about as much focus as Tracy, who at least had the excuse of needing to pee every fifteen minutes. He wandered the store, trying to keep an eye on the open entryway, vaguely moving stock from one display to another.

When Devin strolled in exactly one and a half hours later, Jay waved Tracy off with a free hand and a *don't make me stab you* glare, before dragging Devin off to a changing room and ordering him to strip. They were pushing up on closing time, so he'd already pulled a dozen items he wanted to see modeled on that bulky, muscled body. Devin's sizes were wildly out of balance, his shirts needing enough room for a thickly muscled chest and arms that... well, *bulged*

was really the only word for them. His hips and waist were narrow though, and those thighs were going to prove a challenge with those sculpted quads.

And that ass...

Devin lifted an eyebrow and gave a one-word explanation when he caught Jay staring at him after he put on Jay's favorite pair of tailored, gray trousers.

"Squats."

It almost made Jay want to go to the gym.

Turning in front of the three-way mirror and looking at his own backside, Devin smoothed a hand over his flat stomach in the fitted black T-shirt Jay had pulled for him. "Jesus. You can practically tell I'm circumcised in these."

Jay closed his eyes. Damn the man. "Stop talking about your dick. The goal is to dress so you don't have to *talk* about it in order to draw attention to it, *me entiendes?*"

"I hear you." Jay jerked his head around, staring at Devin and wondering if he'd answered that way by accident. Devin's smile said no. "What? I forgot most of it, but I took Spanish for eight years in high school and college." Devin threaded the dark gray leather through the belt loops of his skinny gray trousers.

Jay was about to say something cranky in Spanish that felt half like flirting when Tracy strode into the changing room hallway where they were loitering while Devin finished buckling up.

It took Jay two seconds to see she was out of gas. She braced herself with a hand against the straining bulge of her belly that made her look on the verge of tipping over. Exhaustion carved lines in her cheeks. Her voice rang hollowly.

"Almost closing time, kiddo, so we better get a move on. Got your boy here settled up? We can close out the registers."

Un-preggo, she would never have hustled a customer out the door. She screwed the heel of her free hand against her temple.

"Why don't I close up tonight? There's nothing going on here. You can head out early," he said, keeping his voice gentle.

Tracy blinked and he pretended not to notice that she was on the verge of crying. "Sure. If it's no trouble." Her words came out even softer now.

"No worries at all, *mami*." She snorted and rolled her eyes at the hot momma nickname. *As if*, she mimed. "G'wan with your bad self. Get out of here."

She sniffled again. "Thanks, Jay. You opening tomorrow?"

"You know it." He made the schedule and he didn't put Tracy on opening shifts any more. She ended up working late too often, so he made sure to schedule her for the noon to close.

"I'll lock up. You can let him out when you're done." Tracy nodded at the both of them and left the hallway. A minute later the CDs they kept on endless repeat in the background switched off and the store fell into silence.

Broken soon enough by Devin, who had moved closer, still needing to tuck in the T-shirt and buckle his belt.

"Why are you relieved?" He raised his eyebrows when Jay glared at him. "What? I can see it on your face."

Jay pressed his lips together. He didn't talk about this with anyone.

Except he already had, hadn't he? That first date. Or not-a-date. When Devin had looked up after making Jay laugh for two hours straight and told him it was Jay's turn to talk about himself. And somehow, Jay had. He'd kept most of the words bottled up. The list of scathing remarks and subtle putdowns he'd tolerated with his ex. The quick subject changes when they were with company and someone asked Jay what he did for a living. But Devin had understood even without those words. Understood what Jay meant, even when he hadn't known how to say it out loud.

So tempting to see if that understanding extended this far.

"She's had a really rough pregnancy. She's trying for this promotion and her douchebag boyfriend took off to parts unknown." He crossed his arms over his chest and stared at Devin.

Eyes narrowed, shirt hanging out of his pants, belt hanging limp from one hand, Devin studied him.

It didn't take him more than a minute. "Pushing too hard?"

Jay exhaled. Devin got it. Yes. His boss and good friend was that close to putting herself in the hospital in her desperation to provide for herself and her soon-to-arrive baby. And the only thing Jay could do about it was... "I think she knows I'm trying to protect her. She never argues when I send her home."

Devin lifted a hand as if he were going to grab Jay's arm, but let it fall at the last moment. Jay told himself he wasn't disappointed.

"You're a good guy, Jay... Hey, what *is* your last name anyway?"

God, he couldn't believe his ex had made him wary to say something as don't-mess-with-me as his name. "Gomez."

"Jay Gomez." He could hear Devin feeling the words in his mouth, rolling them around on his tongue, and braced himself for... something. The wince. The hesitation. It wouldn't be the first time a white guy's interest waned at the reality of his last name. He didn't know what it was, but something about Gomez seemed to bring out icky jokes.

All he got was a smile.

That made it easy enough to follow up with, "It's Julio actually, but no one calls me that. I've been Jay since middle school."

"Whatever works for you." Devin smiled and Jay could tell he felt as if he'd gotten some kind of inside info. Stupid man. He ignored the flush of pleasure that warmed his skin and made his voice brisk instead. "Get out of those clothes so I can ring them up for your hot date. I hope your sister did a better job picking this one out."

"Doubt it. I'd rather go out with you."

"I'm flattered." That was snarky as hell and Jay blushed as Devin shot him a disappointed look. "No, I really am."

"But?" The older man paused with his hands on his belt and Jay was tempted to see what would happen if he didn't wave Devin off to a changing room.

Tempted. Not terminally stupid.

*We've been over this already, remember? Dogs. Wilderness. Hand jobs. God, I've got to get some new metaphors.*

"But no way. You're too old for me. And in five minutes? When you realize having a cute boyfriend doesn't make up for the embarrassment you feel when he tells your friends he works *retail*?" He tried not to let it get to him, but even talking about it sent waves of shame through him. Though he didn't know which was worse, what Carl's friends had said about him, that his ex-boyfriend hadn't defended him from their crap, or the fact that it still bothered him so much. "I don't need another daddy who makes me feel like shit. I've made up my mind. No thanks."

Harsh, and way out of line for how Devin had treated him so far, but too bad. Sometimes when crap landed, innocent bystanders got splattered. He braced himself for the inevitable argument.

It didn't come. Just a smile and an easy headshake. "Damn. And here I'd hoped your texting me was flirtatious."

"Stop trying to be charming and strip, pencil man." Which was a job joke, not a body joke, since Devin could snap Jay in half with casts on both his arms. "If you remember to put these on, I guarantee your next date will be fabulous."

Playing white knight for Devin's wardrobe was *not* the same thing as changing his mind about dating him.

It *wasn't*.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Four

Devin had been hiding in the bathroom for ten minutes.

The first time he'd attempted to stick his head out the door, his date had spotted him and waved while Devin pantomimed forgetting something in the quiet room behind him. Back in the bathroom, he leaned against the exposed brick wall and thunked his head back, letting the rough edges scrape his scalp.

*Fuck. No escape.*

Trapped in the bathroom, trying to work up the energy to go out there and blow off his musclebound 'roid jockey of a date. One drink was enough to make it clear that Devin would gnaw his own arm off before he'd let that guy grab his hand and drag it over to his crotch again.

Lucy had made a valiant effort, hooking him up with a guy who definitely spent time at the gym, which was the only place she knew Devin went except downstairs to her apartment. But he could have told her as soon as he saw Tad—terrible name... sounded like something you scraped off your shoe after it accidentally stuck there—that this date was going to be a spectacular washout.

Spectacular in that it had the potential to turn into a bar brawl if Devin didn't watch it.

Jay's outfit of choice had sure as shit done its job though. The predatory look in Tad's eyes at the sight of him might have been a turn-on if the guy were less of a douchebag. Devin had threatened Lucy with bodily harm if she didn't update the profile she'd created with a more current photo, so this date hadn't included any embarrassing explanations. Just some low-grade sexual harassment. Thrilling.

Jay. God, the thought of him tightened Devin's stomach with a flutter of nerves and made it clear what a flop date two was. The meathead back in the bar didn't tighten anything but a feeling of revulsion. Devin's not-a-date with Jay had been ten times hotter than this meet-and-greet in the hip River North bar.

Devin cursed himself for an idiot as he pulled his phone from his pocket and hit the text icon. He hadn't heard a word from Jay since Sunday night and had promised himself he'd wait to see if Jay contacted him again.



Yeah, that promise was bullshit when he made it.

*Help! Worst. Date. Ever.*

His phone lit up a moment later.

*Did you wear the pants?*

Devin grinned. Jay had been convinced he'd chicken out and wear one of his ordinary pairs of jeans.

*The pants are working. Too well.*

*No such thing.*

*This guy's a loser. You should come rescue me.*

*What are you, chicken? Tell him to piss off.*

Devin had been teasing, typing nonsense because it was more fun than going back out into the posh bar and telling that asshole that he was heading out, no kiss necessary for this one, thank you. But at Jay's dismissive words, he paused. It might be a bit devious, but anything that gave him a chance to hang out with Jay was worth it...

*Can't.*

What excuse could he give?

*He works for a client. Have to be nice.*

*Fake an emergency at home. Rugrat vomit always works.*

*Told him my sister was home w/nephew. No excuse there.*

His phone didn't blink for a hundred and thirty-seven thousand years.

The text message light started blinking a split second before his phone buzzed and Devin couldn't keep the grin off his face.

*Pain. In. My. Ass. You're totally buying me drinks. Text address.*

He'd never punched in numbers and letters so fast in his life. Devin killed another five minutes in the bathroom before it occurred to him that his date might come looking for him, thinking his lingering in here was some kind of invitation.

Ugh. Gross.

Back at their semiprivate seating area, he grabbed a seat on the couch kitty-corner to the one where his date sat. Tad's eyes narrowed at Devin's choice of a more distant seat and stayed that way through twenty minutes of stilted conversation about workout regimens and protein shakes.

Jesus. Devin liked to blow off steam at the gym, but he couldn't imagine anything more boring than sitting around and talking about it on a date.

Tad's startled look was the only warning Devin got before a heavy weight pushed against his shoulders and a hand snuck into the open front of his shirt. Devin closed his eyes and smelled the vanilla and leather scent of Jay's cologne.

"Who the hell are you?" Tad was pissed at the interruption.

"His boyfriend." Jay looked over Devin's shoulder at Tad and the words vibrated against Devin's ear. Which was apparently connected to his cock. Either that or Jay's voice resonated on some kind of weird sex frequency that made him hard whenever he heard it.

"What the fuck?" The wrinkled up nose and exposed front teeth didn't improve Tad's looks.

"He gets these ideas, don't you, Devin?" Jay's hand was massaging his chest and Devin was pretty sure if he held his breath any longer he'd pass out. "You can't go looking every time I throw a hissy fit, baby."

*Keep touching me like that and I'll stop looking for good.*

"Yeah, right." Tad scowled at them. The douche-canoe was still arguing. "No way *he* gets himself a hot twink boyfriend like you."

Jay's fingers in his shirt curved until his nails dug into Devin's chest, a sharp sting that drove Devin's hips deeper into the couch as he tried to hold still. The need to get up and plow his fist into this asshole's face surged strong, but he was pretty sure Jay wouldn't thank him for stepping in.

"I'm no twink, you micro-dicked Neanderthal." His sweet boy was gone. The bitch, who'd put his boot so far up your ass you'd be tying his shoelaces with your tongue, was back.

Devin understood it this time. Easier to figure things out when that white-hot anger wasn't directed his way. Somewhere back down the line, Jay had decided that offense was better than defense. Probably when the ex Jay had dropped hints about had been part of his life.

“Please. You’re gagging for it from a real man.” The Neanderthal in question jerked his chin at Devin. “He couldn’t fuck a girl without flinching.”

Jesus. Devin didn’t even know if he was supposed to be insulted by that last crack or not.

In a heartbeat, Jay *slithered* over the arm of the couch, landing in Devin’s lap, facing him, his knees pushed deep into the cushions on either side of Devin’s hips. He ground their crotches together, hard. Devin caught himself before he thrust up and whipped his head right and left, eyes darting everywhere. Were people staring? Grid wasn’t a gay bar, although the downtown scene was hip enough, and their corner recessed enough, to keep any fuss to a minimum. He couldn’t see the asshole anymore because Jay’s chest was in the way, his thighs holding Devin down when his instinct was to stand up.

Jay grabbed his chin, forcing Devin to focus on his face. “Eyes on me, sailor.”

Jesus, it was hard enough keeping his eyes off Jay at the best of times. Impossible to resist him now. Dark eyes locked on his, the hint of a curve at the corner of Jay’s full lips. He leaned forward, lips brushing along Devin’s cheek on a straight line to his ear.

Jay’s whisper took Devin’s attention off the low-key Tuesday night crowd, because he was suddenly so hard he worried more about coming in his fucking pants while Jay writhed melodramatically his lap.

“Put your hands on my ass, dummy.”

He’d have gone to his knees in the middle of the bar. Putting his hands on Jay was the opposite of a hardship. Devin slid his hands up hard, narrow thighs and around the slim curves of Jay’s hips until his hands spanned an ass that made him lightheaded. No doubt the jerkoff across the way was getting an eyeful. Devin dug his fingertips in and the audible hitch in Jay’s breath made Devin’s cock twitch.

“So—” Devin struggled to clear his throat. “Is *this* a date?”

“This is us showing that asshole what he’s missing.” Jay dragged his mouth down Devin’s neck, encouraging him to tilt his head for better access.

The rough scrape of a tongue on his neck set Devin’s skin on fire. He tried to sound grateful. *For the white knight syndrome that keeps Jay riding to the rescue, Lord, we thank you.* “Right. Kind of you.”

“Don’t get any ideas.” Jay bit his earlobe. Devin shuddered.

“You’re kidding, right?” His eyes threatened to roll back in their sockets. “These pants were tight *before* you climbed in my lap.”

Jay shook with silent laughter and Devin thought he might come off the couch with the vibration. “Your sister set you up with *that* guy? You’re gonna have to give me her number. Girl needs help.”

“Her number? Sure. Anything you want.” *Seriously. Anything.*

“Stop dating assholes.”

“Got it. Whatever you say.”

His brains were scrambled and his mouth opened, trying to help him suck in more oxygen. Whatever would clear the sex fog from his brain. But full-on stupid seemed like the best he could manage as Jay humped him while Tad grumbled and Devin set his teeth against the bony wedge of Jay’s shoulder and bit down hard enough to get some attention.

Jay froze. His hands, which had been loosely laced behind Devin’s neck, clutched at the short hairs at Devin’s nape.

Both of them held still for long enough to make things awkward. But after a minute, the boy in his lap broke the spell.

“So. I think we’re done here, yes? Yes.” Jay rose to his knees, which pressed his groin against Devin’s chest, who groaned as he felt Jay’s hard dick pressing into his sternum. When he looked up, Jay’s cheeks were pink and he wouldn’t meet Devin’s eyes. He swung one leg elegantly off Devin’s lap and braced himself with a hand on the couch’s arm as he stood up.

“You better be buying my drinks, asshole.” Devin’s date wasn’t pleased.

Jay’s mouth opened to argue. Grabbing him by the hand, Devin pulled him away from the seating area.

“*That* guy’s a client?” Jay hissed in his ear, trailing behind as Devin threaded through the sparse crowd to the edge of the bar where the wait station was. He lifted two fingers and got the bartender’s attention, pulling out his wallet and finding his credit card.

“Hmm. What?”

“Are you seriously going to have to suck up to that guy at the office?”

Shit. Jay's little lap dance had driven every thought of Devin's lie right out of his head. "Um, no. I don't think we're going to end up under contract to them." He tried to shove the hand with crossed fingers—like a kid for Christ's sake—in his too tight pants pocket and failed.

"Good. God, that guy couldn't fuck a pre-lubed asshole." Jay narrowed his eyes and glared over his shoulder at the seating arrangement they'd left, where Tad had spread his arms and legs wide on the couch like a pasha waiting for tribute.

Devin was surprised Jay had gotten so worked up on his behalf actually, but it was sweet to be defended. More than sweet. It was hot as hell. He leaned up against the bar and scrubbed his hand through his hair, shifting his weight from one foot to the other and wondering if anyone in the bar noticed his dick was an iron bar in his pants.

A heavy warm weight draped itself against his back. Devin's spine jerked straight. "What—" he managed to squeeze out as Jay's arm snaked around his waist, his hand landing square on Devin's dick, out of sight beneath the edge of the bar.

"Shut up. That jackass can still see us and I want him to know exactly what he's missing out on." Jay pressed his face against Devin's back, his mouth landing smack between Devin's shoulder blades. Mouthing up Devin's spine, his lips dragging against the starched cotton of the button down, Jay reached his neck. Devin dropped his head with an all-over shiver and slid his credit card to the edge of the rail in front of him, hoping the bartender could take it from there.

He knew this was only a game to Jay, something he was doing to piss Devin's date off. For whatever reason, Jay had decided to make himself Devin's champion tonight. But that was a hard dick pressing against his ass and Devin's body didn't give a shit that this was all for show. Sweat misted on his skin and he rolled his hips in an effort to push his ass harder against the slim young man plastered to his back.

"Fuck." Devin honestly wasn't sure who said it. Jay's hand on his dick held him tight, not moving, but with a grip that ratcheted up the pressure in his balls until his heart was pounding in his ears and he leaned over the bar on his elbows, panting and staring at the counter.

Forget this being a game. If he didn't get out of there, he was going to come in his pants for real.

A credit card slip materialized at his hand and he scrawled an absurdly generous tip and then a signature across the bottom. Then he shook himself loose from Jay's clasp and spun around to stare the younger man down.

They stood nearly eye to eye. Jay's chest rose and fell as rapidly as his own. Devin shifted forward an inch, pushing against Jay's chest, the toes of his boots kicking against Jay's shoes. He fisted his hands at his sides to keep his fingers from wrapping themselves around Jay's arms, his hips, his fucking neck for turning Devin on so fast and so hard he could hardly think straight. The bar's music kicked up two notches in volume until the bass beat drowned out the thump of Devin's pulse, a throb he could feel in his dick. Jay's breath moved on his skin like water.

"Devin." The word was barely audible above the music.

He pushed past Jay, feeling the younger man at his heels all the way to the short flight of stairs that led up to the street entrance. It felt like running away, but he needed some breathing room and the bar seemed to have run out of oxygen. He jogged up them, feet pushing off every other riser as he headed for the exit, for the bracing cold of the January night air, and the clarity it might blow through his overheated brain.

"Devin." Again, just the one word, this time quieter as Devin turned the corner of the building onto Wells Street. Jay's footsteps followed him, too close.

"Back off. Back off right now, Jay, unless you want—" Devin broke off midsentence. He took a step back. He had no business pushing this, no matter what kind of show Jay had put on inside the bar. "Fuck. I need some fucking breathing room." For once, the wind off the lake had died and his harsh breaths hung in clouds in front of his face, slowly fading.

Jay looked him in the eye.

And stepped forward.

Devin's hands fisted around Jay's upper arms, pulling him close as he backed Jay up until his shoulders slammed into the brick wall, Jay's hands on Devin's hips, tugging him closer. Devin dove at Jay's mouth, his lips forcing Jay's wide open until they were panting into each other's mouth more than they were wrestling about who had more uptight, unresolved energy to spend. He ground his cock against Jay's hip, barely able to feel anything other than his own spiking pleasure through the thick layer of his coat. He pulled back from

the kiss in seconds, knowing he was screwing this up, but Jay chased his mouth for a moment, before falling away.

Devin dropped his head on Jay's shoulder, panting into Jay's thin leather jacket. The butterfly brush of a hand at the nape of his neck pulled him upright. Jay's hands were both at his waist, shoved deep in his jacket pockets.

Stepping away, Devin sucked cold air into his lungs and stared, wide-eyed, at his not-a-date. He opened his mouth, ready to apologize, even if he wasn't quite sure for what.

Jay cut him off before he could get a word out. "Not your fault. I'm giving off some hella mixed signals. Sorry." Jay dragged the back of his hand across his mouth. His lips were red, as if he'd painted them.

"Fuuuuuck!" Devin stomped down the sidewalk, feeling like an angry toddler with a randy teenager's hard-on in his pants, and shouted his frustration at the always-illuminated sky over the city. He'd never wanted to go out on these damn dates to begin with. Now he was all twisted up over this guy who seemed half into him, half about to nine-one-one him, and whose touch lit Devin up like a sodium flare. He pressed his face into his hands. Jesus, he needed to calm down. It wasn't this kid's fault that Devin had apparently been bullshitting himself this entire time, telling himself he didn't care about finding someone. After twenty feet, he stopped and turned around.

Jay stood motionless under the streetlight, fingers pressed to his mouth, eyes wide. His ridiculous jacket gaped open over his chest, completely inadequate for a Chicago winter but sure enough making him look like a damn runway model.

Devin pressed the heels of his hands to his eye sockets and groaned. His fingers ached with the cold. He gave up and pulled his gloves out of his coat pocket, jerking his head to beckon. "Come on."

Jay cocked his head to the side but didn't say anything.

"I'll give you a ride."

"Where?"

"Wherever."

Jay bit his lip, hesitating.

Devin sucked in cold air through his nose, freezing the hairs inside until he exhaled. He knew he radiated sexual tension right now. Getting in a car with

him was probably not the most comfortable idea. "I'll give you money for a cab."

Jay reared his head back. "No way," he snapped. "I can pay for my own cab."

"But you won't." Devin didn't know *how* he knew this, but he was sure he was right. "You'll walk to the Brown Line and take the El home and it's fucking freezing out, Jay. So just let me give you a ride or pay for a taxi, okay?"

Silence hung in the air between them, its edges softened by the *shhh* of passing cars on Wells. Jay looked down the street, up at the streetlight, anywhere that wasn't Devin.

Devin waited.

"Fine."

Devin kept his mouth shut as he walked to his car, Jay following behind him. There wasn't a single thing he could say right now that wouldn't come off like manipulation. Or begging. In the middle of the block, he cut between two parallel-parked cars and crossed the street to where he'd left the Camry. He pressed the unlock button on the key fob and the low beep showed Jay the car. The streetlight overhead was burned out—city crews were slow to change lightbulbs in the dead of winter—and he kept his head up.

If somebody tried to mug him, he'd take their head off, just to release a little sexual tension.

He got in the car and slammed his door shut, buckling his seat belt before starting the engine. Jay slid into the seat next to him, shutting his door quietly. Waiting for the click of the seatbelt buckle, Devin focused on his hands where they gripped the steering wheel at ten and two.

"Buckle up." His voice was harsh in the silence of the car, the street noises shut out in this dark, quiet space.

Silence.

Devin could've sworn he could hear his neck creak as he turned his head slowly to the right.

Jay's head was tipped back against the headrest and he rolled it to the left so he stared in Devin's direction. He shifted in his seat, reaching down to tug at the crotch of his pants.



Sucking in a raw breath, he smelled Jay, the heat of his body rising in the frigid car and carrying his scent to Devin, woody and sharp. A rising tide pushed him toward Jay and told him to reach out and lay his hands on what he wanted, but he locked it down. He closed his eyes, squaring two over and over again in his mind to distract himself. He made it to four thousand ninety-six.

A light hand landed on his wrist.

He opened his eyes wide enough to see the long, pale fingers stroking the back of his gloved hand. The rest of Jay was still, like the lake, frozen in the cold.

A single fingertip traced up the back of Devin's hand until it hit the bare skin of his wrist.

The scritch of a nail against his wrist shot electricity up his arm until it bounced around his insides, making every inch of him twitch and then freeze when Jay's fingertip slid under the hemmed edge of Devin's glove.

Jay stilled too, that one trespassing finger pushed deep under the supple leather.

Impossible to think of anything else, of passing pedestrians or neighborhood patrolmen in cruisers easing down the streets, when Jay's hand was barely touching him.

He stopped thinking entirely. "Open your jacket."

"What?"

"Open your jacket. Pull up your shirt. And unzip your pants." Devin heard the growl in his own voice. Hands on the steering wheel, eyes on Jay, he didn't move. Not one. Fucking. Inch.

"Fuck. This doesn't change anything." But Jay was pulling the lapels of his jacket apart and yanking his shirt up. Devin fell out of his self-imposed stasis and thumbed at the button of his seatbelt until he bruised his finger trying to open the buckle. It clicked and he shoved the strap off his shoulder, twisting in his seat, too impatient to remember how to get enough room to do this.

Jay was fumbling with the button fly on his jeans. Devin pushed his hands out of the way. Ripped the buttons through their holes with a sharp yank and reached in with one rough hand to pull out Jay's cock, ignoring Jay's hands shoving the jeans down his hips.

He swiped his thumb across the head of Jay's dick, pulling a thready cry into the quiet, until Jay fisted one hand and pressed it against his teeth.

*I told you.* The need to lay claim with his words was fierce, but he locked them in the back of his throat and twisted his hand on the soft skin of Jay's dick instead. He meant to be gentle but couldn't quite manage it, breath harsh in his lungs. There wasn't enough air. He was lightheaded with want and need.

Jay's hips bucked into the air. Leaning a heavy arm across Jay's thighs, Devin held him still as he grabbed Jay's cock more firmly in his right hand, pointing it toward his mouth.

He wanted to take his time. To lick and suck and play with his mouth over the veins and ridges of Jay's dick until he'd memorized it with his tongue, but there was no fucking way.

If Jay was anywhere near as turned on as he was, this wasn't going to take long enough. He slid down deep over Jay's dick, the upward punch of Jay's hips frozen in place by Devin's weight.

Even a fist in the mouth couldn't keep his boy quiet.

Jay's cry ripped through the car, bouncing off the ceiling and slamming into Devin until his hands shook on Jay's thigh, on the base of his cock. He pressed his face down far enough to choke himself, swallowing fast as Jay spilled in his mouth.

Silence descended like fog over the front seat.

Pushing himself off Jay's body, Devin already knew what he'd see when he looked at Jay. And what came next after that too.

Jay's eyes were wide, fearful. And Devin felt like shit for putting that look into them, even though he knew they were both equally responsible for this stupidity. Another couple moments of embarrassment kept them still, until Jay scrubbed a hand over his face.

"I can't believe I did this again. Shit." Jay dragged his clothes roughly together and yanked on the door handle, spilling himself out of the car in his haste. Devin didn't know exactly what it was that made this such a terrible idea, when he and Jay were so obviously drawn to each other, but understanding was less important than fixing this.

"I'm sorry." He was already calling after a ghost. "Jay."

He could only see Jay's back as Jay pulled his jacket closed and walked away in one goddamn hurry. Before Jay had reached the corner, Devin was texting him, hoping this child of the digital revolution would be unable to ignore a text message staring at him from his cell phone.

*I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done that.*

Jay pulled his phone from his pocket before he turned the corner, the one working streetlight flaring off the white plastic cover as he moved through the warm yellow light. Devin knew he saw the text message, but his own phone sat silent in his lap. After another minute, he texted again.

*I was out of line. We can just be friends, ok? Your call entirely.  
I apologize.*

The car sank deeper into coldness as Devin sat with his phone on his knee, waiting for a buzz or a blinking light that never came.

*Jay? Please. I'm sorry.*

Species went extinct and new ones evolved from protozoa while he sat in his car in the dark and waited to see how badly he'd fucked this up. Finally, his phone vibrated.

*I screwed up. Don't call me right now. Talk to you later.*

Not until the air whistled hollowly into his lungs did he realize how unsure he'd been that Jay would answer. He leaned his forehead against the steering wheel until the icy plastic curve gave him a headache. Sitting up straight, Devin twisted the key in the ignition and headed home, fully prepared to lie to his sister about the nature of the kiss that had ended this date.

It was none of her business—no one's business at all, actually—whose hands had been on him. Or on whom his hands had been.

At home, Devin stripped out of his clothes as he walked through his apartment, leaving a trail from the front door to his bed where he fell onto the sheets, hand already hard on his dick. He jerked himself dry and told himself it deserved to hurt as he remembered Jay's cry, the sharp sound vibrating in his chest until Devin spilled on his stomach in a sharp spasm whose ache lingered until he drifted off, wondering if he would ever hear from Jay again.

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Five

“Jay picked out this guy?” Devin heard his own voice hit a pitch more commonly found in teenage girls. A man shouldn’t have to hear news that caught him off guard while standing around in his drawers.

It didn’t help that he hadn’t heard from Jay since the guy had bolted from his car on Tuesday night. Now, as he got dressed for date number three, his sister hovered awkwardly in the doorway while he debated about wearing again the simple but stylish outfit Jay had picked out for him. But even pulling those hangers out of his closet made his stomach clench. With nerves or arousal, he wasn’t sure. He shoved the clothes deep in the back of his closet and moved to his dresser instead. Black turtleneck and a pair of dark jeans would have to do. Close enough.

“Well, he helped.”

“What do you mean, *he helped?*”

Lucy blushed and crossed her arms over her chest. Her gaze flicked away from Devin before returning to look him in the eye. Stepping into his bathroom to change, he left the door open so he could hear her explanation. “He told me to stop thinking with my dick unless all I wanted was for you to get laid.”

Huh. Pretty good advice.

He tugged on his jeans and changed shirts.

“So, you what? Ran my date by him?”

“No.” He stuck his head out the door at Lucy’s long pause. She blushed. He rolled his eyes and waved a hand in a *C’m on* circle. *Yes, yes. We know you’ve overstepped your bounds again. Get on with it.* “I wanted to find out what was going on with him, since you were being such a closemouthed bastard about it all.”

He smashed toothpaste on his toothbrush and brought tube and brush out into his bedroom with him. Lucy didn’t look away as he pinned her with a look. Telling her about shopping at Jay’s store had obviously only encouraged her. Then again, he hadn’t told her anything about Tuesday night’s disastrous finale. “You didn’t think that maybe it wasn’t any of your business?”

“That’s what he said,” she admitted. “But he was *into* you, Dev. If he thought he was hiding that in his emails, he sucks at covert activity. And I know you’re into him.”

"Listen, Luce. I know you mean well, but don't push, okay?" He stuck his toothbrush in his mouth and squeezed his last warning around the edges. "I mean it."

"Fine." The set of Lucy's mouth was mutinous. "But I still think he's into you. I feel bad. I think I screwed this up."

He headed for the front hall coat rack, stopping to kiss his sister on the head. "It's not your fault. But you could always let me off the hook for the rest of the dates."

"No way, dude. Maybe he'll ask me how they're going and get jealous."

"Maybe."

He doubted it. Devin knew he was going to do that stupid wishing on eyelashes or pennies in fountains shit, because he was an optimistic and superstitious dumbass, but he figured his best-case scenario was the chance to shop now and then for pants that made his ass look good from a guy who made his heart stutter.

It wasn't much, but it would have to be enough.

\*\*\*\*

An hour into his date with Matt, the restaurant manager, Devin had to admit Lucy had done a much better job of it this time around. Matt was smart, funny, good-looking, and had no qualms about kicking Devin's ass in eight-ball at the pool hall on the edge of Boystown where they'd opted to meet. The place was more dive than gay bar, but the lack of crowds meant they could keep the table for as long as they wanted.

Matt's repertoire of entertaining stories from his restaurant meant Devin had laughed more in the first ten minutes of this date than he had in the entire disastrous evening he'd spent with Tad, before Jay rescued him.

Jay.

The root of his entire problem right now. Every thought led back to Jay somehow, even if the twisty turns of his brain to get there were labyrinthine. Going out on a date, introducing himself to someone new... Hell, even going to the bathroom to take a leak made him think of texting Jay from the john at Grid.

Matt was patient with Devin's occasional moments of distraction, but it was clear he sensed their lack of connection. The restaurant manager was younger

than Devin was, although not Jay-young, tall and wiry with dark hair clipped short and cheekbones you could cut yourself on. If Devin had spotted him in a club two weeks ago, he'd have had that shit on lockdown before his second beer was finished.

Things were different now.

Devin shook his head and leaned over the pool table. He could feel Matt's eyes on him and knew that in a different scenario—on a date with someone else... with Jay—he would be playing it up, sticking his ass out as he bent over the table until he provoked a remark or, better yet, a grab. But he just wasn't feeling it and this perfectly nice guy deserved better.

He'd somehow managed to stay in this game until the very end and lined up his shot, an easy cut into the corner pocket that only required him to avoid scratching by letting the cue ball ricochet off into the adjacent corner. To his surprise, he sank the shot perfectly, eight ball dropping cleanly into the pocket while the cue ball bounced harmlessly around the table. Matt's smile for him at his first win was genuine and when they shook hands, Devin was aware that their clasp lasted longer than a strictly polite handshake would.

He waited to feel something. That slow burn of waking desire. The quick mental speculation about what it would be like to get naked with a guy

Nothing.

He let go of the other man's hand.

"Listen, Matt." No matter how nice you wanted to be, this was always the sucky part. His stomach roiled a little. Was he being an idiot here? Probably. "You're a great guy." God, worst lead-in ever.

Matt's smile was generous. "But you're not feeling it."

"God, I'm sorry. But no."

"That's okay. There's no knowing who'll click. That's why we go out on dates, right?" His date shrugged and tipped his head toward the pool table. "I'm having fun anyway. Another game?"

"Sure." He pulled the solid and striped balls from pockets and rolled them down to the opposite end of the table where Matt racked them. Devin racked his brain for any spark of interest. What was wrong with him that this guy didn't do it for him? *He's a smart, fun guy who's not so young that he's out of your league, like Jay was...*

God, when would every thought his fucked-up brain crapped out not wind its way to Jay? *Who would be all over this guy probably. Matt's exactly what he said he wanted.*

Devin froze.

Matt was exactly what Jay had said he wanted.

Ah, hell.

He yelled at himself—on the inside, no need to alert bystanders to the level of crazy being achieved at this point—for being an overachieving idiot. Nobody was this noble. On the other hand, if he wanted to show Jay he really meant it, that they could be friends, what better way?

Hell in a motherfucking handbasket.

Devin's sigh was loud enough to catch Matt's attention. "So, I have this friend."

"Oh god, you're not going to set me up with someone."

"No. Well, maybe." *Because I have lost my ever-lovin' mind.* "He's a terrific guy. Smart, funny, hot as hell. He's in retail management, so I'm sure he can go toe-to-toe with your horror stories."

"And you're not dating him why?"

Devin blushed. "He's made it clear he isn't interested."

Matt raised a perfectly groomed eyebrow. "Or else you would..."

"Tie him to my bed and not let him up for a week?" He shrugged, feeling kind of stupid. "Hell, yeah."

"So, what? You want to give me his number?" Matt racked the triangle of balls, giving it a sharp shake to keep them tightly packed as he lined up the top of the rack with the circle spot. Then he lifted the plastic rack carefully and slung it back into the slot in the end of the table.

The whole operation was so sexily competent that Devin tried to talk himself out of this stupid plan. But he held his breath for a moment, waiting, and it still didn't work between the two of them. Before the sighing reached teenage girl with a stupid crush proportions, he cut to the chase. "I was thinking I'd give him a call right now. I could introduce you two and head out."

Matt twisted his cue tip into one of the tiny cubes of blue chalk, his grin like lightning on a hot night. "Why not? Call him up."

Devin pulled out his phone and hit *Contacts*. At the last second, he touched the text message icon instead of *Call*. The odds of Jay picking up a phone call from him were not great, but he'd bet cash money Jay couldn't resist looking at a text message.

*Yeah, and look at how well your bets have served you so far.*

Enough with the bickering. Jesus. The voices in his head were getting out of control. He swiped the message before he could second-guess himself any further.

*Hi. Date three: great guy, no spark. Just realized you'd probably like him. Told him about you & he's interested. We'll be at Halsted Billiards for another hour if you want to meet him. I'll head out when/if you get here.*

He pressed *Send* and tried to not flinch.

\*\*\*\*

Jay pulled on the bar door's icy metal handle and wondered if he could clock himself with it, leaving his unconscious body to be stepped over by Devin and Date Three on their eventual way home to the night of raging porn sex they were obviously going to have after punking the stupid guy who showed up *again* after a shout out from the man he'd promised himself he wouldn't pursue.

*But I'm not pursuing him. I'm after his date this time.*

He stepped into the dive bar and let his eyes adjust, bracing himself for crowd of vaguely bathed hipsters. Or a motorcycle gang.

*Listen to yourself. Clearly all decision-making responsibilities should be removed from your job description, you moron.*

The place was half-full of small groups, mixed gender, and seemed relatively clean. The bartender had her white blonde hair in pinup girl rolls and had a full sleeve of tattoos on both arms. She was also older than Jay's mother and scrutinized his ID long enough to make him question if he somehow wasn't old enough to be in a bar after all. Maybe this was Bizarro World.

*Maybe that would explain your inability, again, to make a decision and stick to it.*

He ordered a cheap bottled beer so he wouldn't mourn it if the situation turned squicky and he had to jet in a hurry. He pushed a five across the bar and



waved off the change, grabbing his beer by the neck and bracing himself to look for Devin and his, Jay's, date.

For days now, each time his phone's blue alert light started blinking, indicating he had a text or an email, every muscle in Jay's body would tense, an all-over spasm that hit him like a jolt of electricity. Every time. He tried to hold off, to look at messages and emails only from time to time instead of as soon as they came in, but that blinking light was like a finger smushed on a doorbell, a buzzing in his head that wouldn't go away until he answered. Or at least looked.

When he saw Devin's name pop up on his screen, his pulse had fluttered and he'd had to wrench a deep breath into his chest to get enough oxygen out of the suddenly thin air. Simply seeing Devin's name flooded him with memories, as if he'd been body-slammed back to last Tuesday in an instant. The dark quiet car. The harsh pull of their breaths. The wet heat of Devin's mouth on him as his hips flew off the seat. The inevitable humiliation when he realized that he'd done it again. Fallen for another older man with more status than him—and you could say that shit didn't matter all you wanted, but Jay knew from experience that the real professional men, the lawyers and doctors and Indian chiefs, didn't hesitate to slap you down to your face when your job was pushing sixty-dollar button-downs. He'd sworn he wouldn't do this to himself again. Wouldn't put himself in a position where he was ashamed of what he did for a living and made to feel worthless by the man he dated. He didn't even really care if Devin meant to do it, because it would happen. There was just no way to balance out that kind of inequality.

And yet here he was again. Acting like the man's beck-and-call girl.

The bartender indicated a dark hall at the end of the bar when Jay asked about pool tables. The hall itself was short and he paused at the entrance to the back room to get the lay of the land.

“Jay!”

Just his luck. Devin and Date Three were at the table nearest the door. He plastered a smile on his face. His cheeks felt like ice cracking under a heavy weight. Handshakes and awkward introductions all around were next, Devin's date the only one who seemed at ease.

“Well, guess I'm outta here.” Devin shrugged into his parka and took a step toward the hall before pausing. “Um, have fun. I guess.”

He turned to leave and the words ripped out of Jay before he could stop them. "So, this isn't gonna count?"

Devin spun on his heel in an instant and came back. "What?"

"Unless you've already, you know." Jay made a kiss face and appropriate noises, thereby relegating himself to the third grade.

Devin turned pink and sputtered. "No. I hadn't mentioned..."

Oh, Jay would get more than his fair share of pleasure out of putting Devin on the spot this time. Echoes of their first date—*not a date!*—rang in him like a bell. "If he doesn't kiss you, then this date doesn't count toward the bet, right?"

"The bet?" The hot, dark-haired guy clearly wasn't clued in to the grand plan.

Devin's pink bordered on purple as Jay spilled the details of the wager in all their embarrassing glory.

But when Matt laughed and said, "You guys are crazy. Sure, I'm good for it," Jay didn't feel as if he'd won this round at all.

Or if he had, it was because everyone else was playing some other game. Watching Devin kiss this guy—walking around the corner of the pool table first and why couldn't they have leaned over it, because a brush of their lips would do, wouldn't it?—scritch'd at Jay's equilibrium until he accidentally slammed his beer bottle down on the rail. The cheap lager foamed up and out of the longneck and his curses broke up the kissing couple who theoretically didn't have any connection, so what the fuck was that about anyway? Then he spotted Matt's finger hooked through one of Devin's belt loops as the older man turned to Jay and figured that for all he'd made a good impression on Devin, the restaurant manager was clearly a player.

Devin was the one who retrieved a bar rag from the front room and mopped up the mess, lingering over the wipe down long enough to get funny looks from Matt. Finally, he balled up the dirty towel and nodded at them.

"Right. See you." Devin wiped a palm on his pants and shook hands with Matt before turning to Jay.

To Jay's surprise, after a brief hesitation, he was folded in a quick hug. Devin's bulky coat billowed under his cheek and he caught himself squeezing back with his arms around the older man's waist. They separated quickly.

"Be good." The corner of Devin's mouth pulled back in half a smile.

"I always am, baby." He mustered up a wink.

"I know."

The quiet that lingered after Devin's exit crumbled under the sudden clatter of another table's winner scattering the initial rack with a fierce break.

"Game?" Matt asked.

"Sure." *Shake it off, Jay. Why else did you come out tonight if not to hang out with this guy that Devin thinks you'll like?* "Fair warning though. I suck."

Matt pressed his lips together for a moment before laughing. "I'm gonna let that one just sail by."

An epidemic of blushing was breaking out on the north side that night apparently. Jay's cheeks felt as if they were on fire. Where he'd normally flirt back, his regular banter suddenly felt awkward and inappropriate. "Thanks. Why don't I rack and you can break?"

An hour later, it was clear that while Matt was charismatic enough to charm the pants off a virgin prom queen, which was damn near what Jay had been in his senior year, the odd start to their evening made any kind of real flirtation too funky to pursue. After his second loss, Jay congratulated Matt and slid his cue into the wall-mounted rack.

"Are we done?"

"Yeah, maybe. I don't know. My head's not in the game."

"No worries. We can head out if you want." At Jay's lifted eyebrow, Matt laughed. "No subtext intended. That thing between you and Devin still feels a little sticky to me. I'd like to go out with you again though, on a night that doesn't start with me seeing someone else." By the end of his speech, Matt had eased himself close enough that Jay had to tip his head back to look Matt in the eyes. The little zing that came from knowing he held a hot guy's attention skittered along Jay's spine, but he let it fizzle out unacknowledged.

"We could maybe do that."

That maybe hadn't slipped by Matt, who looked willing to hang tough. "Do you live in the neighborhood? I'm headed to the El."

"So you're not going to try to pay for my cab ride home?" He bit his tongue. That question sounded hella obnoxious out of context.

"I'm a restaurant manager, Jay. Every server on my staff makes more money than I do. I'll guard your ass on the El though."

Jay grinned. It was still kind of weird that Devin had set him up with his own date, but Matt was certainly the kind of guy he'd been looking for. If he didn't quite feel it, he was being an idiot. *Suck it up. This is your guy.* "Deal."

On their way out the door though, he thought he saw a familiar figure, head down, puffy coat still on, at the end of the bar closest to the door. As if Devin had almost made it out to the street before changing his mind. When Devin spotted him and then ducked his head, Jay jogged away from Matt with a quick "Wait up!" and slid into the gap next to Devin at the bar.

"Jay." Devin's eyes were at half-mast and he swayed toward Jay before carefully righting himself. Even his careful articulation of the name couldn't hide the fact that he was completely and utterly hammered.

"Hey, Devin." Jay braced a hand on the other man's shoulder, in case Devin was as liquefied as he looked. "What are you still doing here?"

Slow blink. "You're leaving. With Matt." Devin stared over Jay's shoulder to where the restaurant manager was waiting at the double doors to the outside.

"I'm leaving at the same *time* as Matt. Not *with* him." He didn't know why he felt the need to explain himself. And based on the blank, blurred look on Devin's face, subtle vocabulary choices were a bit too much of a challenge for him right now. "How are *you* getting home? You didn't drive, did you?"

Devin tried to make a scoffing raspberry noise and mostly succeeded in spitting on Jay. Nice. Good to know the guy he hadn't been able to stop thinking about for days couldn't hold his liquor worth a damn. "Think I'm gonna need a walk."

Jay rolled his eyes. *That* was so not happening. "Yeah, right." He looked over his shoulder to find that Matt had come up behind him. He waved a hand at Devin, encompassing the situation. "Look, I can't leave him here. You go. I'm gonna get him home."

"Need any help?"

"Nah. I got it."

Matt gave him a nod and a two-finger salute before heading out the door. Jay turned to Devin in time to catch him draining the last of his pint and waving the bartender over.

"Oh, no way, *papi*." The nickname slipped out and he grunted. *Whoops. Not your daddy.* He wedged a shoulder in Devin's armpit to keep him upright and signaled the bartender to total up the check. When he saw the credit card

receipt, he squeaked. "Forty dollars? How many beers have you had?" Devin started pinching his fingers to his thumb. Index. Middle. Ring. Lost count and started over. "Okay, we obviously don't have time for that question. Sign the slip, drunken one."

The cab ride was manageable, after he finally wrestled Devin's wallet from him and got his address from his license.

Shoving Devin up the stairs to the unit on the second floor of the two-flat was an exercise in not paying attention to the perfectly muscled ass under his hands.

Jay gave Devin three tries at inserting the key into the deadbolt lock before he took them away. Five minutes later, he figured out that Devin hadn't been using the right key. Once inside, he fumbled for a light switch and then made a beeline for the first large piece of furniture he saw, an oversized couch up against the wall opposite the front door. He rolled Devin off his shoulder and onto the cushions, then made him sit up so Jay could pull off his jacket. While he was pulling Devin's mucky boots off, the man himself pried a bleary eye open and stared at him.

"Jay."

"That's me, buddy. How you feeling?"

"Maybe I'm gonna puke."

"Excellent. Wait here." He left Devin sprawled on the chocolate brown leather couch and went in search of a bathroom. The entire apartment was unlit but airy, white walls and hardwood floors, giant unframed canvases on the walls that looked like painted black and white photographs of rainy city streets. The first door to the right on the hallway leading back from the living room was a bathroom—a powder room, he supposed, just a toilet and a sink—which meant that he didn't have an excuse to snoop further, damn it. Jay snagged the tiny wastebasket from the cabinet under the white bowl of a sink and brought it back to the front room.

"Here. Puke in this." He dropped the bucket next to the couch. Hands on his hips, he eyed Devin, who'd managed to pull himself into a sitting position. "We good here?"

"You're leaving?" Devin flung himself onto his back, betrayal writ large on his face.

"You think I'm gonna stay here with you all night?"

Even Devin's shrug lurched. "I drank all the beers." He rolled back onto his side and lifted his head, thwacking his palm against the seat cushion until Jay sat down and let Devin drop his drunk-ass head in his lap.

"That you did, my friend." He flexed his thigh involuntarily and Devin's head rocked.

"Am I?"

"Are you what?"

"Your friend."

Jay sighed. Shit. "Yes. Yes, you are." He ran his fingers through Devin's short blond hair as the heat of Devin's cheek soaked into his leg. Devin rocked his head, rubbing his face against the denim.

"That's good. 'Fraid you'd say no way. So I drank—"

"All the beers, yes." He kept threading his fingers through soft hair and pretended it was for Devin's sake. "And you want to be my friend."

"Yeah. You're smart and funny and really nice even when you're cranky." Devin half-droned his litany of charms and the words tugged at Jay, even if he didn't expect Devin to remember a damn word of this conversation in the morning. It was kind of sweet. It was the way he'd always wanted someone to see him. Jay's stomach flipped. *It was the way he wanted someone to see him.* Devin was still talking. "Want to. Even if you won't let me suck you again."

Jay's dick jumped. Having Devin's face two inches from his crotch suddenly seemed like the world's worst idea. His balls pulled up and the vibrations from Devin's mumbling traveled across his skin like circles on a pond after you threw a pebble in. Except each word Devin muttered was another pebble and Jay was so full of ripples his skin hummed.

"What the hell am I going to do with you now?"

He guessed the snoring was a decent reply.

By the time Jay slipped out the door at two a.m., leaving a sleeping Devin under a blanket on the couch, he still had no clue what the answer to that question was.

Just a small, quiet voice in the corner of his mind, whispering to him.

This *is your guy.*

## Chapter Six

Jay was a mess.

On the other hand, every button-down, T-shirt, pair of jeans, sweater, or scarf on the boutique floor was in perfect order. Hell, he'd even reorganized their display of tastefully colorful socks.

Control on the outside. Chaos on the inside.

Tracy was about ready to push him over the safety rail of the atrium balcony outside the boutique's entrance.

"For Christ's sake, what is your problem?" His boss had done a complete one-eighty on the topic after a week of listening to Jay say absolutely nothing about Devin Hollister.

After five years together on the mall floor, Tracy didn't need words to know exactly what was going on in Jay's tortured brain. "Just call him! Email. Text. Whatthefuckever. You're obviously halfway in love with this guy or you'd be bitching to me about him nonstop."

This was true.

But god, he couldn't. He'd promised himself that he'd never be that kid again, the one who fell for a slick line and couldn't hold firm to a single decision he made for himself if a hot, older man who wanted to show him off was on the horizon.

Problem was, a niggling little voice in his brain kept pointing out that Devin was the opposite of slick. That he almost never pushed, and when he did, was willing to back off immediately at Jay's command.

No. It didn't matter. Jay couldn't afford to second-guess himself.

He couldn't handle that back and forth again. Not and find himself whole afterward.

"I made up my mind, Tracy. I made it up the first night." He sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, making sure to leave it as carefully tousled as before. "And I've been screwing it up ever since. It's Carl, version two point oh."

His boss opened her mouth. Shut it. Bit her lip. Jay crossed his arms high on his chest and forced a loud exhale. Waited patiently.

Okay, waited.

“Did you ever think maybe you got it wrong?”

Overnight inventory counts left behind a bond you didn't bullshit. “Every day.”

Tracy wrapped him in a firm hug because she was halfway to being the world's greatest mom before the kid even arrived. “Standing firm is great, kiddo, but so is admitting you made a mistake and fixing it.”

“How am I supposed to know the difference?” His voice was muffled in her hair until the baby kicked him and he jumped back. He was convinced that kid didn't like him already.

“You just have to feel it. Listen to your heart.” He scowled at her. “Yes, you could choke on the cheese but there's a reason people say it. Listen to your goddamn heart, Jay.” She crossed her arms and rested them on her bulging stomach.

“You know, you can't talk with that kind of potty mouth once the sprout shoots out your vajayjay.”

“Gross.” Even the mother-to-be flinched at that image. It was possible he'd taken things too far. Tracy narrowed her eyes at him again. “Your heart, dipshit.”

Jay bit his lip, right on the sore spot where he'd been gnawing ever since getting an email from Lucy. “I know where his next date is.”

Tracy's dramatic gasp would've made him laugh if this weren't so frigging important. She pressed her fingertips to the corners of her mouth. “Holy shit. You can go there and declare your love and win him forever.”

Jay groaned out loud. “Oh my god, that's exactly what I was thinking, which means it's a terrible idea.”

“What?”

“Your last romantic decision knocked you up and skipped town.” Tracy glared at him. *Danger, Will Robinson*. But it was true and he knew their friendship could take the truth. “And mine made me embarrassed to admit that I work here, at this job that I love, with the best boss in the universe.”

“You have to do it, Jay. You've gotta know.”

He was pretty sure that made up for the knocked up thing. There were stampeding buffalo in his belly. “What if it's the worst idea ever?”



“It won’t be. Because you know it’s right.”

\*\*\*\*

For once, Lucy had set up Devin on a date in a gay bar. Jay didn’t know if she was finally getting the hang of things or if Devin had pointed out that maybe the first time two gay men got together it might be more comfortable to do so in a setting where, if someone was staring at them, it was with admiration, and not a prelude to a gay-bashing.

In any case, Boystown was jumping for a Wednesday night and Jay had to thread his way through drifting bunches of men on Halsted Street, dodging the occasional smack to his ass from men he would maybe recognize if he could be bothered to look at anything other than the battered hammered aluminum sign spelling out the name of the bar at the end of the block.

For the first time ever, Jay shivered in his leather jacket and wished he had one of those fugly down parkas. He wished he was bundled up in something warm and unshakably cozy. The sidewalks were crazy icy, even though all the bars salted them heavily, hoping to avoid cracking their drunk patrons’ skulls. He shoved his hands under his armpits and nodded to the regular bouncer.

Inside the bar, he ignored the nods and waves of half a dozen guys he knew. Well, knew biblically, even if he wasn’t entirely sure of all their names.

*That’s why you’re here. Because that shit is fucking old and I’m still a babe in the woods. Imagine what it’s like to be an old dude, walking in here at fifty, knowing there isn’t anyone left for you to bang who doesn’t already know that you fart in your sleep.*

And maybe his eyes had frigging radar now for Devin, because it didn’t take Jay more than two minutes to spot him across the room on a stool at the back bar next to what was undoubtedly Date Four. The idea of having to tap Devin on the shoulder kind of made Jay want to pass out, so he approached from an angle that allowed Devin to spot him walking up.

“Jay?” Devin half rose off his barstool.

“Hey.” Jay nodded at the man next to Devin who was twisting around on his own stool to see who was interrupting them. “Sorry to interrupt. You got a sec?”

Devin sat up straighter and squinted at him, tilting his head. “I’m—”

“I know,” Jay interrupted, feeling his nerve drain away like water, leaving him a hollow, shivering shell. This was a terrible idea. “Just one minute.”

He stepped away, far enough not to be able to hear what Devin said when he leaned closer to his date, a ripped black dude with a shaved head and a goatee.

“Hey. What’s up? Are you okay?”

Of *course* he would ask that. Because Devin was a good guy and if Jay weren’t so fucked in the head he would have figured that out from the beginning and wouldn’t be standing here, about ten seconds from puking on his own shoes with nerves.

“Here’s the thing.” He couldn’t do it. Couldn’t look Devin in the eye. So he stared at the floor and blurted it out. “I think I made a mistake.”

“A mistake?”

Imagine Dragons faded out and Jay caught himself in time to avoid shouting his reply into the quiet between songs. As quiet as a bar half full of gay men got at least.

“When I said we shouldn’t, um, date.”

“Really.”

“Pretty sure.”

“Okay, well, that’s, uh, good to know. But I have...” Devin looked back over his shoulder to where his date sat.

Jay’s eyes stung. His chest was tight. Right. He’d known the potential for humiliation was huge, but he’d really thought...

*What? Did you think he was going to dump his date when you laid yourself out like some kind of shitty brunch dessert at Old Country Buffet? Even if he wanted to take pity on you, he’s not the kind of guy to ditch someone.*

*He never ditched you once. But he sure has moved on.*

“I gotta go.” His voice rasped in his throat. Devin opened his mouth as if he was going to say something, but Jay couldn’t bear to hear it. He spun around and booked it for the exit.

Worst. Idea. Ever.

\*\*\*\*\*

“You’re gonna go get him, right?” his date asked when Devin took halting steps back to his barstool, trying to process the whirlwind that had just picked

him up, tossed his pockets for loose change, and slammed him to the ground again.

*Get him. Him.*

*Jay.*

He blinked at his date, a handsome man who was smiling like he'd seen stranger things a hundred times before.

*Yes, go get him, you asshole.*

Devin was already grabbing his coat. "Hell, yes. Sorry." His date's name had flown right out of his brain. He dug through his pockets for his wallet.

His lovely, wonderful, too late to the dance, fourth date waved him off. "I got it. Go get your man."

He punched his fists into sleeves that tangled with bar patrons' elbows as he pushed his way to the door. Every twink and his bear blocked his path to the exit, until Devin wanted to roar with frustration. He burst out the doors and nearly landed on his ass as the ice slid his booted feet out from under him. He kept himself upright with a hand on the bouncer, who didn't look as if he appreciated it.

"Sorry. Have you seen—" A group of giggling suburbanite-looking kids pushed past him and the bouncer eased him out of the way, demanding ID or a perfect ass to get in the door.

*Where the fuck was he?*

Devin would track Jay down sooner or later, he knew it. Even if he had to do something as fundamentally crass as show up at his place of employment wearing a trench coat and holding a boom box over his head, a reference that would undoubtedly get Devin a blank look. But this was Jay, who had issues Devin had only fumbled around the edges of and he didn't know how far off the rails Jay could drive himself in twenty-four hours. Or longer, if he didn't work tomorrow and didn't answer his phone.

He took a guess and headed north, because it was that way to the El. He pushed it with a slow jog, hands spread wide at his sides like a tightrope walker, sliding across the sidewalk square and looking like an idiot because he didn't give a shit if only he could find Jay.

At the nearest street corner he skidded to a halt, sliding on the ice until his toes hit the curb and a cab rounding the corner honked at him to back off as it sped by.

*Where is he? Shit. Where is he?*

He scanned both sides of the street leading to the El station.

*C'mon. C'mon. He has to be here. He has to.*

His pulse was pounding in his ears, his hands shaking, and he didn't know why it felt like he might die if he couldn't find Jay right the fuck now, but it did. Who knew what kind of screwed up thoughts were running through Jay's head, all because Devin was too damn stupid, too slow to figure out what to do when the man he wanted more than anyone he'd ever known showed up in the middle of another stupid blind date. He'd seen the look on Jay's face, that crushing mix of humiliation and resignation, as if he knew exactly what it felt like already to come in second. As if he half expected it and yet was still smashed into pieces by the rejection.

*Jesus. Would it have killed you to tell him yes? Yes, I want you. Yes, I pick you. Above this guy. Above everyone.*

*Where is he?*

Then.

Barely fifty feet in front of him.

Skinny shoulders. Hunched in and barely covered in the world's stupidest leather jacket.

Relief made him dizzy. Made his knees wobble under him.

“Jay!” Heads turned, every pedestrian on the block.

Including the only one he wanted.

Jay froze, eyes wide and watching him as Devin jogged and slid and kept himself from falling through sheer determination to catch up. When he got close enough to talk without shouting, Jay shivered like a rabbit and bolted, calling over his shoulder, “Sorry. God, sorry.”

“Wait. Jay.” He grabbed Jay by the sleeve, but the other man spun away from him, walking backwards for a moment, words pouring out of him until he backed into a light pole.

“I'm sorry. I know that was out of line, busting in on your date like some kind of stalker. *Ouch.*” The pole halted him in his tracks but Jay's mouth kept running. “Jesus, I don't know what I was—”

Devin stopped Jay's babbling with his mouth. He smiled into the kiss and braced his hands on the light pole above Jay's head, licking his way into that suddenly silent mouth, until Jay opened underneath him and it was good. So good he mashed himself shoulder to ankle against Jay and tucked his face against the stupidly bare skin of Jay's neck. He was buying Jay a fucking proper winter coat for Christmas next year. Imagining Jay's reaction if he said that out loud, he smiled into the coat's collar. "I'm so glad you did. I pick *you*. Please, please, *please* tell me you're coming home with me."

"Oh, god yes."

\*\*\*\*

*Get up. You cannot fuck him on the stairs.*

But stopping was impossible when Jay's leg was wrapped around Devin's hip, groin rolling against his, one hand scrabbling to open Devin's coat, the other gripping his ass, as they sprawled where they'd stumbled on the staircase to the second floor. And Devin knew his sister wasn't deaf and wouldn't hesitate to come into the hall and bust them, but Jay was *humping his leg* and Devin was trying to avoid coming in his pants from the little moans that spilled out of Jay's mouth with every thrust.

"Have to." He fisted his hand in Jay's hair. Pulled the man's head back and sucked on his throat until Jay groaned again. Devin lifted his mouth, panting. "Get up."

"Can't. Unh." Jay opened Devin's coat and worked a hand up under his shirt. His fingers burned on Devin's back, fingernails scratching across his spine.

Devin arched his back, electricity shooting to his toes. Then he hunched over, dug his arms under Jay's, and hauled him to his feet. "Up. Now." He would physically manhandle this guy up the fucking steps if he had to.

Jay scrambled to get his feet beneath him and they made it to the top in half a breath. Getting his key in the lock was a challenge, with Jay pressed up behind him, hands up his shirt and digging past his waistband. The snick of the lock made him lightheaded with relief. He pulled away from Jay, grabbed him by the hand, and yanked him through the door, slamming it shut behind them and heading straight for his bedroom.

They toed their boots off and threw their coats on the armchair in the corner of the room that functioned as a clothes rack, grinning at each other and

breathing hard. Devin was halfway through wrestling his shirt over his head when Jay tackled him to the unmade bed. He pulled his arms and his head free and tossed his shirt to the floor, slinging a leg over Jay's hip and pulling him close, kissing him hard until they were gasping, hot and wet, against each other's mouths.

Jay's voice hummed and tickled against his lips. "How do you want me?"

The words *ass up and spread 'em* were at his teeth, when Devin paused. His chest rose and fell like bellows, the taste of Jay's skin on his tongue. Somewhere down the road he'd get the full story about Jay's ex, but he was pretty goddamn sure that what Jay wanted had come in pretty far down the list with that guy.

He sucked on Jay's bottom lip, testing his teeth gently against its fullness before pulling his face away. "This is your show, baby. You call the shots."

"Really?" Jay's voice couldn't have held more skepticism with a bucket. He slid his hands into the rear pockets of Devin's jeans and pushed their groins together. Rocking his hips against Jay's hard length, Devin closed his eyes for a second as pleasure tumbled him like a wave. "So if I say I want to fuck you..."

"Condoms and lube in the drawer." Devin lifted his chin at the nightstand behind Jay and smiled a little on the inside, because he knew he'd made the right call. "Just tell me if you want me to roll over or not."

Testing maybe, Jay tugged on Devin's hip, his eyes flaring as Devin tipped onto his stomach. The pillow was soft against his face as he raised his hips to let Jay work his jeans down his legs. He'd want to push that pillow down in a minute but right now he needed to bite it to keep the moans inside as Jay ran his hands back up Devin's legs, nudging them apart as he rose. Jay's thumbs dipped in between Devin's thighs, the backs brushing against his balls, before they pushed up and in and spread his cheeks apart. Cool air hit his ass and he clenched his hole.

"Shit," Jay muttered above him. "You know this is not gonna be my finest hour, right?"

"Oh, it's gonna be fucking fine."

"I'm just saying." Jay huffed a breath on Devin's lower back, making him shiver. The mattress rocked underneath him as Jay got off the bed and grabbed what he needed from the drawer, stripping his clothes off with porn star speed. Devin didn't move, eating up Jay—*naked Jay*—with his eyes. Especially Jay's

uncircumcised, brown dick, which he stroked twice, hard, staring back at Devin, before climbing back on the bed and kneeing Devin's legs further apart. The slick noise of a condom being rolled on hit his brain like pure adrenaline. He hunched his hips and shoved the pillow down under his belly. "Get ready." Jay laughed shortly. "Figure I'm gonna last about five minutes. Maybe."

Cool fingers slick against him, circling and brushing, until his quads started to shake and one slim finger slid deep on his shaky inhale. Pressing his mouth to the bare sheet, Devin tried to muffle his groan. A sharp slap landed on his ass, Jay's hand soothing the sting a moment later.

"Don't. I wanna hear. Please."

There wasn't anything he wouldn't give this man. He turned his face to the side and rested his cheek on the mattress, letting the sounds pour from his mouth as Jay moved inside of him. When he looked up, Jay was leaning over him, eyes fierce, dipping his head to bite at Devin's shoulder until the almost-pain arched his back. Devin's brain started to splinter, tracking the slow slide of fingers in his ass and the burn of a bruise being pulled to his skin.

"Jerk yourself. Now." The words slipped out on a moan as Jay's cock slipped in. Devin turned his face to the mattress after all and braced his forehead so he could push back against the burn, because it had actually been quite some time since he'd last done this, a fact he didn't really acknowledge until Jay's dick was lodged halfway up his ass.

But then his dick was hot and hard in his hands. The ache in his balls pushed him further back, and the pain didn't matter because it melted into a rush of fire in his blood that spilled out over his hand as he came, his ass clamping down on Jay's cock. Jay's shout tore through the night as his hips stuttered, held. The heavy weight of him collapsed against Devin's back.

Their breathing settled, sucking gasps gentling as the sweat cooled on his skin. Jay fumbled for the condom and eased off Devin, who rolled to his side and kind of regretted that pillow as Jay limped to the bathroom and switched on the too-bright light. Water ran and then the light shut off. Grabbing the only other pillow on the bed, Devin pushed it over for Jay, curling his own arm under his head. Close enough.

"Holy shit. I think I broke something." Jay clambered back onto the bed and pulled the covers over them both.

"My ass," Devin said, a little shaky with adrenaline.

“Really? Are you okay?” Jay sat up like a Jack-in-the-box. He reached out in the dark and patted down Devin’s torso.

Checking for a busted ass, Devin guessed and grinned. “You didn’t break it, goofball. That was awesome.”

“It was totally awesome.” Jay’s smile shone in his voice like diamonds.

“Totally.”

Jay snuggled up against Devin’s crotch and pulled one of Devin’s arms around him. The edge of the pillow nudging Devin’s face caught his attention as Jay pushed it back far enough to share.

“Here. Get yourself half of this, *papi*.”

“*Papi*? Thought you didn’t want one of those.”

“Yeah, well, it looks like I got one, right? Don’t want you getting a crick in your neck, old man.”

He smiled into the back of Jay’s neck. Stuck out his tongue and licked a stripe up the bumps of his vertebrae until Jay shivered in his arms. “Right.”

“None of that now.” But the younger man’s voice was gruff, rumbling in his belly. “You need your sleep.”

“Yeah?”

“Want you rested so you can fuck me in the shower tomorrow morning.”

Devin shut up and went to sleep.

\*\*\*\*

The alarm went off early enough that Devin tried to pull his spare pillow over his head to block out the slowly escalating beeps. But there was no second pillow. Moving the one under his cheek got him an extremely cute growl from the warm body in front of him.

Jay.

Recognition made him smile. Then he remembered words whispered in the dark and his smile split his face wide open in a huge grin. “Rise and shine, boy! Welcome to a brand new evolution.” He yanked the covers off the bed as he climbed over the curving body of his lover.

“Nooooo.” The thin wail came from under the pillow now as Jay ostriched himself.



“Yes! And I was promised sex, so get your butt out of bed.”

The pillow nailed Devin in the ass as he stepped into the bathroom. Taking a piss and brushing his teeth with someone else in the bathroom with him was weird. Something he'd never done before. He could get used to the company though if it came with orgasms like the one that had nearly broken him last night.

Jay smacked his butt as Devin leaned over the sink and spit. “Hurry up, old man, or you're gonna miss getting blown in the shower.”

“Listen, about this ‘old man’ thing.”

“Blown. In the shower.” Jay's voice floated over the shower curtain.

Devin threw his toothbrush in the general vicinity of the cupholder and hit speed dial on his phone.

“It's hella early, Dev.” Lucy's voice was sleep-raspy.

“Hey, Luce, listen, I need you to cancel date five.” Keep it simple. Keep it brief.

As if his sister did brief. “What? Hell, no. You're not welshing now, boyo. What's going on?”

“The thing is...” He tried to figure out how to put it without announcing that he needed to get his well-fucked ass into the shower with his new boyfriend.

A shout rose over the spatter of water hitting porcelain. “Tell her she got it right the first time.”

“Is that—” The gasp in his ear was the last thing Devin heard as he hung up on his sister.

He slid his phone on the counter next to the sink and pulled back the navy cloth shower curtain.

Winking with more sauce than a chocolate sundae, Jay glanced back over his shoulder and wiggled.

“Yeah she did,” Devin said, and got in.

**The End**

## **Author Bio**

*Amy Jo Cousins writes contemporary romance and erotica, both straight and LGBTQ, about smart people finding their own best kind of smexy. She lives in Chicago with her son, where she tweets too much, sometimes runs really far, and waits for the Cubs to win the World Series. Off Campus, an M/M contemporary romance, is the first book in her Bend or Break LGBTQ series from Samhain, launching December 30th, 2014.*

## **Contact & Media Info**

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#)