



*Misty  
Malone*

DEAD  
MEN  
GET NO  
TAIL

# *Dead Men Get No Tail*

A homoerotic novella by

MISTY MALONE

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# Chapter One

*Wednesday Afternoon*

One of the things Clay loved most about Jack Bowman was his ability to make an entrance. Sure, he was suave and cool, funny and charming, but no one could make a dramatic appearance quite like the University of Colorado's self-proclaimed God of the Senior Class.

"My life is over. Completely. Nothing left worth saving. Just kill me now."

*Speak of the devil*, Clay thought as Jack stormed into their dorm room and collapsed on top of the nearest bed.

Unfortunately, it happened to be the bed Clay currently occupied.

"Oof! Get off me, fucktard! I can't breathe."

"Life as we know it is *finité*, and all you can think about is breathing?" Jack rolled off and lay beside Clay in the bed. His hand settled on the curve of Clay's hip, a warm weight that made the blond hairs on the back of Clay's neck stand on end.

"Can I help you with something?" Clay asked, proud that his voice cracked only a little. Ever since the start of the school year, being so close to Jack made his body do weird things, like make his stomach churn or start his heart racing.

Fuck it all if he knew what it meant, though.

His dark-haired roommate sighed and stared at the ceiling as if searching for the meaning of life among the cracks, spit wads, and trophy condoms that had accumulated during their nine-month tenure in the room.

Clay watched Jack and waited.

*Three.*

*Two.*

*One.*

“Aren’t you even going to ask me what’s wrong?”

*Right on time.*

“Jack, after four years, I’ve learned to wait until your hissy fits are over before interrupting.” He sat up and stared down at his friend. “Are you done flouncing yet?”

“You’re cruel, Clayface. An ass, just like everybody else!” He rolled off the bed and stormed across the room, arms folded over his chest. Jack stared out the window instead of pacing like he usually did during his snits.

Clay began to think something might actually be wrong this time when Dominic and Miles came into the room, the former’s face bright red.

“Jesus, Bowman. It was just a joke!”

Jack kept his back turned. “There’s a lot of truth in jest, asshat. Didn’t your mom ever tell you that?”

“Yeah,” Dominic said. He scratched the back of his head. “And my dad told me to lighten up and not act like a girl. So what’s your problem?”

Jack didn’t answer. Instead, he huffed like, well, a *girl*.

Clay forced himself not to roll his eyes. “What happened this time?”

“Laura,” Miles said, grimacing.

*Ah. That explains it.* It wasn’t exactly a well-kept secret that Jack and Dominic’s latest conquest didn’t exactly see eye to eye. For example, Laura argued that their Resident Advisor Preston was really a smart, honest, good person at heart. Jack disagreed with the “being a person” part.

“What was the fight about this time?” Clay asked.

Dominic sighed. “Laura was talking about graduating next month, and how we all should’ve left a legacy or something for future classes to remember us by. Then Jack here had a shit fit!”

Jack turned, grabbed a pillow from Clay’s bed, and hurled it at Dominic’s head. It missed, but the calculus book he flung next didn’t. Dominic tried to dodge, didn’t make it, and ended up tripping over the pillow. He fell, his head making a not-so-pleasant *thud* on the ugly tiled floor. “*Mierda!*”

“Don’t you ‘*shit*’ me, you cocksucker,” Jack yelled.

Clay winced. He’d never liked that term.

“Your girlfriend said all I’d leave behind was a trail of STDs and illegitimate children,” Jack yelled. “And you laughed!”

Dominic shrugged. “Well, she’s right. I mean, you *have* slept with half the upperclassmen.”

“And there was that sophomore chick around Christmas, too,” Miles added.

Dominic pushed off the floor and stood up. “You are called *Jack-Off* for a reason. Face it. You’re a man-whore.”

Clay winced. He could *see* the explosion before Jack even opened his mouth.

Jack’s face turned red. He growled and clenched his fists. All he needed was steam shooting out of his ears to make the picture complete.

“I. Am not. A man-whore!”

“No?” Dominic folded his arms. “This month alone, you’ve done Tina, Jennie, Elizabeth, Whitley, and that skinny white chick with the weird name.”

“Whitney, you ass. At least try to get the names right.” Jack waggled his eyebrows and nodded towards Miles. “And which Elizabeth?”

Hey!” Miles shouted, shoving Jack. “If you touched my sister, I’ll kill you!”

Jack sighed. “We’re getting off topic. Can we focus here?”

Clay couldn’t decide if that was a good decision or not.

“Mitsubishi! That was her name,” Dominic said, snapping his fingers and looking proud of himself.

“Jackass, that’s a car,” Jack said.

“Eh, whatever. You still get the Dick of the Month award.”

“See?” Jack flung his arm towards Dominic and looked at Clay. “Again, back to me being a whore who hasn’t done anything meaningful in four fucking years.”

“Calm down, Jack,” Clay said. He put his hands on the taller man’s shoulders and squeezed, ignoring the strange flutter in his stomach as he did so. “Dominic didn’t mean it in a bad way. Just that you’ve been a little...loose this year.”

“Yeah.” Dominic snorted. “You’ve gotten more tail than the rest of us combined.”

Jack looked like he wanted to argue, but instead sighed and bowed his head. "It's not that."

"Then what's got your thong in a twist?" Dominic asked, leaning against Jack's dresser.

"Do...do you agree with Laura? That that's all people will remember me by? 'Jack Bowman, the No-Tell Motel?'"

Miles tried to hide his snicker. Unsuccessfully.

"See! I haven't done anything worth shit." Jack slouched towards his bed and collapsed face-first onto the mattress.

"You streaked across the field at the homecoming game," Miles offered. "People will remember you for *that*."

"Not like anyone can ever know about it, though," came the muffled response. "Wore a mask, remember?"

*Who could ever forget*, Clay thought with a shudder. *Hilary Clinton's face on a very male body.*

He fought the temptation to run his hands through Jack's thick, shoulder-length hair. "Hey, what about the fact that you've got A's and B's in most of your classes? Or that you're on the varsity soccer team? Those are both impressive."

"But what does any of that *mean*? My dad's a doctor, Mom's a lawyer, and my brother works for the Peace Corps. How could anything *I've* done be considered a legacy compared to that?" Jack rolled over and covered his face with his hands. "Ugh. This sucks. My life has no meaning."

Dominic and Miles looked at each other and shrugged. They were shit at handling Jack when he got like this. Clay was, too, but he hated seeing his friend so upset. He blew a piece of blond fringe away from his face and tried again. "Jack. Believe me, years after we've all left school, people will still remember you. Hell, I bet in seventy years, half the eulogies people give will say the highlight of their lives was meeting the great Jack Bowman."

Jack popped up from the bed so fast, he smashed headfirst into Clay. "Oww! Damn it!"

Before his eyes had a chance to refocus from the blue and black spots dancing in front of them, Jack grabbed Clay's shoulders and shook him like Big Tammy's tits on Wet T-Shirt Day. "What did you just say?"

"Uh, meeting you?"

"No! The other part!"



Clay thought his head might explode. Whether that would happen before or after he puked, he didn't know. "What other part?"

"Eulogies!"

Jack released him. Clay fell back on the bed and hit his head on the footboard.

*When the room stops spinning, I'm gonna kill him.*

"Eulogies. Like funerals. That's where people say nice shit about you and get all sad and stuff, right?"

"Er, yeah," Miles said. He looked as confused as Clay felt.

The light of mischief and mayhem shone in Jack's blue-gray eyes. Clay felt something inside him shrivel up and die. Nothing good could come from that look. Nothing at all.

"I should have a funeral!"

Miles made a sound like a dying cat.

Dominic's jaw flapped up and down a couple of times until he finally came up with, "*Que joder le pasa a este tipo? Esta loco.*"

Clay didn't exactly find the sound of that encouraging. He'd only gotten two words out of that: *fucking* and *crazy*.

*Yeah. Pretty much sums it up.*

He took a deep breath. Once again, the task of knocking some sense into his Drama Queen roommate fell into his lap, even if he had to use a baseball bat to do it.

"Gotta do it soon, before finals start. We'll send out invitations, and put up flowers and posters and shit, and maybe we could get some restaurant on The Hill to cater the food," Jack rambled. "Do you think we should have a band?"

Clay got to his feet, a bit wobbly after the recent abuse to his skull. "Jack. I think you're missing one, rather important, kinda vital thing here."

Jack stopped ticking off ideas on his fingers and looked genuinely surprised that any facet of his Great Awesome Scheme could be anything less than stellar. "What's that?"

Whatever remained of Clay's patience evaporated in the face of Jack's complete denial of reality. "In order to have a funeral, you have to be *dead*, you moron!"

Jack waved him off. "Details, Clayface. No, really, we'll tell people that it's a fake wake. Just a way to bring everyone

together before we leave school and find out what legacy I'll leave behind. It'll be perfect!"

In Clay's experience, *perfect* meant *problem*.

## Chapter Two

*Thursday Afternoon*

“So, what makes Shakespeare such a great writer, even in terms of the modern age?”

Personally, Clay couldn't give a rat's ass about Shakespeare or his hippie-looking-for-a-tree-to-hug professor. He hadn't slept at all last night; his thoughts stuck on Jack's supremely stupid idea.

*A funeral. What the fuck?*

Death wasn't funny. At all. Clay had already been to too many funerals in his life, and he was only twenty-one.

All night, he'd replayed Jack's words in his head, and no matter what he tried, he couldn't get them to stop. Around three AM, he'd given up trying to sleep and grabbed a book to read out in the dorm hallway where he didn't have to worry about waking Jack.

*Not like I got any reading done. Stupid Jack. Stupid scheme. Stupid me for going along with it.*

Clay sighed. If he was honest with himself, it wasn't thoughts of the funeral that had kept him up all night.

He'd been thinking about Jack.

Clay didn't know when it started, or why, but lately, all he could think about was Jack. Like how the guy would throw his head back whenever he laughed, or how his soccer jersey clung to his sweaty chest after practice, or the way he'd wear his towel lopsided after a shower.

A breath caught in his throat. Clay gasped. An erection, rock-solid, throbbed against his denim jeans.

*Oh, fuck.*

He crossed his legs under his desk and prayed the teacher wouldn't look his way. Clay never raised his hand in this class, and he sure as hell didn't want to raise something else.

*Think unsexy thoughts. Uh...ice fishing. C-Span. Hippie-Lady on the rag.*

*Yup. That did it.*

The uncomfortable bulge in his pants deflated, making him feel strangely empty. He flopped against the back of his chair and hid his face behind a curtain of sandy-colored hair, praying no one glanced in his direction.

He'd *never* gotten a woody in class before. What the hell happened? He was just thinking about Jack and...

*No.*

*No fucking way.*

Just because his body reacted like...like *that*, didn't mean he was *interested* in Jack or anything. He was a guy; he couldn't control it. Erections happened wherever and whenever they wanted to.

Didn't mean he was gay. Nope. Not at all.

"Well, what about the homoerotic overtones in Hamlet?" Hippie-Lady's voice broke through Clay's funk. "Let's talk about the relationship between Rosencrantz and Guildenstern."

*That* caught his attention.

A small brunette in the first row raised her hand. "Well, I for one find it appalling that modern readers skew the text just to fit their own perceptions. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern were Hamlet's friends. Nothing more. I am so sick of people slashing every male character in a book, just because they're there!"

Slash? What the hell was slash?

The professor nodded and adjusted the glittery scarf-thing around her shoulders. "I understand your viewpoint, Chloe. But you can't ignore the Bard's own notes, or the hundreds of scholarly essays that have been written on the subject."

Chloe slammed her pen down on her notebook. "It's that line of thought that gives free range to anyone with an Internet connection and a perverted imagination."

A blonde across the room raised her hand. "Shakespeare wrote this stuff in, like, what, the 1600s? Did people even *talk* about gay sex back then?"

Hippie-Lady walked over to her desk and leaned against it. “It’s true that the subject was rarely broached in written literature during the time. At least, not in overt format. But what about in subtext? Where do we, as educated readers, draw the line between hidden messages the author gives us, versus what we think we *want* to see?”

Those last words hit Clay like a car wreck—the really bad kind you can’t rip your eyes away from, no matter how hard you try.

That was it. Exactly. He was so focused on how he *wasn’t* gay, of course he’d start *thinking* he was. He and Jack were together so much, being roommates and all—of course Clay’s subconscious would make his body all twitchy and tingly every time he thought about his dark-haired best friend.

Clay took a deep breath. Now that he knew the *why*, he had to figure out a way to make it stop.

*All right. I’m not lusting after my roommate. Which means, something else set me off. Or someone.*

Clay looked around the room. The girls in the class were all engaged in debate with the professor, while the guys looked about as interested as a frog on dissection day. Could Chloe have gotten that reaction out of him? She was cute, he supposed, in a preppy “more pretentious than thou” kinda way. But she had nice hair, all long and thick and so black it looked almost blue. And her tits’ size didn’t hurt, either.

Maybe *that’s* what he had to do! He hadn’t been on a date in a while, not since freshman year. So of course his body was one giant raging hormone.

*I should ask that Chloe girl out. She’s smart, not hard on the eyes. Yeah, I think a date’s exactly what I need to get over this...whatever it is.*

A breeze blew past him. Clay looked up.

*Shit!*

Class was over, and the lecture hall was emptying save for the professor and the brown-noser students acting all interested in what she had to say.

Clay rolled his eyes, grabbed his backpack and notebook, then ran out of the classroom. Chloe couldn’t have gotten too far ahead, right?

He ran down the hallway and took the stairs three at a time, racing into the Student Union courtyard just outside Hellem's Hall. Someone had put laundry detergent in the fountain again; it looked like a giant foam party. Several students had taken off their shoes and waded through the white suds, kicking bubble clusters at their friends or unsuspecting passerby.

Clay scanned the quad, heart pounding. That was a good sign, that this Chloe chick could make his heart race, right?

He ignored the little voice that said, *because you just sprinted down three flights of stairs, moron.*

Then, a flash of long dark hair caught his attention. Clay ran towards the entrance of the Union, where Chloe tried to balance a book, a beverage, a salad, and the glass door all at once.

"Hey! Here, let me help," Clay said as he grabbed the door from her.

"Thanks." She straightened her lunch items, then looked up at him. He hadn't realized she was so short. Or that her eyes were brown. For some reason, he thought they'd be blue. Or gray.

"So, you have a name, or are you just going to stare at me all day?"

Clay shook his head. "Oh! Um, sorry. I'm Clay. Clay Parkinson."

"Okay, Clay Clay Parkinson. I'm Chloe Vandermeer," she answered with a smirk.

An uncomfortable blush warmed his cheeks. "Oh, I know. We're in Professor Heggert's Shakespeare class together. Great class, isn't it? I mean, good discussions and debates and, er, stuff." Clay mentally smacked himself. When the hell did he develop verbal diarrhea? At least he remembered to call their professor by her real name, though.

Chloe rolled her eyes. "The only thing Heggert's good at is getting stoned. Burnt-out hippie."

Clay burst out laughing. "Thank God. I thought I was the only one who thought that!"

She smiled, then started to walk towards one of the wrought iron picnic tables. "Yeah, I've seen you in class before. You don't say much."

“Reason I’m a Humanities major, I guess. None of us have much to say.”

That got a chuckle out of her. She put her tray down and then sat, crossing her knees in a way that made her plaid skirt hike most of the way up her thigh. Clay sat opposite her, attention drawn to the line of her leg, eyes glued to where Chloe’s hand smoothed the hem.

“Like what you see?”

Clay choked. “Um yeah, I was...I mean, I wasn’t staring...Not that you don’t...I...”

Soft fingertips brushed his lips, shutting him up. “Look. You’re cute, but I don’t date guys I’m in a class with. If something happens, then it gets awkward and uncomfortable for everyone involved.”

Was it bad that Clay felt *relieved* at getting shot down?

She dropped her hand and picked up her plastic spork. Clay stood and took a step back, then cleared his throat. *Right. Thank her, tell her you’ll see in her in class, and get the fuck out of here.*

“So, er, thanks...I’ll see you right here, tonight at six when I get out of my Chem Lab.”

Clay blinked. *Didn’t she just say...*

“I thought you didn’t date classmates?”

“I don’t.” Chloe speared a cherry tomato and brought it to her painted lips. She ran her tongue over the tight, red skin, then popped it in her mouth.

On some cosmic level, Clay *knew* he should be incredibly turned on by this. But...he just wasn’t.

What the hell was wrong with him?

“Um, er, what?”

She finished fellating a piece of cucumber. “Just because I don’t date guys in my classes, doesn’t mean I won’t screw them. You, me, tonight. My apartment. You bring the condoms, I’ll light some candles. Get ready to fuck your brains out.”

\* \* \* \*

It was 5:59, and Clay’s knee hadn’t stopped jerking since 3:47. This was the first time anyone had offered him a random

hook up, no strings attached. Was he *really* going through with this? Would Chloe even show up?

And would it be so bad if she didn't?

The condom he'd bought in the vending machine in the men's room burned a hole in his back pocket, but not in a good way.

Fuck, why wasn't he more excited about this?

"Hey there, Shakespeare Boy."

Clay jerked so hard he fell off the bench. He lay on the cold concrete, ass over elbows, head throbbing from the impact, and wished for a tornado to come and blow him away.

Chloe's laughter certainly didn't help, either. "That's the best reaction I've ever gotten. I think I should be flattered."

*I wish I was dead.* Clay righted himself and stared at his untied sneakers, not able to look up at her. "Er, hi."

That soft hand was back, this time cupping his cheek. She drew his gaze to meet her own. "I think it's sweet that you're so nervous about this. Don't worry. I don't bite." She turned around, then glanced at him over her shoulder. "Unless you ask me to."

She crooked her finger, beckoning him like a dog. Stupid mutt that he was, he followed.

"I live right across the street in University Towers. Fourth floor. Great view. And all my roommates went to Vail for the weekend."

"Oh, um, great."

Chloe wound her arm around Clay's and leaned her head against his shoulder. As they walked past the soap-free fountain, he caught a glimpse of their reflections. Tall and short, blond and brunette, guy and girl.

Textbook normal, right?

So why did he feel like this was the biggest mistake of his life?

Chloe led him off campus, across the busy street, and up the narrow stairs into her apartment. It smelled like Lemon Pledge and patchouli and reminded Clay of a seventies party Jack threw sophomore year.



Jack had looked really good in that purple silk lamé v-neck shirt, and those white leather pants were so tight Clay could see...

*No!*

No. He was *not* going to think about Jack tonight.

Tonight he would prove he was just like every other guy on campus. He was a man. Men slept with women.

Right. He could do this. So what if it was his first time?

His girlfriends in high school said he was a good kisser. And they seemed to like it when he'd fondle their breasts or cup their asses after they'd asked him to. Going all the way couldn't be so much different, right?

Again, he ignored the little voice that laughed at him and said, *Ever wonder why you never asked any of them on second or third dates?*

They climbed the steps to Chloe's apartment and Clay tried not to burst out of his skin as she fiddled with the key in the lock. Finally the door opened, and Chloe turned on the lights.

"Just give me a minute, lover," she murmured. She slid her hand over his shoulder, then down his chest and abs. "Let me slip into something a little more *comfortable*."

She sashayed into her bedroom and shut the door with a soft *click*. Damn it, the girl was sexy. She knew how to swing her hips and tighten her ass like a model. So why did her little catwalk routine make him think of how Jack could do it so much better?

Clay pushed a stack of *Cosmopolitan* magazines to the far side of the couch and sat to the left of a giant pile of laundry. A black satin thong stared at him from the top of the heap. If Dominic were here, he'd probably nick the frilly thing and shove it in his pocket as a gift for Laura.

He shoved his shaking hands between his knees and looked around the small apartment for anything that might distract the butterflies in his stomach. A pile of dishes leaned precariously in the sink, looking like one good jolt would shatter them all over the floor. The quintessential Boulder Bong sat in the far corner of the room, surrounded by rolling papers, empty baggies, and half-used matchbooks.

Maybe a hit would help him get through this.

The bedroom door opened.

Clay almost wet himself, and not in a good way.

Chloe leaned against the door frame. She wore a fire engine-red teddy, complete with corset and leather laces, thigh-high black fuck-me boots, and a studded collar around her neck.

She looked like Satan's favorite dominatrix.

Chloe sauntered over, straddled his lap, and sat on his knees. She ran her hands up and down his arms, then over his thighs, fingers playing with his belt buckle and zipper. Leaning closer, she ran her tongue down his neck, flicking his ear as she trailed lower and lower.

Like a robot, he put his hands on her waist and pulled her closer, then stroked her back, just like the guys in the movies did.

Chloe purred. "Tell me what you want."

Sitting on his lap like that, she reminded him of a fucked up version of Santa Claus.

"I don't..." His voice cracked like a pimply prepubescent teen. "Uh, whatever you're up for."

"Interesting choice of words." Before he could take another breath, Chloe ripped off his belt, shoved his zipper down, and had his cock in her hand. Clay sat as rigid as a statue as she stoked and fondled and licked her way along his penis.

*Fuck fuckity fuck fuck!*

Limpier than one of Jack's gym socks, it just...sat there, not responding at all to Chloe's skilled hands. Damn it all to hell, why was this happening to him?

"I'm so sorry." He gripped the stained couch cushions with white fists. "I've never—"

"Seems I'll to have to work a bit harder on you. Not that I mind." Chloe ran her hands underneath Clay's shirt. "I like a challenge."

She stroked his near-hairless chest and licked him again, then started to undo his shirt buttons. With her teeth. Each time she unhooked one, she'd press her lips to the revealed triangle of skin and make a humming noise he could feel all the way down to his stomach.

But apparently his cock was deaf today.

Two more buttons, and she slid the shirt off his shoulders. She sat back and smiled; her brown eyes flashed. "Damn. Didn't know you were holding out on me, Shakespeare Boy." Chloe pushed him back against the armrest of the couch and shoved his legs in the other direction. She lay over him, angled so that he could see right down inside her teddy.

Ignoring the way his hands shook, he reached up and cupped her breasts. Each fit perfectly in the palm of his hands. He wondered if that meant she had big breasts, or he just had large hands.

He squeezed, and she gave a soft moan of appreciation. She tilted her head back and exposed her collar-clad throat. Was he supposed to *do* something with the black choker? Was he...should he *wear* it or something?

"Come on, Clay. Get in the game," she groaned, bouncing over his unresponsive cock.

Shit, he'd spaced out too long. He played with her nipples through the lacy fabric, pinching and rubbing circles over the stiff nubs. She stroked his cock in time with his movements, a point-counterpoint that should have had him as hard as a fifteen-year-old watching Skinamax for the first time, but failed miserably.

"Fuck it, I'm not a radio," she snapped, biting his chin. "Stop playing around and finger me already!"

*Oh. Fuck.*

Clay's hands slid down to her waist, as if they were under *her* control and not his. He slipped his hands under the short skirt. She was already wet.

It was all he could do not to pull away and run for the door. Here was a hot, horny co-ed jerking him off, and he'd rather be in his dorm room, studying for his Philosophy final.

*It's official. I'm a fucking freak.*

Chloe yanked him so hard, it hurt.

"Oww! What the hell?"

"You suck at this. What's your problem? You gay or something?"

Clay's voice froze in his throat. *Oh God, oh God, oh God.*

He pushed Chloe off him and half-rolled to the floor, then stumbled to his feet like a drunken frat boy. "You...I'm not...don't ever say that again!"

"You asshole! What the hell?" She pushed herself up, dark hair messy and teddy disheveled as if he *had* fucked her. 'Course, she probably wouldn't be looking at him like she wanted to rip his face off if he had gone through with it.

He didn't know whether to be angry, scared, humiliated, or ashamed. He went for the easiest choice. "Don't you ever say that about me again!"

"What, that you suck in bed?"

"No!"

"Then what?"

His balls shriveled up inside him and died. "That...that other thing."

"What other thing?" She swung off the ugly-ass couch and stalked over to him. The anger suddenly drained from her face, replaced by something far worse.

"Oh, my God. You're a virgin, aren't you?"

His balls retreated even further. *I'm really gonna miss them.* "I...I'm not..."

She snarled, like a caged animal, then grabbed his hips and pulled him closer. "God, do you have any idea how hot that is? I'm gonna to make you scream so hard, baby."

"You mean...you'd want to..."

Chloe grabbed his hand and shoved it towards her clit. "Are you as turned on as I am?"

*No! No! No!*

She bit his chin. "Just stay here a minute while I get the handcuffs. You're not averse to a little bondage or breath play, are you?"

Clay did the only thing a mature, respectable, college-aged young man could do in that situation.

He ran.

Out the apartment door, jeans and boxers around his ankles, shirt forgotten on the floor behind him, Clay stumbled down the stairs, one shaky hand gripping the banister, the other trying to yank his pants up before someone called the cops.

As he ran away from the Seventh Level of Hell, he made a promise to himself.

*Jack and the guys never hear about this. Ever.*

## Chapter Three

### *Thursday Night*

“Remind me how I got involved in this again?”

Clay looked at Miles, who held five planks of wood they’d “borrowed” from the rehab zone behind the Chemistry building.

Miles shrugged and dropped a plank on the floor of the hallway that lead to the storage room beneath their dorm. “Er, Jack offered to pay us for building his coffin?”

“I don’t care how many tequila shots he offers.” Clay looked at the roll of fabric and box of nails he’d stolen from the theater department. “This is just plain wrong.”

“Come on, Clay. Could be good for a laugh.”

*Could be good to get us expelled*, he thought as he ducked, narrowly avoiding Miles’ attempt to clock him in the head with a two-by-four.

Clay led the way through the utilidors, then up into the storage room. Jack and Dominic sat on the floor scribbling over half a dozen sheets of papers. From Clay’s vantage point, one drawing looked like a chariot pulled by a herd of cheerleaders.

“Hey!” Jack exclaimed as he looked up. “What took you two so long?”

“Pardon us for not wanting to get busted by the RAs,” Clay snarked. He threw the drapery bolt to the floor. A cloud of dust blew up from the filthy concrete slab that sent Clay into a sneezing fit.

Miles dropped his planks, shooting even more dust into the air. All four of them joined the allergy parade.

“With as often as we’re in here,” Dominic said between sneezes, “you’d think there wouldn’t be so much dust.”

“Especially with us using Mrs. Sheppard’s bra as a feather duster,” Jack added.

“Hey! Fuck you!” Miles shouted.

“Shut it, *pendejos*,” Dominic ordered. He gestured to the bits of crumpled paper all over the floor. “Anyway, Jack and I have it all worked out. We’ll have the funeral this Saturday.”

“Saturday?” Clay sputtered. “That’s in three days!”

“I know. Perfect, isn’t it?” Jack flashed that grin that did weird things to Clay’s insides.

“So, how’s this gonna to work?” Miles asked as he sat on the floor.

Dominic cleared his throat and assumed his I’m-The-Leader voice. “We need to get the invitations handed out by tomorrow at the latest. This way, it’ll be all anyone can talk about for the rest of the week.”

“I’ll stay out of the way until Saturday. Can’t let people see me before then,” Jack said. He flashed a warm, bright smile. “I want them to save all their speeches for the funeral. I’ll probably just hang out in the dorm. Wanna join me, Clay?”

*Yeah, you hang, and I’ll kick the chair out from under you.* “Ever hear of a little thing called classes, Jack? You’d really skip your Org. Chem. and Molecular Bio labs just to pull this off?”

Jack lay down on the floor and crossed his arms behind his head like this was a beach on the French Riviera, not a dilapidated basement. “Nah. Professor Gurion won’t care. Not as long as we win against UNC on Sunday’s soccer match. And Dr. Duer loves me.”

Clay gave up. Logic never played a part in any of Jack’s schemes. Like that time with the washing machine and the pineapple. Or the incident that got them banned from the Student Union for three months.

“Oye! As I was saying,” Dominic said with a glare. “We’ve got a lot of work to do before Saturday. I’ve already asked Carol if we can use the backroom at The Sink. I turned on the Latino charm, so no problem there.”

“Yeah. No problem at all,” Clay muttered.

“What was that, Parkinson? Didn’t quite catch it.”

“Never mind. Go on. What else is involved in this fucking farce?”

Jack sat up, clutching the pocket over his heart. “I’m wounded, Clayface. Here I am, trying to plan the best send off

party CU has ever seen, and you're not even excited about it. What gives?"

Clay tried to clamp down the anger pooling in his belly. "It's not important."

Dominic shrugged and continued. "We should get to The Sink at least an hour early to set up. I asked Carol if she wouldn't mind donating a keg for the cause since we've been such good customers over the years. Miles, you're in charge of the invite list. Make sure you include all the hot chicks."

"Dudes, too," Jack added, wagging his eyebrows. "Can't forget the frat boys now, can we?"

If Clay had a beverage in his mouth at that moment, it would have come shooting out of his nose. *No. No way Jack's interested in guys.*

Dominic, however, didn't look too surprised. "*Hay, me cabo de joder!* Fine. Got that, Miley Cyrus? Good. Moving on." He ignored Miles' annoyed squawk at the new nickname and sorted through the scribbled pieces of paper. "I'll see what I can do about music and flowers. Clay and Jack will build the coffin."

"What? Fuck that!"

"Calm down, Clayface," Jack said. "You repaired the desk that Miles broke when he plopped his fat ass on it back in sophomore year. This should be a snap for you."

"That's not the point!"

"Then what is?"

He couldn't even answer. All he wanted to do was shove his fist through Jack's owl-eyed expression. How could he not understand?

Clay turned his back on all of them and stomped up the stairs. He caught his foot on the fourth step from the top and nearly fell down the stairs.

"Fuck!"

He pulled his leg free from the moldy, worn wood, jumped up the rest of the steps, and limped into the nearest empty room—a janitor's closet by the look of it.

Clay turned the lock and slumped against the wall. He slid down until he was on the floor and surrounded by half-empty bottles of carpet cleaner and vomit dust. He pulled his knees to his chest, trying to calm the unwelcome *thud* in his chest.



Jack had come up with some really stupid ideas before, but *this* had to be the worst. A funeral. A fucking funeral! It didn't matter if it was fake. It was still Jack, lying in a coffin, pretending he was dead.

A shudder ripped through him.

Death was a very real thing to Clay. He could still remember the way his father's body looked after the car accident; how small his little sister's coffin had been. And here were his best friends, mocking funerals and planning a party?

*Fuck that!*

Before he wanted it to, the anger drained out of him, leaving weary resignation behind. *Of course* he would follow Jack and Dominic and Miles into this mess. He always did, no matter how moronic the idea. They were his friends. They made him feel normal.

Though, he couldn't exactly consider the dreams he'd had this past year were *normal*. Especially not the one where he'd found himself on his back in a grassy field with Jack on top of him, sucking on his neck and making him forget all the reasons why he shouldn't enjoy the feel of his best friend's hand slipping lower, down over his stomach, across his thighs, squeezing his cock.

A tight pressure pushed against his crotch. Clay looked down in shock. He couldn't get it up for Chloe, but a half-remembered wet dream about his best friend got him hard?

*Oh, God!*

Clay shoved his hand into his jeans, barely pausing to undo the zipper. He needed to feel the heat of skin on skin. He stroked himself once, twice, then groaned. There was a reason he shouldn't do this, but for the life of him, he couldn't remember what it was.

A bead of precum was all the lubricant he needed. Clay pulled again. Hard and fast, that's what he needed. The light from the single bulb in the closet danced in his blurry vision. He bit his lip and swallowed the pleased groan building in his chest. But a needy moan still escaped his throat. He stroked faster, needing more friction against his aching cock. Clay could feel the lines of his palm, the calluses on his fingers, the sharp

rub of his knuckles against his inner thigh. His balls clenched. His whole body tensed in anticipation.

Clay whimpered as a wave of pleasure washed over him. A hard, urgent squeeze and he was swept up and over, a climax so intense he wondered for a moment if he were going to survive it.

The orgasm tore through his body, a pulse of release that spiked again just when he thought it had finally ended. His body shook, strung tight. He hated how good this felt, how much he craved it, how his mind screamed that it was wrong.

Wrong to have Jack's name on his lips as he came.

He rolled his head back, vision full with bursts of red and black and white, ears ringing, hand sticky and wet.

Clay's chest was so tight he thought he'd suffocate. The burn in his lungs reminded him he needed to breathe. He leaned back against the back wall and turned his head, thankful for the cool cement against his hot face. For several moments he concentrated on just breathing in and out, nothing more than that.

Other than his raspy breaths, everything was silent. He couldn't even hear the others downstairs. Maybe they'd left? Maybe they'd finally given up on this stupid idea and gone back to do some actual work for finals?

*Yeah, right. And if frogs had wings they wouldn't bump their asses when they jumped.*

Clay buried his flushed face against his knees. He'd just gotten off in a filthy closet, thinking about his best friend. His *male* best friend. "What the fuck's wrong with me?"

"That's what I'd like to know."

Clay nearly jumped out of his skin. "Jack!" he shouted to the closed door. He wanted to pretend that the voice didn't affect him, but his heart beat fast enough to make him dizzy the moment he heard it, so he knew it was useless. "Damnit, Jack, don't sneak up on me like that!"

"Didn't mean to give you a coronary, Clayface." Silence. "So, um, you wanna open the door, or do I have to talk to the splinters all night?"

Clay shimmied out of his hoodie and tied it backwards around his waist to hide the uncomfortable evidence of what he'd just done. He wiped his hand on the back wall, took a deep

breath, then unlatched and opened the door, face burning with shame and embarrassment.

“I’m—”

“—sorry.”

Clay gave him a hesitant smile. They always spoke over each other. He liked it that they knew each other’s thoughts so well.

“No, I’m sorry,” Clay insisted. “I overreacted. I should just go and let you guys finish up.”

Jack had a shit-eating grin on his face. “Not before you kiss me good-bye.”

Clay wanted to wipe that smirk off with a fist or suck it off or...God, what was he thinking?

Oh right, he *wasn’t*.

Jack stared at him, unblinking. It made Clay squirm.

“Jack?”

“You don’t want to say anything, do you?”

“What?”

“On Saturday. That’s why you’re not into this funeral thing. You don’t want to say anything because you agree with Laura. You don’t think I’ve left any kind of legacy behind.”

Clay couldn’t stand that kicked puppy look on his friend’s face. *Knowing* he shouldn’t, he pulled Jack close and hugged him, as if a simple touch could convey everything he felt right at that moment.

“No, Jack,” Clay murmured. “Never that. It’s just...there’s so much to say to say about you, I’d never be able to stop.”

Against him, Jack took a deep, shuddering breath. God, the way his chest moved—

Clay closed his eyes. *I am not getting turned on by the way he breathes.*

Jack half-eased out of Clay’s embrace. “Then what is it? Why don’t you want to do this with me?” He turned his head so his chin rested on Clay’s shoulder.

Clay closed his eyes. “It’s your funeral, Jack.”

He snickered. “That’s a *really* bad pun.”

Clay sighed. Was Jack twenty, or two? “Funeral. As in your death.” He stepped away from Jack’s closeness and wrapped his arms around himself, mostly to hide his trembling hands.

"I...I'm not okay with that. I don't want to think about you dying. About any of you dying."

*And me left behind, alone.*

*Again.*

That miserable look in Jack's eyes faded away. "Is that what's bothering you? Everyone knows it's a fake funeral. It's our last prank before leaving CU for good. You know me well enough to guess I'd want to go out big."

Clay tilted his head. If he didn't know better, Jack sounded almost...like he was flirting. He ducked his head and glanced up nervously, a slow flush warming his cheeks. "Well, yes I do know you. And I thought you had me figured out, too."

Jack grinned. "I figure we need a drink. What do you say we finish up here, then hit the bars? Just the two of us."

It was easy to forget everything else when Jack smiled at him like that. He grabbed Clay's forearms. The heat from his hands coursed over Clay's skin like hot water, melting something he hadn't even known was frozen.

"This thing will be about celebrating life." He kissed Clay on the corner of his jaw hard enough to leave a bruise, then shot him a big, lopsided grin. "And that's enough drama. Come on. We've got a coffin to build and mass quantities of alcohol to consume."

Clay shook his head. Some things would never change.

Like the way he felt confused and empty inside every time Jack wasn't touching him.

\* \* \* \*

"So glad my parents got me a car for graduation instead of some lame-ass trip to Europe," Jack said, completely ignoring all DMV established rules as he sped down Colfax Avenue.

Clay had never prayed so hard in his life, unsure if the four wheels of the MX-5 had been on the ground simultaneously since they'd left Boulder.

*Someone remind me why he's my best friend again?*

"Here we go," Jack said as he pulled into the parking lot outside a bar and killed the ignition. He reached backwards and grabbed the vinyl ragtop to pull it over them. They sat in the

confined space together, Jack looking at Clay, his blue-gray eyes wide with a burst of some emotion that Clay couldn't name, maybe because he wasn't sure he had ever experienced it himself.

Clay's heart sped up. Jack leaned closer, his breath warm and moist as it crept over Clay's skin.

Suddenly, the little car felt claustrophobic. Clay wrenched the door open, then tripped on the low step and sprawled face-first into the dirt parking lot.

*Awesome. Fan-fucking-tastic.*

Jack hopped out of the car and helped Clay to his feet. "Nice one, Clayface."

If Colorado could've assisted with an instant sinkhole beneath his feet, he'd have been eternally grateful. "Uh, 'grace' is my middle name?"

Avoiding Jack's laughter, Clay glanced around the parking lot, filled with trendy little sports cars like Jack's, and even a couple of Harley motorcycles. The bar itself was a low, rectangular building, its brick façade crumbling. A bunch of well-dressed guys loitered outside the place, many talking to either some really ugly chicks or serious-need-of-a-shave drag queens. They all either took swigs from hip flasks or smoked. From the smell, Clay doubted only cigarettes were being lit up. A neon sign above the bar's door read, 'Synergy.'

"I thought we were going to Larimer Square?"

Jack shook his head. "Thought we could try something new tonight."

A club. Ugh. All Clay wanted to do was drink until he got shit-faced. He *so* wasn't into chatting up some random girl or forcing himself to smile and dance.

"Jack, I don't think—"

"It's not your job to think tonight, Claymate." Jack wrapped his arm around Clay's shoulders.

A shiver ran through his body. It was all Clay could do not to pull away.

"Tonight, we will get you drunk and you *will* have some fun. Trust me."

*"Trust me." Oh God, not again.*

Jack led him to the front door, a half-rusted metal contraption that sounded like a nuclear explosion every time someone went in or came out. Clay felt like a child as Jack nodded to the leather-and-mesh-clad bouncer, who winked back and waved them past the line of people awaiting entry.

The first thing Clay noticed was *light*. Lots of it. Reds and blues and yellows, all blended together with the sole purpose of blinding him. He let Jack lead him further into the place, the throbbing pulse of the music beating in time to his footsteps. Smoke from a fog machine drifted through the club. It clogged up Clay's throat and brought tears to his eyes. He tried to hide the fact he was choking to death by nodding his head in time to the awful techno music that blared from a nearby wall-mount speaker.

"Come on, let's dance!"

"I don't think—"

Jack didn't give Clay a chance to back out. He dragged Clay to the congested dance floor—a giant checkerboard circle that rotated to the pulse of strobe lights. Jack pulled him into the center of the mob and started to move in time to the music, gyrating like a man having a seizure, yet still managing to look cool and suave, like his body was made for such movements.

Clay swallowed. Hard.

He glanced around the dance floor, trying to find something—*someone*—else to focus on, but the pulsing strobe and dim lighting and packed dance floor made it hard to see more than five inches in front of his face.

The song changed, the fast tempo fading into a slow swaying rhythm. A warm hand splayed across his lower back and the other guided his shaking fingers to cup Jack's shoulder.

He couldn't breathe; couldn't move. Couldn't stop this if he wanted to.

And...he didn't.

Jack smiled. Not one of his cocky or scheming grins, but that pure flash of *life* that first drew Clay towards him four years ago.

Clay's heart pounded. He waited for someone to catch them; call them unnatural freaks and pound their faces in.

Someone to remind Clay it wasn't natural to dance with another man, no matter how much he wanted to.

But, nothing happened. Around them, other couples pulled closer together, heads laid on shoulders and arms wrapped around one another. Bodies swayed in time to the soft melody.

Jack's knee bumped into his. Clay gave thanks that the club was dark enough that Jack probably couldn't see the fevered flush on his neck and cheeks. Surrendering, he let Jack lead him in a slow sway. The words and music and other patrons faded into the background. Nothing mattered beyond the heat of Jack's hands, the smell of his musky cologne, and the way his eyes seemed to stare right into his soul.

He pulled Clay closer until they stood, chest to chest, bodies locked with tension that felt like quivering resistance. Jack's eyes shone with a dark fire that Clay thought could immolate them both. He felt the beat of Jack's heart against his. Strong. Fast. *Here.*

It matched the thrum of his own. His eyes felt heavy; half-lidded.

Wild, terrified hope burst inside him. *Could he...does he...*

Jack's hand moved up to stroke his cheek. Clay opened his eyes and lost all thought of resistance when he saw those blue-grey eyes glittering like moonlit ice. He leaned forward.

The song changed, back to some God-awful headache-inducing crap. Had the song really been that short? Clay wanted to kick the DJ in the head.

"Let's hit the bar," Jack yelled into his ear. "I need a beer."

Without giving Clay a chance to respond, Jack steered him towards a hideous concoction of glass, marble, and neon light that apparently passed for a bar. Clay forced his heart back into his chest and plopped onto the red vinyl stool. He swiveled around, gaze drawn to the impressive number of alcohol bottles that lined the wall behind the bar. Maybe if he stared at it long enough, he'd be able to forget about what had almost happened on the dance floor; what he wished would have happened.

"So, what do you think?" Jack shouted over the deafening music. "Pretty sweet club, huh?"

Not exactly the words he would have chosen, but still...

Clay turned around on the stool, leg jerking spastically. Maybe tonight wouldn't be so bad after all. He looked back toward the dance floor. It was pretty packed, full of people grinding and stroking hands and arms and necks.

*Wait.*

His eyes narrowed. Everywhere he looked, *men* danced or talked or downed shots. Muscular arms bulged beneath body-fitting tees and jeans hugged asses so tight, Clay's mouth dried right up.

But not a single pair of tits to be found.

*Did Jack...how does he...why...oh shit!*

Clay had to take several deep breaths. When he spoke, his voice was tight and hoarse. "Jack?"

He shook a lock of dark hair out of his face. "Yeah?"

"Is this a *gay* club?"

Jack raised a pierced eyebrow. "Yeah."

Clay didn't know whether to push the smug bastard off his stool or steal his car keys and leave the fucker stranded. "*A gay club?*" he hissed. "What the fuck?"

"So?"

*So. So?* "Jack, I'm not—"

"Well if it isn't Jack-Off Jack," a voice interrupted from Clay's left. He jerked and spun around. A bartender leaned toward them, smirking. A very *masculine* bartender, who ran his hand through Jack's jet-black hair, and practically climbed over the bar into Jack's lap. He wore blue vinyl pants and matching vest over a bare chest. His nipples were pierced with little silver hoops and a chain wound between them that dipped beneath his pant line.

He did *not* want to know where that chain led. Absolutely not.

"Clay, meet Franco," Jack said, not breaking eye contact with his new "friend."

Franco the bartender was everything Clay wasn't. Tall and broad-chested, rock-hard abs, and a square jaw Clay just itched to punch. And fuck it all if he didn't have a perfect cleft in his chin, too.

It took all of Clay's willpower not to smack the guy's hands away from Jack.



*Chill out, Clay.* He took a deep breath. *It's not like Jack is anything more than your roommate.*

"Nice to meet you," Franco murmured, with a perfect you're-invisible-to-me tone in his voice. "So Jack, when are you going to run away with me?"

Clay's teeth ground together.

Jack's laughed, loud and deep. "When you stop slutting around everywhere."

"Learned from the best." Franco tossed a strand of long dark hair behind his shoulder. "So, what're you drinking tonight? My treat."

"You know me. Loaded Corona. Clay?"

*Oh, so now you remember I exist.* "No thanks."

That kicked-puppy expression crossed Jack's face again. "You look pissed off."

"Oh, no. Not at all." Clay slid off the barstool, trying to convince himself he didn't care that Franco's hands were sliding down the side of Jack's face, over his collarbone, and into his shirt.

Jack grabbed his sleeve. "Clay?"

He yanked his arm free. "I'm going to the bathroom."

Heart pounding, Clay ran across the club, eyes scanning for someplace private. He spotted the men's room, ever-so-cleverly marked by a neon image of a banana hammock. Unfortunately, he had to weave through the packed dance floor to get to it.

"Clay, hold up!"

*Oh, screw it.*

He took a deep breath and started to maneuver through the man-on-man traffic. The sweaty scent of cheap cologne made him sneeze. He edged around an ugly-ass drag queen with a porn 'stache and a bald midget tethered to the he/she's wrist. Behind him, strong hands grabbed his hips, and something hard pressed against his back. Clay yelped like a terrier and squirmed away from a tattooed biker, right as he asked, "Wanna be my bitch?"

He would *never* forgive Jack for bringing him here. What the hell had he been thinking?

Clay stumbled into the men's room door and pushed it open. Black and white tiles glimmered under the hum of purple fluorescent lights.

He looked around for a place to sit, then wished he hadn't.

The line of urinals along the far wall were shaped like different colored condoms, and the flesh-colored sink faucets looked like the good ol' twig and berries. A vending machine stood in the corner—one of those bright red monstrosities that usually had gumballs or silly putty inside. Except this one had plastic capsules labeled “Edible Body Paint,” “Cherry Flavored Lube,” and “Ribbed for HIS Pleasure.”

Clay sank to the floor, choosing to ignore his inner germaphobe. A moan echoed off the tiled walls, followed by a muffled curse and a weird noise Clay couldn't identify. He leaned forward. Motion underneath one of the stalls caught his attention. Someone knelt on the floor inside the stall, another person in front of him, leather pants around his ankles. The two bodies rocked together, the men panting and groaning and crying out.

And fuck it all if Clay's cock didn't spring to attention.

The bathroom door flew open, smacking against the hand dryer in the corner. Jack stormed in, his button-down shirt untucked and perfect hair messier than Clay had ever seen it. He looked like he'd been molested crossing the dance floor.

*Serves the bastard right.*

“Clay, what the fuck?”

He didn't feel like fighting with Jack. Not like it would do any good. “Go back to the bar, Jack. Franco's probably waiting for you. And don't worry, I'll be your DD.”

“I didn't drag your ass out so you could hide in the can while I got pissed with the bartender, you fucker.” Jack slid to the floor. Clay didn't miss the disgusted look that crossed his friend's face. “Ugh, I don't even want to *think* about when this place was last cleaned.”

Another groan echoed from the stall across from them. Someone slammed into the aluminum door.

“Get a room!” Jack shouted at them.

A choked voice answered, “Find your own!”

Jack shook his head. “Pervs.”

Clay was inclined to agree.

“So...” Jack cleared his throat. “What happened back there?”

He didn't know which would be the worse answer—that he was actually *jealous* of Jack flirting with the bartender, or that he'd gotten turned on by two strangers—two *men*—jacking each other off in the john.

Jack's hand landed on Clay's knee. The warmth shot straight to his cock.

"And none of that 'nothing' crap, all right? I know something happened back there."

Clay's face flushed with embarrassment. "Really, it wasn't—"

"Don't lie to me."

Clay had never seen such a serious look in Jack's eyes before. He didn't know how to respond.

The hand on his knee rose to tip Clay's chin, bringing his gaze to meet Jack's. "We've been best friends since we met at freshman orientation. You used to tell me everything. What changed?"

God, he *hated* that wounded note in Jack's voice. "Nothing—"

"Please, Clay. Talk to me."

A warm rush flowed through him, like a flood of guilt and remorse. Cold shivers shot down his arms. *Change the subject, idiot. Before you lose him for good.* "Why did you bring me here tonight?"

Jack sighed, like he was disappointed or something. The sound ripped right through Clay's heart. "I thought we'd been over this. You've been stressed out for weeks and I thought you could use a night of fun."

"No." Clay took a deep breath. "No, I meant, why *here*? Why a gay club?"

Jack's stormy eyes bored into his. Clay couldn't have looked away if he tried. "This place helps people put things in perspective. You can try something different, or learn things you didn't know you didn't know. It's okay here. It's safe here."

God, how he wished he could. He'd give anything to be as confident and sure of himself as Jack was.

Jack grabbed his hand. Clay could barely stand the heat of his touch. "I'm your friend. No matter what. Just...remember that, okay? Regardless of what you choose."

He shimmied against the wall until he stood upright, then offered a hand to Clay. Jack helped him to his feet, large hands grasping Clay's forearms.

Clay had to remind himself to breathe.

"We cool?" Jack asked as he ran his hands up and down Clay's arms.

He could only nod in response.

Jack released him and headed towards the bathroom door. "Come on. First round's on me."

Clay followed, skin on fire from Jack's caress, no matter how much he wanted to deny it.

"And who knows?" Jack said, shooting a smirk over his shoulder. "Maybe I'll choose the same as you."

# Chapter Four

## *Friday Morning*

Clay lay in bed, drenched in sweat. His heart raced, pounding furiously, and his throat hurt, as if he'd been screaming.

He waited, holding his breath.

Jack's snore sounded like a freight train. Clay's body melted with relief. He hadn't woken him.

*Holy fuck...*

He'd *never* had such a vivid dream before. Not even when drunk or stoned off his ass.

Clay beat his head against his pillows and shut his eyes. His entire body thrummed with electricity. He ran his fingers over his chest, hands remembering where ghostly touches had stroked his skin.

Fuck, he was hard! Shouldn't it have gone down by now? He'd already dumped a load in his pajamas after getting back from the club last night.

He reached into his sweatpants and grabbed his already-swollen prick, covered with the cooling evidence of his wet dream release. It pulsed in his palm, as if remembering the dream-hand that had stroked and teased and brought him to the brink.

Clay bit his lip. He couldn't let Jack hear him. Shit, he'd never be able to look at his best friend again. Especially after how Jack had leered at *him* in that dream.

Hand trembling, he stroked himself, remembering how it felt when Dream-Jack did it to him. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, Clay knew he should fight against this, but he couldn't help it. He needed it too badly.

He could still feel the way Dream-Jack had teased and tasted every inch of his neck and chest, marking him, claiming him.

God, how he wanted to be claimed!

With his other hand, he squeezed a hard nipple, trying to recapture the sensation of Dream-Jack taking the stiff nub into his mouth to bite and suck. Clay turned his face into the pillow and moaned. God, it felt *so good*, even if it was just a remembered dream. His strokes sped up—faster, faster—sobs of need catching in his throat.

Dream-Jack's lips had moved soundlessly over his body as if murmuring a prayer. Then he'd leaned back, cupped Dream-Clay's jaw, and flashed a crooked grin before placing a light kiss on his forehead—a brand he would always wear.

It felt like a band of fire exploded across Clay's entire body, singeing his skin, burning his blood, consuming him.

"Are you scared?" Dream-Jack had asked.

Clay could barely breathe. In the dark room, he whispered the same answer he'd given in his dream. "N...no."

"You should be."

Then Dream-Jack's mouth had claimed his. For a single, explosive moment, Dream-Clay had let himself melt into the kiss. It was amazing, and beautiful, and everything he'd ever wanted without even knowing he wanted it.

If he could only have this fantasy in his dreams, then so fucking be it!

In the still, quiet room, he could almost hear Jack's heart like he had in the dream, beating through his chest, into his own.

Clay groaned with need.

"You want me," Dream-Jack had said. He'd grabbed Dream-Clay's cock and gave it a rough squeeze. "I should just leave you like this."

Clay bit his pillow. It was all he could do not to come again. His strokes were frantic, desperate. It was more than he could stand. He bucked into his fist, wishing for more friction, wishing it was someone else's hand jerking him off.

"I know you." Dream-Jack's words filled his mind, soaring over the cresting wave within him. He'd wiped a single drop of precum off Dream-Clay's cock, then licked it from his finger. "I

know the way you fear what you are; ignore what you want, deny what you need.”

Dream-Jack had rolled his tongue and dragged it from the middle of Dream-Clay’s cock to the head.

Clay gasped, forgetting how to breathe.

Close...he was *so* close...

“That isn’t what I want from you,” Dream-Jack had said, his soft smile as vivid in Clay’s memories as it was in the dream.

On the verge, Dream-Clay asked the same question he had before. “What do you want from me?”

“This.” Dream-Jack then took Dream-Clay’s hand and placed it on his muscular chest, right over his heart. “But I want you to make me earn it.”

*Oh, God...*

With a shudder, Clay came, hot spurts of semen splashing across his hand and belly, staining his shirt, coating the blanket and sheets. For the second time that night, he let himself get lost in blue-gray eyes and bare skin and the taste of warm lips on his. The surge stole his breath and he bit his lip harder. He tasted blood, but refused to cry out.

As the tide ebbed away, so did that stupid voice in his head that said it was okay to have an erotic dream about his best friend.

Jack snored again; oblivious to the world, oblivious to the fact Clay had just come—twice—to thoughts of long, dark hair, slender hands, and a vivid dream of a talented mouth.

No matter how much he wanted to deny the name burning the tip of his tongue, ignore whose face had dominated his dream, he couldn’t.

Clay stared at his hand, covered with seed. Again.

He couldn’t deny the ache inside him that wished it was Jack’s.

\* \* \* \*

After a history lecture featuring his sixty-minute hard on, Clay decided to skip the rest of his classes for the day. Frustrated as hell, he retreated into the men’s room in the Humanities Building and dropped his bag on the floor. He gripped the sides

of the sink and dunked his head under the cool stream. Clay hissed as the cold water chilled his flushed skin, but at least it withered his damn erection.

Lifting his head, Clay stared at his reflection in the grimy mirror. He didn't *look* any different—same sandy-blond hair, brown eyes, long face with high cheekbones. But he just didn't feel right, not since Jack had taken him to that gay club. It was as if he'd been running around completely nude, on display for every single person on campus to stare at him, to judge him.

"What the fuck is *wrong* with me?"

"Good question."

Clay jerked around, nearly slipping on the wet floor. He heard a flush, then Dominic stepped out of one of the stalls and sauntered over to the sink as if he *hadn't* just given Clay a heart attack.

"Oye, you look like *mierda*."

Clay snorted. "Thanks, man."

"Any time." Dominic washed his hands, then dried them on the back of Clay's shirt. "Don't you have class now or something?"

"Didn't feel like going. What about you? Who let you out of the Engineering Quad?"

"My significant other wanted a quickie. And who am I to refuse the lovely Laura?" Smile as big as his ego, Dominic pushed his sunglasses up his nose and stared at Clay in the mirror. "Seriously, *hermano*, what's wrong with you? You been on edge since Wednesday."

Clay shrugged. What was he supposed to say, *I've been having fantasies about fucking my best friend*? Yeah, right.

"Just stressed with finals and finding a job after graduation, is all."

Dominic flashed a shit-eating grin. "I know what you need. Here." He pulled a little black business card out of his back pocket and passed it to Clay.

He stared at the slanted, almost-incomprehensible writing. It looked like a name and phone number. And...a lizard?

"Lola will take of everything you need, man. I used to call her all the time. Uh, before I met Laura, of course."



The proverbial light bulb went on, then exploded in a hundred thousand shards of glass. Clay's voice cracked. "A hooker?"

"Hell, no. An *escort*. Not a hooker." Dominic grinned like a certifiable idiot. "Lola's the best. Knows exactly what it takes, if you know what I mean."

Unfortunately, he did. Flashbacks of that disaster with Chloe sent his balls north, seeking refuge.

"What's the difference between a hooker and an escort?"

"Call her and find out."

Clay shook his head. Maybe if he looked interested, Dominic would leave and Clay could forget this conversation had ever happened. He flipped the business card over.

The minute he read the tagline, his cock sprang to attention. Without his permission. Again.

*Pleasured Fascinations. Purveyor of fine erotic toys, oils, whips, and chains. No kink too crass, no fetish too freaky.*

Clay flushed bright red, like a fucking fire engine. *No. No way. A porn shop? I wouldn't even know what to do, or look at, or try, or...*

"We all need a little...release now and then," Dominic said, oblivious of Clay's discomfort. "If you don't have any other way to get your rocks off, then this is the next best thing."

"But I...I mean, I never...I wouldn't know..."

Somehow, Clay didn't think he and Dominic were talking about the same thing anymore.

Dominic grabbed the bathroom door handle. "Mention my name and she'll give you a discount. Trust me."

Clay learned a long time ago that "trust me" usually meant "run like hell."

And yet, the idea wouldn't leave him alone. Maybe he could pick up a book or something to help him figure out what the hell he was doing.

One look at his tented trousers and he knew *something* had to be done. He'd never make it through the rest of the school year like this. Somehow, he didn't think the excuse, "I couldn't

come to class because I had a raging hard on,” would work for very long.

Except on Hippie-Lady. She’d probably ask him to do a research paper on it, comparing it to a Shakespearian sonnet or some crap like that.

# Chapter Five

*Friday Evening*

*Pleasured Fascinations*

The glare of the neon sign hurt Clay's eyes. It flashed on and off and made him wonder what the seizure-inducing fuck he was doing here.

His watch beeped. Seven forty-five.

Clay had been standing in the gravel parking lot for over an hour. The sound of the departing bus still echoed in his ears. He wondered if the cloud of carbon monoxide that spewed from the tailpipe would cause him brain damage a few years down the line.

For every step he took, his whole body would freeze and he'd end up stumbling like a drunken frat boy back to where he started. It had begun the moment he saw the glossy poster hanging in the shop's window:

*Privacy Guaranteed*

*Hassle-Free Returns Except On:*

*Couples Toys*

*Rabbit Vibrators*

*Anal Plugs*

*The Valu-Lock Ultra Harness*

Behind him, a streetlamp lamp came on, casting a long shadow over the pick-up trucks and cargo vans littering the parking lot. It reminded him of the most inappropriate lighthouse ever. Next door was a liquor store with a window sign that offered discounts for frequent customers. Across the street was a high school.

*Only in Boulder.*

A rustling noise caught his attention. Shit, had someone followed him?

Heart pounding, Clay turned around. Dark trees and scrub bushes lined the far side of the lot. He heard the sound again and saw one of the low bushes rattle, like something was about to burst out of the dead, dried leaves.

Clay jumped back. Maybe he could reach the bus stop before whatever it was caught him?

Another rustle, then a dark shape stumbled out of the woods. The figure jerked, then skittered forward and slid to a stop in the path of one of the light posts.

A baby deer stood in the shaft of yellow light, trembling, the white spots on its hide as large and round as its eyes. The fawn's knees wobbled as it whipped its head around and lurched forward, sniffing the air.

Holy. Fuck. Had he *really* just gotten the piss scared out of him by Bambi?

Clay laughed, one of those nervous yelps that made him sound like a girl. He put his hand out, curious to see if the deer would let him pet it.

The fawn flicked its ears and sniffed his hand, but didn't move any closer. It looked at him, black eyes huge, boring into his. He could see his own face reflected back at him. The deer turned its head towards the store, then back at Clay, and back to the store again.

With a final glance at Clay, it turned and ran back into the woods with barely a sound.

Clay stared after the fawn. There was a metaphor in there somewhere, but damn it if he'd waste any more time worrying about it.

He walked across the parking lot, telling himself it was the cool mountain breeze that made him shiver. Clay grasped the metal handle bar and took a deep breath, then pushed the door open.

A fat dude sat behind the counter in the overly-warm store, inhaling a bag of Cheetos as he watched the shoppers on TV monitors. Half-dressed magazine centerfolds were taped to the walls behind him, and hung over the greasy guy's head was a sign that pointed to an adult arcade on the second floor.

Clay walked towards the counter, feeling like a man headed to his own execution. His heart started pounding again. Maybe it wasn't too late to turn and run back to campus?

Counter-Man looked up from the monitors and gave Clay a glare that made the hairs stand up on the back of his neck. To the right, an old guy with a mullet flipped through a *Busty Asian Beauties Magazine* while making kissy faces.

Sweat broke out on Clay's forehead. *God, this is such a mistake. I'm gonna kill Dominic for this.*

He turned around. Maybe if he acted casual, he could still get out of here without everyone staring at him like the freak he was. He'd look at a few items on the shelves, pretend he just wasn't interested, then slide out of the store when it wouldn't seem like he was running away like a scared little mamma's boy.

Yeah. He could do this. No problem.

As nonchalantly as he could, Clay reached for a plastic blue and red package with a half-naked girl on the cover, who pointed to something shaped like a peach. Squinting in the dim light, he read, "Intimate Packages: slip your manhood into this blonde bombshell's sweet pink love passage."

Clay didn't know whether to scream or laugh. His balls retreated in horror. He shoved the *thing* back on the shelf with shaking hands, knocking over two other display hooks in the process.

"First time, huh?"

He whipped around and tipped over a rack of leather bands with little red hearts sewn into the band.

A girl with pink-and-blue spiked hair stood in front of him, hands on her hips, grinning. "Yup. Sex store virgin in aisle two."

And there went his scrotum. "Um..."

The girl smiled. Not one of those I-am-so-laughing-at-you-right-now grins, but an actual friendly expression. "It's okay, hun. Lots of people are nervous their first time out."

"I'm not—"

"Liar." She bent and gathered up the—*gulp*—cock rings Clay had knocked onto the floor. It gave him the perfect angle to stare down her black tank top. Was it bad that he thought her tattoos were more interesting than her tits?

Clay joined her on the floor and helped clean up the mess he'd made. He righted the so-not-being-used-correctly hat rack and helped the girl hang the rings.

"Sorry about that," he said, offering her a hand up.

She shook her head and pushed herself up. "No worries. It happens more often than you might think." The girl put her hands on her hips again and looked him up and down, then gave him a *knowing* smirk.

*Fuck!*

She grabbed his arm. "Sweetie, it's okay. We get lots of newbies in here. Don't worry. I won't start you off with a double purple dildo or anything. I'm Lola, by the way."

Panic flooded him. "Dominic told me about you!"

She flashed him a wide smile. "Oh, Dominic! He used to be one of my best customers! The only time I see him now is when he picks up presents for that girlfriend of his."

Clay decided he would never be able to look at Dominic and Laura the same way again.

Lola brushed some floor dust off her black miniskirt, then wiped her hands on Clay's sleeve. Apparently it was his day to be a human towel. "So, are you looking to spice up your love life, just experimenting, or," she raised an eyebrow, "*other?*"

Clay would be the happiest man on earth if the floor would just open up and swallow him whole. The embarrassed blush that crept up his neck didn't help matters, either. "I'm not...I don't...maybe I should just go..."

"Aww, sweetie. Don't worry so much. I don't bite. Hard."

"Um..." Aw, fuck it. "*Other.*"

She grabbed his hand and pulled him across the store, chattering like the Micro Machines Man the entire time. "I'll start you off slow, maybe with some blindfolds and handcuffs."

"W...why would I want to blindfold someone?" *Besides the obvious of not being able to see how bad I am at this?*

"Oh, honey. Half the fun is in making them squirm. Now, over there we've got a beginners' bondage kit that comes with suction clamps. They come either in pink or black. And here we've got leather blindfolds, faux-fur or satin love masks, and tickler rubbers."

“That looks like what my mom uses to dust the living room.”

Lola shrugged. “Hey, whatever turns you on...”

Clay decided he wasn’t going to kill Dominic. No, he was going to slap a ball gag in his mouth, shove one of those rabbit things up his ass, and float him in the UMC Fountain for the whole damn student body to see.

“Come on, I’ll show you our complete line of fetish and bondage toys,” Lola said. “You’ll love them. We’ve got eye mask and ball gag combo packs, chokers, collars, harnesses, strap-ons—not like you’ll need one of those though, right? Hey, how do you feel about harnesses and riding crops?”

*Like I’m having an aneurysm?*

She led him past racks of crotch-less panties and penis pumps, then around a corner marked Games Section. Clay’s eyes strayed to some of the more...colorful items, like a pack of cards with the words Foreplay Fortune Teller printed in cursive letters, Twister: the Kama Sutra Edition, Spin the Pecker, and something called a Bouncing Beach Boob.

“Personally, I’ve always enjoyed Pin the Hose on the Fireman,” Lola said, giving him another of those *I understand* smiles. “Always gets me up and in the mood.”

The way he felt right now, Clay would *never* get it up again.

A row of shiny metal rings caught his attention, but *not* in a good way.

“What the fuck is that?”

“*Those* are your new best friends.” Lola stopped and picked one of the *things* off the shelf. “Meet the D-ring and our first double penetration harness. Guaranteed never to rust or chafe.”

“What...How do I...Why would someone...”

“It’s all about control.” Lola ran her thumb over the back of Clay’s hand. “Everyone deserves to have a little fantasy in their lives now and then, right?”

God, he felt like a twelve-year-old learning how to wank for the first time. “Who comes up with this stuff?” He looked around at the well-stocked shelves and racks, covered with things he couldn’t name, let alone identify what they were used for. “How do you even know where to start?”

“Well, there’s always the classics. Most of our customers like our selection of bullwhips, paddles, B-plugs, corset harnesses, wrist and ankle restraints...”

Whatever happened to just having *sex*? Why did he need a whole bunch of crap just to fuck his boyfriend?

*Girlfriend! Girl...oh, fuck.*

“I...I thought I’d just get some lube and condoms. Maybe a book or something.”

“Oh, darling.” Lola shook her head like a disappointed teacher. “There’s so much more to sex than *sex*.”

Fuck, what the hell was he doing there? “Look, this was obviously a mistake. I’m sorry for wasting your time—”

Lola thrust a magazine in his hands. His breath caught in his throat. A glossy god looked up at him from the shiny cover. Chiseled chin, sharp cheekbones, and a chest that gleamed with little diamonds of water. Clay stared at the steely eyes. He couldn’t look away. Absently, he ran his fingers along the line of the long black hair, swirling around a dark nipple, then down to the trail of hair that led past the leather belt at his waist.

*Oh God, it looks like Jack.*

“Ah. So tall, dark, and handsome is your type, hmm?”

The blood in his body rushed southward. Clay managed to nod.

Lola stared at the magazine over his shoulder. “He looks...familiar. Like ‘real life’ familiar.”

*Looks like Jack-Off the No Tell Motel has struck again.*

Clay took a deep breath. *Now or never*. “So...um...if I wanted to...with a *guy*...how would I...”

Thankfully, Lola took the hint. “We have a couple of reference books if you want to learn about the basics.”

For the first time that night, Clay was able to take a deep breath. “Yeah. That sounds good.”

Lola led him to the opposite wall, past a large metal contraption with a hand-written sign that said, “Bondage Love Swing: Fully Adjustable ‘Bounce and Spin’ Attachment Included.”

Just looking at it made his brain hurt. And spine. What the hell was a person supposed to use *that* for?



“Here we go,” Lola said. She shoved a book into the hand *not* gripping the magazine for dear life. The minute Clay saw the yellow and black cover, his whole body become one giant embarrassed blush.

“Gay Sex for Newbies: The Ins and Outs.”

*Fuck. Me. With. A. Spoon.*

“It even has a pull-out color section,” Lola said. “Here, look.”

She reached over and flipped open the book. The words *Ball Spreader* stared at him in seventy-two-point font, right before Lola turned the page and Clay had a stroke.

Or, rather, *watched* a stroke.

Two blond men, *twins*, sat across from each other, fully erect dicks in their hands, while a third man sat between them, hands pinching nipples. Heads were thrown back, Adam’s apples sharp and round, leather collars around the twins’ necks and tied around the bedposts.

Clay’s cock got rock hard in record time.

His heart pounded. No. This was wrong. He shouldn’t be fucking *aroused*. All he could think of was what it would feel like to be the one in between those two sex gods.

God, it felt like his prick was going to explode!

A cool breeze blew over Clay’s face. He looked towards the door, and nearly had a heart attack. Then, he kinda wished he *had*.

“Mr. Parkinson! Well, this is a pleasant surprise. Are you picking up extra batteries, too?”

There was Professor Heggert, standing by the front door and smiling at him like she encountered students in porn shops every day.

The way Clay saw it, either he could stay and probably get drawn into a conversation with Hippie-Lady extolling the virtues of a progressive sex life in Medieval Literature. Or, he could run like fuck.

*Guess which one I choose.*

Clay hauled ass out of the shop, magazine and *How-To* book still clutched in his sweaty hands. He heard Lola shout, but no way in hell was he going to go back there.

Ever.

“Don’t worry,” Lola called after him, her voice echoing across the half-empty parking lot, “I’ll just charge it to Dominic’s account!”

# Chapter Six

## *Saturday Morning*

Hell must have frozen over early this year. Jack Bowman was not only awake at eight o'clock on a Saturday morning, but apparently also dressed and out-and-about.

Clay ignored the nagging discomfort about the guy going missing on the morning of his funeral. Damn, he hated irony.

As much as he liked waking to Jack's gentle snores, he appreciated this time alone. The funeral was this afternoon, guaranteeing that his day was going to suck in a terrific way.

Meaning Clay only had a few hours to read through his ill-gotten goods.

He slid the magazine and book he'd...er, stolen, out of his pillowcase and held one in each hand. The glossy covers featured pictures of scantily clad men, touching and tasting one another. Hands splayed over chests and thighs and asses so firm Clay wondered how many years they'd had to work out just to get their bodies looking like that.

Clay took a deep breath. *Okay. Basics, first. The nice pictures will have to wait for later.*

Stowing the magazine back in his pillowcase, Clay opened *Gay Sex for Newbies: The Ins and Outs*.

Page one was acknowledgements. Page two was a diagram of a man's anatomy.

Like Clay needed any help knowing what his own bits looked like.

He flipped to the table of contents and scanned down for something that might be useful.

"Chapter Three—How to Capture His Attention."

*Bingo.*

Clay read through the chapter quickly, making mental notes along the way. Some of the advice made sense, in an I-never-thought-I'd-need-dating-advice-from-a-book kinda way. The following chapters were about dating and how things worked when both participants were dudes. He hadn't thought figuring out who got the bill after dinner could be so complicated. Then info about things like palimony agreements, declaring same-sex partners as dependants, gay-friendly adoption agencies, but nothing about how to actually *do* anything.

He pulled the magazine out again.

"Page Fourteen—Eight Ways to Make your Lover Scream."

His hands shook as he turned the pages. The minute he saw the article layout, Clay made a mental note to thank the editors and writers of this fine publication. Each numbered step included a how-to list, as well as several diagrams and pictures:

*Step 1: Setting. There is nothing sexy about the backseat of your Trans Am. Show your lover how much he means to you and spring for a nice hotel room. Ones with a full-sized bath or Jacuzzi tub are added bonuses.*

*Step 2: Finger Play. Never underestimate the power of foreplay. Familiarize yourself with your partner's erogenous zones (see diagram at left) and use them. Frequently.*

*Step 3: Breath Play. Sometimes, it needs to be about him, not you, and how good you can make your partner feel. Build the anticipation. Your lover will be more than happy to return the favor later.*

*Step 4: It's all about position. Let your sub dominate the bedroom. Use a pillow under the hips to achieve better penetration. And don't be afraid to put a new spin on the classics. See insert for more ideas.*

*Step 5: Dirty Talk. Also known as verbal foreplay. Let your man know what you like. In fact, order him to do it.*

*Step 6: Stroking. Often falls by the wayside, but don't ignore your partner or forget to return the pleasure you feel. Also, don't forget the lube. Chafing is not your friend.*

*Step 7: Blowjobs. Use them often. Just don't forget to fold your lips over your teeth. Remember, biting hurts.*

*Step 8: Multiple orgasms are indeed possible. Have fun! And be safe. Always use a condom.*

Clay's crotch tightened just *reading* the article. He devoured every word, running through the steps in his head one by one, just to make sure he'd get it right.

His cock pulsed with appreciation as he ran appreciative fingers over the pictures of the male models reenacting the article's advice. One pair in particular caught his eye.

*They look like us. Or us if there was an "us."*

One blond, one dark-headed, the two models frothed against each other like their bodies were made to fit together. The dark-haired one was muscular, but not overdone, and had his hands cupped around the blond's ass. The latter had his head tipped back, mouth open in what Clay could only imagine was a cry of pleasure.

He could picture himself looking like that, if Jack were the one holding him.

Clay slid his hand underneath the comforter and past the elastic waistband of his sweat pants. Breath already coming in short little gusts, Clay reread the article, stroking himself as he reviewed each step. He sank back into the pillow, letting his thoughts drift toward what it would feel like to have Jack's hands stroking him, teasing him, touching him. Would he suck on Clay's throat? Kiss him softly, or hard and rough? Bite his shoulder as he came?

The door banged open. "Good morning, roomie! Lovely day to die, no?"

"Argh!"

Clay's heart exploded out of his chest, landed on the floor, and did a little mariachi dance. He tore his hand away from his disappointed erection and shoved the magazine underneath the covers, praying to every god he could name that Jack hadn't seen the pictures or cover.

"You okay, Clayface? You look a little flushed."

"Fine!" Damn it, he sounded like a chipmunk on speed. He tried again. "F...fine. Yeah. Nightmare, you know."

Jack face melted from curiosity to concern. "The car accident?"

Definitely not something he wanted to talk about, today of all days. *Change the subject, fucknut.* “So, um, you’re up early.”

His roommate grinned and flopped down on Clay’s bed, sprawling across his legs. Clay could barely breathe. If Jack moved just two inches closer, he’d feel...

*Nononono!*

Jack winked at him. “Had to get a start on the day’s festivities. The guys will pick up the decorations at ten, and Carol at The Sink confirmed that we’re good to go, and that they’ll donate a keg because we’re such good customers. Man, this thing is gonna be great!”

What would really be great was Jack getting the hell off him, his erection settling down, and an ice cold shower where he could shut his brain off for about thirty minutes.

He forced thoughts of Chem lab, cafeteria food, and Janet Reno into his brain, willing his body to calm the fuck down.

Jack smacked Clay’s knee. “Come on. Get dressed. Dominic and Miles are meeting us on the Hill for some breakfast and we’ll start setting up for the funeral.”

“Sure. Right. Just, uh, give me a minute, yeah?”

“Meet us at the Pancake Palace,” Jack said, getting off the bed. He rummaged through his closet and pulled out a Colorado Rockies cap. “Can’t get caught out when I’m supposed to be dead, right?”

Jack walked towards the door, grasped the handle, then stopped. He glanced at Clay over his shoulder with a weird look on his face, like he wanted to say something, but didn’t want to say it.

“Jack?” An unsettled feeling pooled in Clay’s stomach. “What is it?”

“That issue is my favorite, too.”

He walked out of their dorm room, leaving the shards of Clay’s sanity lying on the floor in a thousand pieces.

\* \* \* \*

“*Oi, mano*, took you long enough to get here,” Dominic said as Clay literally collapsed in a seat at the sticky table. “My mom takes less time getting ready.”

“Missed...the bus...” Panting, he grabbed Miles’ water and took a long chug, willing the ache in his ribs to settle. Sweat poured down his face and neck from the steep sprint up the hill. “Fucking thing...tried to choke me with diesel fumes...as it sped away. Driver waved as he punched the gas. Asshole.”

Miles used his plastic menu as a fan. Clay sighed in relief. “You’ve just become my favorite person in the whole world, Miley.”

“Hey!” Jack whined. “I thought *I* was your favorite person?”

Clay thought back to the book and the chapter that talked about flirting with other guys. It seemed like a good line to respond to, but what about Dominic and Miles? Would they be freaked out? What if Dominic and Miles decided to pound the crap out of him if they found out he was gay? And what if he was wrong and Jack really wasn’t interested in him like that?

*Aw, fuck it.*

“Of course you’re my favorite person,” Clay finally said. “Right up there with my mother.”

Dominic snorted so hard, orange juice shot out of his nose. Miles looked like he’d burst a blood vessel from laughing. Jack just raised his pierced eyebrow as if trying to figure out if Clay were stoned or just drunk.

Clay wished he could just shrivel up and die. *Yeah. Bring my mom into my attempt at flirting. Great. Fucking. Idea.*

Time to save the tiny bit of pride he still had left. He stole Jack’s menu and ignored the guys as he debated between breakfast specials that he couldn’t eat now if he tried.

A waitress with a gap in her front teeth the size of the Grand Canyon wobbled over to their table. She looked hung over. Smelled like it, too. “What’ll it be?”

They placed their orders, Dominic and Miles snickering every time Clay caught their gazes. If he didn’t think he’d end up in jail for it, he’d fork their eyes out with a spoon.

Jack took a sip of his coffee and sighed in contentment, eyes half-closed as he savored the taste.

*Okay, Clay. Second chance. Don’t fuck it up.*

“So, was it good for you?”

Jack’s eyebrows creased. “Huh?”

*Shit.* “I mean, was it as good for you as it is, er, for you?”

Jack stared at him as if he’d just sprouted tits. “What are you talking about?”

“Um, you know—”

“Are you on drugs?” Miles asked.

Clay bowed his head, finding his rolled up silverware suddenly riveting. “Never mind.”

It was official. Clay Parkinson trying to flirt with Jack Bowman was like using Excalibur to peel a kumquat.

“Well, whatever you’re smoking, I want some,” Dominic said, right before poking Clay in the arm with his fork.

Miles snickered. “Careful there, Dominic. He might ask if you and the fork are having a good time.”

“Maybe Clay and the fork want a little *alone* time,” Dominic shot back. He started to run the tines over Clay’s face.

Clay pushed him away. “Stop it, fucktard.”

“He protests too much, no?” Dominic tried to run the fork through Clay’s hair. “Maybe he *should* use the fork to get off. Lord knows he ain’t getting any as it is. Chiquillo needs some serious help.”

“Cool it, Dominic,” Jack said, voice hard.

Clay shoved Dominic again. “Get off me. I mean it.”

“How could you even get off using a *fork*?” Miles had a disgusted expression on his face. “What would you do with it, shove it up your hole?”

Dominic made a lewd gesture with the piece of silverware. “Would you like that, joto? Taking a fork up the ass?”

Something snapped inside him. Clay shot out of his chair, knocking it over. All the other diners stopped talking and stared at him, but he didn’t give a shit.

Dominic jerked. “Clay?”

“Fuck off.”

He threw a couple of dollars on the table to pay for the toast he had no intention of eating and ran. A little kid darted across his path and Clay nearly bowled him over. He pushed the kid away and ignored its psycho mother berating him for not thinking her demon spawn was the cutest thing ever.

Bright Colorado sunshine blinded him as he stormed out of the restaurant. He hissed and stumbled over to a bench right by



the ashtrays at the corner of the sidewalk. Feeling like there wasn't a solid bone in his body, Clay slumped on the iron seat and put his head between his knees.

Any minute now, he'd pass out and could pretend nothing had happened.

Just like nothing would ever happen with Jack.

He pounded his fists against his legs. "Fuck!"

"Yeah, that's what I told those guys they could go do to themselves."

Clay looked up, right as Jack sat down beside him.

"Sorry."

Jack frowned. "What are you apologizing for?"

*Being a moron every time I'm around you? For not even knowing what I'm doing any more? Because I think I'm in love with you?* "I don't know."

Jack sighed. "Look. Don't let what Dominic said bother you, okay? He and Miley were being douchebags."

"I know."

Jack cupped Clay's cheek. The touch burned something inside of him. "Do you? Really?"

Clay had no answer.

Jack leaned closer. His breath ghosted over Clay's lips, sweet with the scents of maple syrup and coffee. Clay stared at Jack's mouth, a hairsbreadth away from his. Jack licked his lips, then put his hand on Clay's shoulder. A soft heat rushed through him, starting in his cheeks and slowly warming his chest and hands, then his belly and crotch.

If Clay were to turn his head just a fraction of an inch...

Jack's tongue flicked lightly against Clay's lower lip. Clay tensed. Jack's hand slid down Clay's arm, then over the small of his back, stroking until Clay's muscles relaxed. With a soft moan, Jack licked him again, tracing Clay's lip from left to right, pulling it into his mouth with a sharp nip.

Clay's body trembled. Was this really happening?

Jack stroked his jaw, tilting his face up so their eyes met. He slipped one hand behind Clay's head, fingers tangling in his hair.

"It's all right," Jack whispered. "It is."

Mouth dry, Clay swallowed. Hard. "What is?"

"Wanting."

His heart pounded so hard, he wondered if Jack could feel it. He made a sound that was halfway between a moan and a sigh as his jeans grew tighter. “Wh...what do you know about what I want?”

Jack looked like a predator hunting down prey, his eyes wide, pupils devouring the gray-blue irises. He opened his mouth, baring his teeth. Then he chuckled softly and blew out another breath, before licking Clay’s lips again. “Know what *I* want?”

Clay shook his head.

“I want you to let me—”

“Oye, there you losers are!” Dominic burst through the restaurant’s glass doors, Miles right behind him.

The spell was broken. Jack jerked away from Clay as if he’d been burned.

Clay felt like he had been.

Fuck, what would the guys think if they caught Clay kissing Jack? What would they say if they knew Clay liked guys more than he’d ever liked girls?

Jack rubbed his hands over his face. “Dominic, you’re a twat, you know that?”

“Huh? Why?”

Clay really didn’t want Jack to answer that question. He took a deep breath, rubbed his damp hands on his jeans, and stood up. “Come on, guys. It’s almost ten. Let’s get this train wreck on the tracks.”

## Chapter Seven

*Saturday Afternoon*

“But, I’m not Irish.”

Clay paused on the top stair, outside of the The Sink's large third-floor meeting room reserved for the funeral.

*What on earth is Jack bitching about now?*

“Jack-Off, it’s a song. It doesn’t mean you’re Irish,” Dominic’s voice answered.

“My name’s not Danny, either.”

Clay rolled his eyes, then elbowed the door open, hands occupied with a large keg of Fat Tire. Dominic must have seen the door twitch because he flung it open and grabbed the keg before Clay could say fuck off. He followed Dominic into the room.

The first word that came to mind was *pink*.

Every decoration in the room was an awful shade of rose pink, from the wilted, half-dead flowers in dirty vases, to the chair sashes and tablecloths around the ramshackle homemade coffin, to the God-awful costumes worn by the four Color Guard girls looking at sheet music in the far corner.

“Um, Dominic?”

At least he had the decency to flush before answering. “Yeah, yeah, I know. But Fiona’s Floral had a sale.”

Clay raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms. “A sale.”

“Right. Well. A...um, a post-Valentine’s Day Sale.”

Clay felt a headache—just the *first* of the day, he was sure—bloom behind his eyes. “But Valentine’s was weeks ago.”

“That’s why everything was so cheap. And the flowers are from a wedding Fiona was supposed to do last weekend, but turns out the bride was pregnant and never slept with the groom—”

Clay shook his head. Dominic had a gift in thwarting reality wherever it dared to tread. Such as the flannel shirt-tux jacket combo he currently sported.

He helped Dominic tap the keg and set it up next to the pile of finger sandwiches Carol had donated...after Jack had flirted with her a bit.

An act Clay *refused* to think about.

“Where’s Miles?”

Dominic grinned. “He’s on usher duty.”

“Ushers? Why do we need those? It’s not like people can’t find their own seats. The room’s not that large.”

“Oh, not here. Back on campus. See, this thing is going to be bigger than we originally planned. Everyone we tapped showed their invites to their friends, and then almost the whole senior class wanted to come! Half the juniors, too. So Miley’s weeding out the slags from the hags, and directing the rest over here.”

Clay felt like he was on a demented Tilt-o-Whirl, right at the point where you either fall off or throw up. “How many invitations did Miles send?”

“Hey, shut your holes already! You two could wake the dead.”

Clay turned, just in time to see Jack rise from the coffin, dressed in his cemetery best. His black suit jacket and white dress shirt were finely pressed, and surprisingly free of stains. He even looked like he was...

*No...*

*Not possible...*

*He didn’t...*

“Er, Jack?”

“Yeah, Clayface?”

He forced himself to breathe. “Are you wearing makeup?”

Jack Bowman, arguably one of the best looking guys at CU, ran a finger over his lips and pulled away a smear of bright red rouge. “Why, I do believe I am.”

“But...where...when...” He shook his head. “Why? *Why* are you wearing lipstick?”

“Not just lipstick. *Cherry* flavored lipstick. And I’ve got on blush, eyeliner, and even a little mascara. Took me forever to get

the look right, even with that magazine Dominic swiped from Laura's stash. Don't know how chicks do this every day. Makes my face itch." He scratched at some of the glitter underneath his ear. "So, like it?"

*I'd like to lick it off you*, was the first thought that came to mind. Clay stared at him, Jack's face smooth and shiny from all that powder and glitter. He caught a whiff of whatever cologne the dark-haired man had bathed in that morning. It smelt like musk, and sweat, and pine wood...and Jack.

Clay swallowed the *something* that lodged in his throat and forced himself to look away. He ignored the voice in his, er, head that wanted to touch those bright red lips for himself; see if they tasted as sweet as they looked.

Just a little closer, and he'd be able to kiss those full lips, all red and round and wet.

He gave himself a mental face slap. *Damn it, get a hold of yourself! It's not like you and Jack are...well, I mean you couldn't be...he'd never...he doesn't know you like guys.*

Clay shook his head. *No, you don't like guys! You are not gay.*

*And yet, just three days ago, you jacked-off in a closet, his name on your lips when you came*, another voice argued inside his head.

He sighed. Even if he *were* gay, it's not like Jack was. Or that Jack would ever think of him *that way*. Clay was only imagining it that Jack looked like he wanted to kiss him that morning. No way was that real; no chance that could ever happen.

*Stop. Just stop. Don't go there.*

"Dominic, is this going to take much longer?" one of the small pink-clad Color Guard girls said, arms crossed. She smacked her sheet music against her leg. "We're going to be late and Coach Lewis said she'd skin us alive if we missed another practice."

"Sure thing, Jenny," Dominic mumbled.

"It's Janie."

"Right." He flashed his trademark you-can't-resist-this grin, which really only worked on Laura. "But everyone will be here soon. You don't want all the hard work you girls put into

learning the music going to waste, do you? I promise, as soon as all the guests are seated and your song is over, you four can head on back.”

Janie scowled, then turned back to the other girls.

The sound of rushed, heavy footsteps clattered up the stairwell. Miles burst into the room, panting and red-faced.

“Guys, they’re here! But—”

Dominic clapped his hands. “Great! We’ve just finished with the refreshments. Let them in.”

Miles grabbed Dominic’s shoulders and shook him. “But there’s something that—”

“No *buts*, Miles. We’re on a tight schedule here,” Jack interrupted.

“Shut up, Jack-Off,” Dominic hissed, squirming out of Miles’ vice grip. “They’ll hear you. You’re supposed to be dead, remember?”

Clay shook his head. *Now there’s a phrase I never thought I’d hear.*

Jack gave Dominic a one-fingered salute and lay back down in the creaking casket, hands crossed over his chest.

More footsteps rattled the rickety stairs outside the room. Clay turned around just in time to see Dominic fight to stifle the last of his sniggers and take a deep breath as he welcomed the first guests into the room.

Clad in black, two girls in their year entered the room. Clay thought they lived on the floor below them in the dorms, though he couldn’t remember their names.

*Wait. Are those girls crying?*

They were. The girl on the left sobbed into a handkerchief while the one on the right looked a second away from doing the same. They clung to each other like their pet bunny had just died.

Dominic glanced over at him, looking as confused as Clay felt. “Um, are you two all right?”

Clay didn’t think it was possible, but the girl on the left started to cry harder and flung herself into the nearest chair. The other girl stiffened, then nodded. “It’s...just so unexpected, you know? He was always so full of life, and now...” She trailed off, then covered a sob as she rushed over to the other girl, letting her own tears fall.

Dominic shook his head, eyes wide. Miles looked like he was going into anaphylactic shock, his face all red and splotchy.

The varsity soccer team came up the stairs next. The captain, Andy Rourke, nodded at Clay. "I know you two were close. I'm so sorry for your loss. CU's never seen a better center forward."

He patted Clay's shoulder, then went into the room, the other players in tow. They, too, had red-rimmed eyes.

Clay scooted over to Dominic and Miles. "What the hell is happening?"

Dominic shrugged. "I dunno. It's like they all think he's really dead."

And just like that, the proverbial light bulb went on in Clay's head.

"No. Oh, no." He pinched the bridge of his nose. "Miles, please tell me you remembered to tell people this is a *fake* funeral."

Miles was actually shaking. "That's what I've been trying to tell you," he whispered. "I kinda, sorta, forgot to mention that Jack really isn't dead."

Dead. Silence.

Then, Mount St. Dominic exploded.

"You kinda, sorta, *forgot* that Jack isn't dead?" he hissed. "What the hell is wrong with you? *Te voy a caer encima, pendejo!*"

Clay thought that was a *very* good question. How the fuck could they explain this? "You jackass! How could you be so stupid? What the fuck are we going to tell everyone? They'll kill us!"

"I'm sorry!"

"Fucking dillhole!"

Clay took a deep breath and closed his eyes. There was only one way out of this mess. "We finish the funeral."

Both Dominic and Miles spat, "What?"

"We go through with it." Clay opened his eyes. He hated this idea, but what choice did they have? "We give Jack what he wanted. Then, when it's over, one of us knocks the coffin over, Jack rolls out, everyone freaks and runs. If we act surprised, we might just get away with our balls still attached to our bodies."

Dominic gave a half-grin. “Always knew you were the smart one, Clay. Let’s do it.”

Miles squawked his approval.

Clay nodded, silently vowing to murder his friends when this was all over. “Miles, go take a seat in the back of the room and don’t make eye contact with anyone. Dominic, start the ceremony. Rush through it as fast as you can. I’ll stand by the door and do damage control.”

They split up. Miles swung by the refreshments table and grabbed two sandwiches before slouching down in a seat. Clay inched over toward the door and strategically stood behind the table with the guest book and framed photos of Jack, just in case. He liked his testicles right where they were.

Dominic took his spot behind the makeshift milk-crate podium near the base of the casket. He opened his mouth to speak when that Janie girl tugged on his sleeve. Dominic bent down as she whispered in his ear, then stood up with a grimace on his face. He nodded, stepped away from the podium, and walked over to the end of the coffin. The Color Guard girl returned to her compatriots and they burst out the most off-pitch, painful, make-your-ears-bleed version of *Danny Boy* that Clay had ever heard.

Though, they did sound better than Jack’s attempts at musicality, if his shower concerts were anything to judge by.

And of course his treacherous brain had chosen that moment to derail into thoughts of a naked Jack, soaping his chest, his abs, his...

A touch to his elbow yanked Clay’s attention away from the gutter and back toward the door. He nearly fell over when he recognized their latest guest.

“Sasha?”

Jack’s latest conquest, the supposed love of his life and future mother of his children—despite the fact the relationship had only lasted five months—had limp, dark hair and pale skin, highlighted by the dark shadows under her eyes, like she hadn’t slept in days.

A guilty voice in Clay’s head shouted, *She probably hasn’t, thinking her ex died, you idiot!*



Then a second voice shouted, *His parents! Oh my God, she knows his parents and she probably told them and they must think he's dead and they've lost a son and we're the worst human beings on the planet!*

Sasha sounded like she'd smoked an entire case of cigarettes before coming here. "How did it happen?"

Clay would have traded a month's worth of awkward wet dreams and untimely erections to *not* be having this conversation. "Um...well...it was quite...er, sudden."

The goth-girl's steady gaze did not break.

"It was an accident. Something about a garden hose and a runaway golf cart. We're not solid on all the details."

Sasha's thin eyebrows knit together. "That's the best they could come up with?"

"Huh?"

The thin girl crossed her black-and-pink striped arms. "Well, however Jack got killed, I'm sure there was stupid, bourgeoisie, establishment reason behind it. I always knew he'd die like that, fodder for the revolution. They probably wanted to silence him. That's why those capitalist bastards are hiding the truth from us."

"I'm sorry?" He had no idea what else to say.

Sasha nodded, then dropped her defensive stance. "I know." She sighed, heavy and melodramatic, just like Jack. *No wonder they got together. And no wonder they imploded.*

"I know you two are...*were* close," she said. "He always spoke about his friends whenever we'd go out. If you ever want to talk, I'll listen."

The hand on his arm was back, stroking up and down with a deliberate motion. Then, the hand dropped lower. Clay's breath caught in his throat. Sasha stepped closer, hand warm on the small of his back, touching places he didn't even know he had.

He jerked backwards. His cheeks flushed, and *not* in a good way. "W...what are you doing?"

Sasha tilted her head and raised a pierced eyebrow. "Well, Jack obviously saw something in you."

"What?"

She blinked at him. Twice. Three times, with lashes painted heavier than a Jackson Pollock painting.

“Er, do you have something in your eye?”

“Yes.” Sasha shoved her leg in between his. He yelped. She growled and licked her front teeth with her tongue. “You.”

Lust swirled in her brown eyes. “Jack once told me he has all these letters he wrote to you. Didn’t have the courage to send them, obviously. I snuck a peek once when he was taking a piss. Have to say I was surprised to find out my boyfriend liked to call your name when he masturbated instead of mine.”

Clay wondered if this was what a stroke felt like.

“But, since Jack couldn’t follow through with it, then perhaps I should. Death always reminds us of what we’re missing out on, wouldn’t you say?” Her hand curved around his ass and squeezed, sharp nails digging into his flesh.

Clay jumped away from her faster than a freshman during Hell Week. “Oh, I...I really...couldn’t...it’s Jack’s funeral, and—” *And the thought of doing that with you, with any chick, makes me want to sick up.*

*Oh.*

*Shit.*

*Guess it’s true then.*

Sasha withdrew her hand from his ass and resumed the stony mask she’d worn when she’d first arrived. “Of course. We should observe proper decorum in times like these. I’ll find you again when the timing is more...erogenous to us both.”

The next second, her lips were on his, wet and demanding and completely not what he wanted. She shoved her tongue in his mouth and licked the back of his teeth. It was all he could do not to bite the offending organ invading his mouth. Her hands stroked over his chest, rubbing nipples that refused to harden under her skanky touch.

She finally pulled away with a slick sound, licking Clay’s lips on her way out. With a flare of her black skirt, she walked into the room and sat in the back row, as far away from Jack’s coffin as she could get.

Clay hadn’t had the time to process what had just happened, when Dominic stepped up to the podium again. Thankfully, the Color Guard girls were done murdering their song and had taken their seats.

*Jack's ex wants to screw me, his parents probably think we murdered him, and by Monday the entire student body will know we scammed them.*

*Maybe we'd better eat off campus until end of term.*

Dominic cleared his throat. "Right. So...um, we're here to...er, say goodbye to Jack, and stuff. Would, um, anyone like to say something? You know, since, er, it's a funeral and all."

Clay smacked his forehead. They were doomed.

Laura was the first to stand. Like most of the girls in the room, her eyes were rimmed red. *Of course she's been crying, you twat! Because you made her think someone she knew died!*

She sniffled and blinked her eyes. "I...I met Jack at orientation freshman year. I didn't think much of him then because he seemed so arrogant and full of himself. And he didn't get much better over the next four years. But he didn't deserve to die. Not so young."

She hurried back to her seat in tears.

Clay felt like the worst scum of the earth. Worse than the stuff that passed for veggie burgers in the dorm cafeteria.

Across the room, he caught Miles' eye. *Guy looks like he's about to hurl.*

*Me, too.*

Preston the RA was the next person to stand, to Clay's surprise. Dominic scowled at him, but Preston held up his hand. "I've come here to pay my respects, Martinez. Surely you can allow that."

Dominic nodded. Barely.

"Bowman's short life should serve as an example to us all," he said, voice low and cold as his gaze raked the room. "Stupidity gets us nowhere. He could have lived a long, perhaps fruitful life, if he'd pulled his head out of his ass long enough to use the mush in his cranium instead of strutting around campus like a constipated peacock."

Clay clenched his fists. No one talked about his Jack that way!

Wait. *His* Jack? When did *that* happen?

Preston smirked. "May you all take this as a lesson to obey the posted rules in the dormitories."

The RA brushed by Clay on his way out of the room. Clay took extra care to pound his shoulder into the asshole's side as hard as he could.

Dominic cleared his throat. Clay silently willed him to hurry the hell up.

"Well, if we're all done here—"

"Wait! I have something to say."

A pretty blonde in the fourth row wearing a black halter top and Daisy Dukes stood up and walked toward the head of the coffin. She took a deep breath and ran a shaking hand through Jack's shoulder-length black hair.

Clay wanted to pull all her curls out of her head via her nostrils. His fingernails bit into his palms when she leaned over and placed a kiss on Jack's forehead.

"He was the gentlest lover I've ever had," she said, still stroking the smooth hair. "He touched me in ways I never thought a man *could* touch a woman. Treated me like a goddess." She turned and faced the room. "He even cried after we made love."

Clay bit his lip. *No choice. Can't...hold...it in...*

Dominic didn't even try to hold back. He snorted, loud. Miles did, too.

The blonde stomped her foot. "Don't mock him. He was so moved by what we shared that he needed to express his emotions. He was sensitive and cared about *my* needs."

Even Clay couldn't resist—no man could. His stomach hurt, he laughed so hard. Half the room joined him.

The other half, he noticed, were women. *Angry* women.

"Wait a minute. Did Jack say, 'You're the first person to ever make me feel this way?'" one girl asked.

"Yeah," the blonde said. "And then he told me he'd always dreamed of experiencing a moment like that."

A second girl asked, "Did he call you his very own angel?"

One of the soccer players stood. "And that he never thought he'd be able to open up to someone and trust them?" shouted Dave.

"That you were his first?"

"Or you're the only love he's ever known?"

“And that something so right could only last that one, perfect night?”

Clay had a *very* bad feeling about this.

Every girl in the room was on her feet and furious, save Laura—only because Dominic would have killed him if Jack ever made a move on her.

The blonde stopped stroking Jack’s hair. She stared at the “corpse,” and then spat on his face. “You...you...you man-whore!” With a snarl worthy of any woman scorned, she stomped out of the room. The other girls, plus several of the guys, followed her, also spitting on Jack before storming out of the room. The other mourners followed suit, leaving the four friends alone in the room.

Dominic snickered.

Clay blinked.

Miles puffed on his inhaler.

Jack jumped out of the coffin faster than a Pop Tart on speed. “What the fuck! They were supposed to talk about good memories and shit. And I didn’t cry because I was *moved*. That stupid bitch was so dry, I thought my prick would get stuck!” He wiped the globs of spit his face with his sleeve. “All that work, wasted. What the hell happened?”

“Miley Cyrus over here screwed up the invites,” Dominic said. “Everyone thought you were really dead.”

“Fuck.”

“Pretty much.”

“But think of how many people showed up, Jack,” Clay said. “That should prove that people care about you. That you *have* left a legacy here.”

Jack slumped to the floor. “But, no one actually said anything *nice*. Hell, I didn’t even get to hear what you all think about me.” He looked at each of them in turn. “What would you have said, if this was a real funeral and I was dead?”

*Oh, not this again. Not now.* The *last* thing Clay wanted to do was tell Jack how he felt about him, especially when he didn’t even understand it himself.

Dominic, asshat *extraordinaire* that he was, went first. “Okay, but if any of this goes beyond these walls, I’ll shove my foot so far up your asses that you’ll be tasting my Nikes for a

week.” He took a deep breath. “Okay. Well, I guess I’d say, you know, that if I could’ve picked someone to be my brother, instead of inheriting the two *hijos de putas* that I did, I would’ve chosen you. I know you have my back, and I’ve got yours.”

Jack smiled. “That was deep, Martinez.”

“I’ll deny the whole thing if you ever bring it up again.”

“So noted.” Jack nodded. “Your turn, Miles.”

“Um, what he said, I guess. And that you’re a good friend. I mean, I know I fuck things up a lot—”

“Like today,” Dominic muttered under his breath.

Miles ignored him. “But you always stand up for me. I appreciate that. I really do.”

Jack grinned. “Thanks, Miley. That means a lot.”

And then, of course, Jack just *had* to turn those intense blue-grey eyes in his direction. “Clay?”

A lump lodged in his throat. He didn’t even know where to start. “Um...”

“Come on, Clayface. Can’t be that hard if even Dominic here could string two words together and make a sentence.”

Dominic smacked him upside the head.

“Oye!”

“All right. Lay off. Um...I guess I would’ve said...um...” Clay swallowed. Why was this so damn hard? “Um, well, I’d be sad, of course. I mean, you were the first person I met at CU. You invited me to sit with you in the cafeteria that first night. And then, when my dad and sister died...” That stupid lump clogged up his throat again. “You helped me pack, and got me on the plane back home, and then, when I told you I didn’t want to come back, you flew out to Boston and *yelled* at me. You told me it wasn’t what my dad or Lizzie would have wanted...”

Clay took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes with the palms of his hands. “You have no idea how much that meant to me. How much that *means* to me.”

The moment it was out of his mouth, he realized how true it was. Jack had been a major force in his life for so many years now; his whole adult life, really. And in nearly all his strongest memories—both the good and the bad—Jack was there, with a smile and a joke, or a tub of chocolate frosting whenever he’d

sink into a funk about his dad and sister, followed by a promise that someday, everything would be all right again.

And then, there were those letters Sasha had mentioned.

*Could Jack really like me more than a friend?* Somehow, the idea made more sense than anything else had in the last thirty-six hours.

“Hey, guys,” he said, turning towards Dominic and Miles. “Can I talk to Jack alone for a minute?”

“You just want us to get killed by the angry mob first, don’t you?” Dominic asked, crossing his arms.

“Let us know how sharp their pitchforks are.” Clay answered.

Miles snorted. “I’ll save one for you, don’t worry.”

“Thanks. See you guys back in the dorm.”

Miles lumbered down the stairs, but Dominic stayed behind. He had a weird look on his face, like he was hung over and having a philosophical moment.

“Dominic?” Clay asked.

He scratched the back of his head. “Um, yeah. Just...” He took a deep breath. “Look, whatever you two get up to, just don’t give me any details, all right?”

Clay’s heart pounded as loud as Dominic’s retreating footsteps down the rickety wooden stairs.

This was it.

They were alone.

Jack was here...with him...just the two of them...

“What’s up, Claymate? You okay?”

He walked across the room and knelt in front of Jack. Clay pushed a loose strand of silky black hair behind Jack’s ear, fingers ghosting over the warm, smooth skin.

“Clay?”

Jack’s voice, soft and uncertain, gave him the courage he needed. Clay leaned forward, eyes closed, and prayed Jack would close the distance between them.

He did.

Awkward lips met; noses bumped. Clay brought his hands up to cup Jack’s face, and for one long moment, neither moved. Jack shifted, tilting his head so their lips fit together, hands settling on Clay’s shoulders.

He didn't know what he was doing, but it felt *right*, like the answer to question he hadn't yet asked.

Which didn't make it any less terrifying.

Clay put everything he had, everything he felt—everything he *was*—into the kiss, trying to show Jack exactly what he meant to him. His tongue slid over Jack's lips. A hint of whisky lingered there under the cherry-flavored gloss. Clay groaned, delving deeper.

Their lips pressed harder, and Clay's mouth opened. His body trembled, hesitant and unsure, running on pure instinct. Jack made a humming noise and ran his hands over Clay's back, drawing him deeper into the kiss. Clay clawed at his shoulders like a drowning man. Which he was. Drowning in the most amazing sensations he had ever felt.

And then, Jack's tongue slipped into his mouth, devouring him from the inside out.

*Fuck, I am going to die from this...*

*But what a way to go.*

Jack's mouth moved down Clay's throat, biting and sucking his Adam's apple. He was so different from the girls Clay had kissed. They were soft and smelled nice, while Jack was hard and rough, with the barest hint of stubble across his chin.

"Clay..."

The sound of his name on Jack's lips sent shivers down Clay's spine that went straight to his cock. He put his arms around Jack's waist and leaned up to kiss him again. Jack's mouth opened and his tongue dipped between Clay's lips again, thrusting and retreating in a delicious rhythm.

Following his lead, Clay pushed forward to do some exploring of his own. Jack's mouth was hot and sweet and *wonderful*. He thought he could kiss Jack like this for the rest of his life.

Then, a stray thought ran riot through his brain; one stupid, treacherous thought that made his erection scream *not now!*

"Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"We kissed."

A grin. "I'd say so."

"Is that...was it okay?"



Jack kissed Clay again, brief and soft, and so sweet Clay could barely stand it. “Yeah. Yeah, it is.”

“When...” Clay cursed his cracking voice. “When did you know?”

“That I was bi, or that I wanted you?”

“Both. Either. I don’t care.”

Jack lifted his head and smiled. “Pretty much when I decided I’d rather kiss you than any other of the chicks I’ve been with.”

That was *more* than good enough for Clay.

“You know, I’ve been thinking there are two ways to approach this,” Jack said as he stroked Clay’s arms. “One involves throwing you over that coffin and fucking you within an inch of your life.”

“A...and the other?” Not that Clay saw a problem with that. He just wanted to be clear on all his options.

Jack’s next kiss lingered long enough to suck most of the breath from Clay’s lungs. “Your second choice is you and me, nice and slow, seeing just how good we can make each other feel.”

Clay groaned. His swelling prick pushed against his zipper, begging for release. “God, do you have any idea how much I want you?”

“You have me. You’ll always have me,” Jack murmured. He sounded almost shy. It made Clay want him even more. “I want to make love to you. Will you let me do that?”

Clay could only nod in response.

Slowly, as if he wanted to torture Clay, Jack slipped the suit jacket and dress shirt off his shoulders and let them slide to the floor. All Clay could do was stare, transfixed, as Jack circled each of his nipples with his long fingers, his tongue peeking out the corner of his mouth. He arched his back and stretched his arms over his head, making every muscle in his abdomen ripple. It was the damn sexist thing Clay had ever seen.

Jack lay back onto the floor, propped on one elbow, and gestured at Clay’s still-clothed body. “Are you coming?”

A nervous laugh burst from his throat. “Not yet, but I want to.”

Cold hands slid underneath his button-down shirt, sending shocks over the patches of bare skin they touched. Clay's fingers fumbled as he tried to free himself from the stupid thing, finally giving up and yanking the damn thing up and over his head.

Jack laughed, the rumble shooting straight through his chest and into Clay's. "Didn't know you were into bodice rippers, Clayface."

"Shut up and get naked."

"Yes, sir! I'm *always* ready to serve."

Their clothes flew between them, thrown off in a hurried rush to feel the heat of skin on skin. Jack was broad and lean, his chest covered with thick black hair that begged to be teased, and every inch of skin a golden tan. No matter how many times he'd seen him shirtless or even completely nude, Clay never grew tired of looking at Jack's perfect body. He ran his fingers down Jack's chest, squeezing one dark nipple just to hear the hiss Jack made in response, then followed the trail that led down his belly to the thick, pulsing cock, already stiff and ready, rising from a nest of black curls.

Clay licked his lips. "Damn..."

"You, too."

Jack grabbed Clay's cock. The feel of his rough hands on his fevered flesh nearly made Clay come right then and there. Jack angled himself so that he lay on top, one knee wedged between Clay's legs, his hand warm and teasing, stroking slowly, touching him *everywhere*. He cried out as Jack cupped his balls, rolling him, rubbing him, claiming him.

It felt fucking incredible.

Clay gasped as Jack's knee rubbed against his swollen cock. Then a warm, wet mouth swallowed him. A cry ripped through Clay, incoherent, wordless, meaningless. Jack's hands touched every inch of his body as if memorizing him. Clay hadn't known the spot below his ear could make him moan, or that teasing the skin behind his knees could almost make him come.

Jack's mouth on his cock felt *so* much better than just touching it himself.

Clay felt hot, liquid fire pool in his belly, faster and stronger than it ever had before. The desire and *want* burning in Jack's eyes made Clay's orgasm surge forward. "Gonna...come..."

That delicious wet mouth pulled back. Clay almost cried out in loss, but Jack put a soft finger over Clay's kiss-swollen lips. "Shh, not yet. Don't you want to know what it's like with my cock inside you? Feel the way I make love to someone I care about?" He lowered his voice and shifted so that his cock brushed against Clay's stomach. It made Clay's throat ache with need. "Can you already feel me inside you?"

For a second, Clay couldn't breathe. Every one of his fantasies had just come true.

Well, not *every* one. Not yet.

Jack crawled away for a moment and grabbed his pants from the pile of discarded clothes. He pulled out a silver square and half-used tube of lube from one of the pockets.

Clay laughed. "You fucking Boy Scout."

"Depends. Were you one?"

Jack ripped the foil package open with his teeth. With trembling hands, Clay took the condom from him and slid it over Jack's cock. Fuck, it was so *big*.

A moment of panic hit him. How was *that* going to fit *there*?

Jack splayed his hand across Clay's chest and gently pushed him to the floor. Clay prayed Jack couldn't feel how hard his heart hammered in his chest. Jack leaned over him and placed a soft kiss at the corner of his mouth, then straddled Clay's spread knees. "Trust me, okay? It'll only hurt for a moment."

Clay gave a half-nod, eyes closed, waiting.

Jack massaged the tensed ring guarding the deepest entrance to Clay's body, relaxing the muscle until it had no choice but to grant him entry. Jack's finger paused just over Clay's opening, lazily running his fingertip around the rim. He stopped, then pressed just hard enough make Clay whimper with need and push back against his hand.

Then a strong, insistent finger pierced him, cold and slick from the lube. Clay hissed, not expecting the burn. He shifted, trying to adjust, willing his body to accept Jack just as his mind and heart already had. Clay could only lie there, gasping for air, as Jack wriggled his finger, moving the lubricant around, eyes hooded and full of distant fire.

Jack's other hand slid up Clay's chest and wrapped around his shoulders. Their bodies pressed together—chest, hips, thighs.

A second finger breached the tight ring of muscle, scissoring and loosening his body's resistance. Jack's finger twisted sharply and Clay nearly passed out from the burst of sensation that shot through him. His shocked cry filled the room. Jack murmured a soothing whisper, then bent over. Clay raised his hips, certain Jack was about to deep throat him.

Instead, he licked the inside of Clay's thigh. Once, twice, that rough tongue left wet circle-eight patterns behind.

Then, Jack blew a breath across the damp skin.

Clay lost it. His hips bucked furiously as a cry ripped from his throat, the pleasure counterpoint to the pain. Jack repeated the gesture on the opposite side, leaving Clay trembling, yet desperate for more.

Then a third finger followed, fast. The fit was easier this time. Jack flexed his fingers, stretching him, opening him, blasting so much raw sensation into Clay's body that it was all he could do to hang on and enjoy the ride. Or rather, enjoy being ridden.

Every drop of blood he had throbbled inside his swollen cock. Clay's entire body jerked with the motion of Jack's hand half-buried inside him. Damn, it felt good! His fingers clawed the floor beneath him. Clay started to rock, harder with each thrust, finger-fucking himself on that amazingly talented hand.

He was desperate for more; for the pressure of something larger than fingers. The mere thought made him groan. Clay reached up and trailed a hand over the cords of muscles that pulsed just under Jack's tan skin. His fingers ghosted over the smooth, sweaty chest above him until they tangled in the shining strands of jet-black hair that fell over Jack's shoulders. He threaded his hands in Jack's hair and pulled, *needing* to touch him.

The fingers probing inside him stroked *something*, and Clay lost all words, all fears, all hesitation. He sobbed for breath against the rising tide of sensation and silky hair and sweaty skin as Jack's fingers swiped towards his cleft.

His eyes were dusky gray, frightening in their intensity. “Clay?”

“God, yes!”

“Enough teasing.” The words so soft and hoarse Clay almost missed them.

One-handed, Jack tried to squeeze more lubricant onto his fingers, but his hands shook too much. A rush of affection surged through Clay, that *he* could unsettle Jack as much as Jack unsettled him. He took the silver tube and squeezed some of the jelly into his own trembling hands.

He looked into Jack’s eyes, not for permission so much as just wanting to know he was doing this right. He’d never be able to forgive himself if he screwed this up. Clay had waited too long to feel this good.

The heated blush on Jack’s face was all the answer he needed.

Clay reached for him. Jack hissed as the cold lube made contact, then groaned when Clay stroked Jack’s thickness.

*Fuck*, was the only thought tumbling through Clay’s head. He could feel the blood pumping through Jack’s cock as it throbbed and pulsed in his hands. It made his own twitch in response. He stroked upward, loving the tickle of the short hairs ghosting across his skin, then swiped downward to caress Jack’s balls. They felt so full, so warm in his hands that he just had to squeeze them tighter. Jack clenched his thighs, trapping Clay’s hand.

“Now,” he panted. “Gotta have you now.”

A sharp spear of pleasure stabbed through Clay. He spread his legs and bent his knees, then grabbed Jack’s hips to guide him closer. Not just because he wanted Jack to hurry the hell up, but because he knew if didn’t have something solid to hold onto—something fast and familiar—he’d lose himself.

Clay felt Jack’s fingers pulled out of him, and he couldn’t help but groan at the thought of what came next.

The blunt head of Jack’s cock nudged at his tight entrance, seeking entrance, seeking permission. Clay shoved himself forward, holding his breath as Jack breached him. He slid into Clay slowly, with soft broken words that meant nothing and didn’t need to mean anything; the point was that Clay could hear

them, and know *he* caused them. He thought his heart might explode before they finished this.

Then pain slithered like a smoldering fire through Clay's chest and into his abdomen. He bit his lip so that he wouldn't cry out. Jack pushed harder. Clay's body welcomed him as though he'd waited his entire life for Jack Bowman's cock to find a home inside him. Maybe it had.

One moment he felt the sudden slide, the *fullness*, the sharp pain of being breached; the next he was consumed by the heat and the tightness. His whole body trembled.

Jack began to move. In and out, harder with every thrust. His hand tightened around Clay's shaft, milking it as they rocked together. Breathless, unanchored, drifting between the plunge of Jack's tongue in his mouth and the thrust of his cock. He grasped hair and shoulders and floor, but then another surge of sensation would come and tear him free.

Clay had never felt a connection like his in his life. Jack's fingers stroked every line of muscle, his rock-hard nipples, the line of Clay's jaw, the curve of his neck. He couldn't remember ever feeling so cherished before.

Was it going to be this way every time they made love?

Jack slammed into him. Clay met him, thrust for thrust, wanting to take his lover as far inside himself as possible. He lost himself in the rhythmic fullness that never for a moment let him forget what he was doing or who did it with. A haze of heat drifted between them, scorching his skin, burning out of Jack's stormy grey-blue eyes.

Then Jack pulled out a bit. Before Clay could mourn the emptiness, Jack pushed in again at a different angle.

Clay gasped, and this time, it wasn't with pain. The back of his head collided with the wooden floor. "Do that again," he ordered when speech returned. "Now."

Jack bit his throat, mouth pulling, sucking, *demanding* a response. Once again that liquid fire traveled through Clay's hands and arms and belly, and this time it shot straight to his cock, spreading out to engulf his balls. He bucked his hips, blind to everything but the sensations threatening to overwhelm him completely. His hands tightened on Jack's hips so hard it must have hurt.

"I love being inside you," Jack whispered into Clay's mouth.

He groaned. "I love having you inside me."

And God, it was true.

Clay couldn't remember ever feeling like this. The pleasure rose slowly, steadily, in an enveloping wave. He gasped as fire surged through him, golden sparks bursting behind his eyes.

Then Jack thrust into him with the strength of his hips and back and legs. Clay shivered. The warmth in his belly changed, spiraled higher. He shook his head in wonder and closed his eyes, head thrown back, inviting Jack to taste him. God, how much pleasure could a body take?

His cock ached, crushed between their two bodies, the friction doing a better job at jerking him off than his hand ever could. He heard a hitch in Jack's panting, followed by a low moan. Clay pushed back, thrust for thrust, and it was so good, so perfect.

"Look at me." Jack's voice was a husky rasp.

Clay smiled. He liked that Jack didn't try to hide how affected he was. He opened his eyes, trusting Jack more than he'd ever trusted anyone else in his life.

"Look," Jack said. "No hands."

Jack rolled his hips and just like that, Clay came.

He cried out as his orgasm ripped through him. Powerless to stop it, his balls tightened and seed exploded from his swollen shaft. Lights burst behind his eyes; he couldn't breathe. He bared his throat in surrender as his climax erupted over both their hands.

A final spasm; his muscles clenched around Jack's cock, making the dark haired man shudder. Jack bowed his head and bit Clay's shoulder as he moaned his name in a way that Clay had never, *ever*, imagined hearing. Jack came with a howling cry and filled Clay completely.

He could only lie there, gasping, as Jack moved and shuddered inside him. His eyes rolled back in his head and sweat dripped from his hair onto Clay's face as their bodies rubbed and touched and joined together.

Panting and sore, Clay stole one more kiss before Jack pulled out of him and lay on the floor beside him, arms and legs spread, gasping for breath.

He turned his head to stare at the beautiful man lying beside him. Clay quivered as the fingers that had delved so deep inside him brushed over his chest, neck, and face. He felt utterly exposed, utterly destroyed...utterly owned.

Clay came back to himself, sweat-soaked and half-pinned beneath Jack's weight and deliciously exhausted. His mouth felt bruised, his ass sore as hell, and his thighs and belly were wet and sticky.

He'd never felt better in his entire life.

Clay stroked the side of Jack's face, circling the rough places his razor had missed. With his thumb, he wiped away a stray bead of sweat then brought his hand to his mouth to swallow the salty-sweet moisture. Jack repeated the gesture with Clay's cum, spread all over both their bodies. Clay's prick gave an appreciative jump at the sight.

His hand strayed to Jack's chest, fingers spread over his heart, feeling the beat slowing to match his. *You're going to fall in love with him*, a voice purred in the back of his head. *I think you may already be halfway there.*

*But halfway isn't good enough*, Clay argued with the voice. *I want to fall all the way. And I don't mind falling, as long as Jack falls right alongside me.*

Clay cupped Jack's cheek and tilted his face so their lips fit together again, the way they were supposed to. He just couldn't stop touching him, kissing him. Clay licked the corner of Jack's mouth while the other man tried to catch his breath. His tongue slid lower, to the line of Jack's strong jaw and traced that sharp angle up behind his ear. A strangled, breathless whimper made Clay smirk as he bit Jack's earlobe gently and sucked it, nuzzling the soft skin.

Clay had never felt so...*complete*. No matter where graduation brought them, he would never forget this moment—the way Jack's breath brushed against his chin, the way one of his knees still wrapped around Clay, keeping them locked together, the way Jack's fingers played with Clay's damp hair.

"Know what I think?"



“Hmm?” Clay hummed.

“I think *you’re* my legacy,” Jack said.

Clay laughed. “Looks like you’re stuck with me then.”

“Rather be stuck *in* you,” Jack said, devouring Clay’s lips once more.

*I’ll never knock a funeral again*, he thought, before everything was silenced when Jack started to do *that thing* with his tongue.

## *About the Author*

A new voice in town, Misty hails from the Big Apple itself. Growing up in the hustle and bustle of NYC introduced her to many different world cultures, which continue to give her inspiration for her stories and novels.

A Taurus with a penchant for angsty romances gone wrong and good ol' fashioned epic fantasy, Misty asks her readers to keep their eyes open, and visit her website often, for new works of erotic fiction.

<http://photowitch.com/mm/>