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Becoming Us

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Anah Crow and Dianne Fox

Chapter One

Something smacked into the back of Zac's head, knocking him into the beer table. Cups sloshed and Kaede yelled, "Hey! Watch it, man!"

Zac rolled his eyes. His housemate was a little overzealous in his protectiveness of the beer. It wasn't like they'd gotten the imported shit, not for this party. The back-to-school party didn't rate that kind of expense. Especially not when the crew team and the water polo team were out here playing volleyball with a giant beachball and aiming right for the keg with every shot.

Turning around, Zac picked up the ball that had caused all the trouble and served it back toward the net. "Be careful of the beer!"

A couple of the crew guys waved like they understood, but Zac knew better. They were all totally sloshed already. Whatever.

He grabbed a couple of the big red plastic cups filled to the brim with cheap beer and went looking for Bryce. He hadn't seen Bryce since the first partiers had shown up hours ago. Used to be, Bryce was the quintessential party guy, always ready to have a good time.

Used to be, Bryce was Zac's best friend. All that had changed, though. Zac just hoped they could get some kind of friendship back. He couldn't face a whole year of distance between them, like there had been since since an article about 'out' athletes in last month's back-to-school issue of *Game On* had included interviews with Zac and their friend Perry. Perry was gone, graduated, but Zac still had to deal with the repercussions of their decision.

He slipped through the front door, looking for Bryce inside the house, but it was mostly empty. Just a few people using the bathroom or getting pizza from the kitchen. No Bryce.

The party stopped at the back door, but Zac found Bryce in the backyard, sitting alone on the old swing. Swallowing his nervousness, and his pride, he headed over to make a peace offering.

Zac flopped down on the swing uninvited, setting it to swinging with a loud creak and a shiver. They'd pulled it out of someone's trash and put it together right around the time they'd moved in, back in sophomore year. Amazingly, two years later, it was still in one piece.

He held out one of the cups. "Beer?"

Bryce sighed and took the offering. "Thanks. Shouldn't you be partying?"

"Shouldn't you?" Zac countered, taking a sip of his beer.

"I am. See?" Bryce waved his cigarette and beer, sloshing beer all over him.

"Godfuckingdamnitsonofabitchmotherfucker," he said, without much heat behind it, like he'd given up.

"Dude." Zac snorted and reached out to take the cup back. "You okay?"

"Fuck it." Bryce tried to shake the beer off and ended up dropping his cigarette. He stomped on it, in spite of being barefoot, and slouched back in the swing. It was probably already out, thanks to the beer. "This is Not Right," he snapped, taking his beer back.

"What's not?" Zac had his suspicions, but he wanted to hear Bryce say it.

"Me not knowing. Why did Perry get to know and not me?" Bryce sloshed beer again, but the cup was already a quarter empty and it only went over his hand and wrist.

"Bryce..." Zac wasn't sure what to say to that. That wasn't what he'd expected, not at all. He'd known things with Bryce would change, but he hadn't thought about how coming out together in that interview would make it obvious Perry had known all along. "Because it wasn't really... relevant."

"Not relevant?"

"Well, it's not like you welcomed Perry with open arms when *he* came out to you," Zac pointed out before he could censor himself. Bryce wasn't even looking at Zac anymore. It was just like before, when Perry had come out to the swim team and Bryce had started flinching away from his touches, avoiding spending time alone with him. Bryce had never *said* anything, but Zac knew that Perry being out had changed things for Bryce.

Bryce stopped draining the cup to sputter, "It was just... I was surprised." He flailed his arms until he was standing. "I mean, all that time, and he never said anything. And then I'm supposed to act like I knew all along?" The cup and whatever was left in it went into the too-long grass with his next flail.

Zac stood up and caught Bryce's arm, intending to pull him back to the swing, but Bryce leaned back against his grasp. "Dude." Perry had been totally patient with everyone on the team, letting them get their bearings around him again, but it had seemed everything Perry tried had just made things worse between him and Bryce.

"It's just. Not right. It's not. Nothing's *right*." Bryce wasn't just being an ass about it; he was actually upset about something.

"What's wrong, man?"

"Nothing." Bryce pulled away and stumbled as he went to get one of the bottles of beer he'd stashed at the base of the swing. Of course. Zac had to wonder how many had been there to start with. "Just. Nothing. It's just all wrong, that's all. I need another drink. Maybe I should get laid."

If that could've fixed things, Bryce would've been cured of everything by now, though. He could get laid just by looking like he was thinking about it.

"Maybe." Zac shoved his hands in his pockets. "This really bugs you, huh?"

"I don't know. Maybe. It's just..." Bryce popped the cap on his beer and dropped it into the grass, then took a drink. "Forget about it. I'm a fucking buzz-kill tonight. Go inside." He slumped down on the swing and fumbled for whoever's cigarettes he'd snagged.

Zac didn't feel right about that. He couldn't leave his best friend out here to stew, even if he wasn't sure they were still best friends anymore, especially now.

He sat down beside Bryce and said, "Since when do I take orders from you?"

"Since I can kick your skinny ass," Bryce mumbled around the mouth of the beer bottle. He wasn't usually a grumpy drunk. Bryce was *never* grumpy unless he had an exam, and not like this. Even his grumpiness usually had that classic, good-natured, all-American air to it.

"Yeah, I'll be sure to start kow-towing just as soon as that happens." Zac nudged Bryce's shoulder with his fist.

"What, you want me to try?" Bryce tried to scowl, but it didn't work. "I couldn't hit you." He slumped over and put his head on Zac's shoulder. "You're all little and everything."

"I'm not little," Zac said, gently ruffling Bryce's soft, dark hair. "It just looks like that 'cause you're huge." He was the smallest guy on the team, Bryce was the biggest. They balanced each other out. Bryce was the rich kid; Zac was there on scholarship. They were supposed to fit together. It had been that way since they'd been assigned the same dorm room freshman year.

"You guys were all close and everything." Bryce sighed heavily. "And then you go and come out in that article, and..."

“And what?”

“And now I know you guys must’ve been, like, together, that’s what.” Bryce shoved himself away to slouch against the arm of the swing. “All that time, and you never said anything.”

“We used to mess around a little,” Zac allowed. “Nothing serious.”

“Oh, sure.” Bryce took another drink of his beer, glaring drunkenly at Zac with nothing but hurt behind it. “The whole fucking world is queer and no one told me.”

“It was nothing,” Zac said, shifting his weight and shoving his hands under his thighs. “I mean, we were just fucking around.” He looked over at Bryce, trying to gauge what was going on in his friend’s head.

Bryce was purely out of sorts. All he did was grunt and stare at his bare feet stretched out in the grass. Usually, he would’ve said something like *aww, that’s cool, man*, and something sympathetic but crude about Perry not being around for convenient sex. Now, he just took a drink of beer number too-many and stayed silent.

Maybe honesty hadn’t been the best choice. “You wanna tell me what you’re thinking, man? You’re kinda freakin’ me out, here.”

“Nothing. It’s cool.” Bryce took another drink. “Sorry. I’m just...” He waved the bottle vaguely. “Nothing’s right. I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

“Bryce...” Zac eyed him for a long moment, and then sighed. “What’s up with you, man?”

“Nothing. Nothing’s wrong with *me*.” Bryce drained the beer and tossed the bottle off into the grass, then discovered that he’d sloshed beer on the cigarettes. “Just. Nothing. I’m *fine*. Same as always.”

“Bullshit. Bryce, you’ve been weird since we came back to school,” Zac snapped. “What, are you pining for Perry or something? It’s not like he’s your type, man, what with the dick and all. Did you have a thing for him? Because you’re totally more his type than I am.”

The look Bryce gave Zac was angrier than Zac had ever seen. “Fuck you.” He pushed himself to his feet and stalked away.

Shit. “Bryce.” Zac scrambled to his feet, dodging the obstacle course of beer bottles and crab apples littering the grass. “Bryce, man...”

“*Jesus.*” Bryce’s long stride came up short. Somehow, drunk as he was, he managed to stand on one foot. “Son of a *bitch.*”

“What happened?” Zac asked, and then he saw Bryce yank something out of his foot and throw it away into the dark, almost overbalancing and putting his bad foot down to keep from pitching over. Maybe they should have cleaned up better after the ritual ‘killing of the old barbeque’ that had come before they’d put together the new one earlier tonight. “Oh, shit. Bryce, man, you okay?” He caught up with Bryce and slid his arm under Bryce’s shoulders.

“I’m fine.” Bryce didn’t pull away. “Just fucking up again. I just need to wash it off. The one fucking time I don’t have a fucking beer in my fucking hand...” He leaned on Zac, but headed for the house.

Zac was quiet on the way up to the house, thinking. Maybe that *was* the problem? He’d thought Bryce was straight, but. Well, Bryce had probably thought Zac was straight, too, before that interview. The entryway at the back door was empty, so Zac was able to get Bryce into the downstairs bathroom without too much commotion from anyone else. “You up to date on your tetanus or whatever?” he asked, closing the bathroom door behind them.

“Yeah. I cut my hand open working on Dad’s boat this summer, scraping the hull clean.” Bryce thumped against the far wall, leaning there so he could put his foot in the sink to wash it clean. It was bleeding pretty badly, but he didn’t seem to care. “Bled all over his fifty-foot Goetz. Thing cost more than this house. I’m such a fucking loser sometimes.” Bryce snorted and shook his head as he turned on the cold water. Dark pink swirled around the drain and was sucked away.

“Nah, man, you’re just--” Zac caught sight of all the blood still welling from the cut and winced. “Jesus. That’s gonna suck. Lemme see if we’ve got bandages or something.”

“It’s not deep.” Bryce twisted, but couldn’t reach the toilet paper without falling over. “Just give me some of that and go grab my shoes from the hall. I’ll be fine. You don’t need to bother with this, man. Go have fun. Look, it’s already slowing down. Blood’s good. Cleans it out.” Bryce wasn’t one to let anyone take care of him; he was usually looking out for everyone else, in his slightly clumsy, oversized-puppy way.

“Do you want... lemme get you a Band-Aid, dude. Toilet paper’s not going to last long.” Zac looked Bryce over, the way his expression was tense and his shoulders were all tight, and frowned. “Maybe some of that stuff Kaede’s mom sends, too, the antibiotic cream with the painkillers in it.”

“I’m fine, okay?” Bryce gave Zac a pitiful look. “Just go have fun. Please? That’ll make me feel better. I’ll raid Kaede’s first aid kit when this stops bleeding enough for me to...” There was a thunderous hammering on the door.

“Hey! Other people have to piss, too,” someone outside bellowed.

Bryce grabbed the hand towel since Zac wasn’t giving him anything. “Use the bushes,” he yelled back, but Zac could tell his heart wasn’t really in it. “Go back to the party. I’ll go upstairs,” he said to Zac. “I should just... study or something.”

“Sure.” It was weeks until they had anything worth studying for. Zac handed over the roll of toilet paper and opened up the bathroom door to get Bryce his shoes. He gave Bryce another long look, and said, “Come find me if you want to talk or something, okay? Or hang out and play video games or whatever.”

Bryce didn’t get a chance to answer before some guy from the crew team shouldered past Zac, unzipped, and started taking a piss. “Christ,” the guy said. “Don’t you guys have your own bedrooms if you want to get into it?”

Bryce snarled, straightened, popped the guy in the back of the head, and then slid past Zac, leaving a single trail of wet, slightly bloody footprints on his way to the stairs.

Zac sighed. He wasn’t really in the mood to party anymore, so he just followed Bryce up the stairs and stopped in the doorway when Bryce went into his room. “Hey, Bryce...” He rubbed his toes against the back of his other leg, and then shifted nervously. He hadn’t meant to piss Bryce off, saying what he had about Perry.

Bryce grabbed the towel from the back of his chair, threw it on his bed, and then collapsed onto the bed with his foot on the towel. “Look, I’m sorry,” he said, tucking one arm under his head and staring at the ceiling before looking at Zac. “Just. Better mood tomorrow. New day and all that shit, okay, man? Back to the old Bryce.”

“Sure.” Zac rubbed the back of his leg with his toes again, then shrugged a little and turned away. Maybe whatever it was would be better tomorrow. He closed Bryce’s door behind him and headed back to his own bedroom.

He felt like shit. It was going to be a crappy senior year if this was any indication. Stripping, he threw his clothes into a corner, pulled on pajama pants that smelled reasonably clean, and then collapsed into bed. It wasn’t supposed to be like this. After all these years, it was supposed to be easy between them.

The last of the partiers had passed out or been kicked out and Bryce was lying in the dark, staring at the ceiling, feeling his foot throb. The foot wasn’t what bothered him, though. He’d been a total jerk. That was just wrong. He was mad at Zac, too, though. How could you be mad at someone and still miss them? How could you miss them when they were right there, next door?

He got up to piss and brush his teeth, and then showered because he was feeling skanky. The shower didn’t make him less drunk, but he felt better. On his way back to his room, towel around his waist, clothes in hand, he stopped to tap lightly on Zac’s door. He waited a heartbeat, and then nudged the door open enough to lean in. Maybe he could say he was sorry. There was no way he could sleep after being crappy to Zac.

“You asleep?” He tried to be quiet enough that if Zac was sleeping, Bryce wouldn’t wake him.

Zac rolled over in bed to face the door. “Nah,” he mumbled, rubbing a hand over his face and shaved head. “S up?”

“Can’t sleep.” Bryce shut the door behind him, and then limped over to Zac’s bed. After a moment’s hesitation, he sat down, his clothes in his lap. “Sorry I was an asshole tonight,” he said quietly. He felt stupid, and that in turn made him miserable.

“S’okay, man.” Zac yawned, and nudged Bryce’s thigh with the back of his hand. “Wasn’t exactly Mr. Congeniality myself. You okay?”

Bryce sighed and slumped down with his head at Zac’s feet. “I just don’t want to talk about it, okay? I’m trying to be Happy Bryce. Honest.”

“C’mere.” Zac smacked Bryce’s leg and then held his hand out, wiggling his fingers. “C’mon. Head goes at the head of the bed.”

Bryce sighed and took Zac’s hand, turning to lie down beside him. They’d slept in the same bed before. Somehow, it felt like everything would be okay if they just were close to each other for a while. He missed Zac so much.

Promising himself he wouldn’t fall asleep, just stay long enough to hang out a little, Bryce made sure his towel was on properly and kept a grip on the clothes he’d been wearing. It wasn’t like they weren’t used to being naked around each other, but Bryce was grateful that Zac was wearing pajamas. He sighed heavily, trying to relax and resisting the urge to snuggle up to Zac for comfort.

Zac slung an arm over Bryce’s chest and yawned. “Good. Sleep now.” So much for not snuggling. He could stay until Zac fell asleep. Maybe Zac missed having someone to be close to.

Bryce closed his eyes obediently and, soothed by being forgiven, he fell asleep in spite of his best intentions.

When Zac woke, the angle of light through his window suggested it was probably late in the morning, if it was still morning at all. He’d expected that, after the late night he’d had, with Bryce and the party and all. Bryce was still there, still sound asleep. Zac *hadn’t* expected that. Nor had he expected Bryce to be wrapped around him like he was a teddy bear. He hadn’t quite realized, last night, that Bryce was naked except for the towel. The towel was long gone, now.

Zac wasn’t used to waking up with a naked Bryce in his bed, pressed up against him, even if they had shared a room in the dorms and on the road. If it hadn’t been wretchedly uncomfortable, especially with last night’s blow-up, Zac would have been pretty pleased. Bryce didn’t snore, never had, surprisingly enough. He was more relaxed right now than he had been since they’d gotten back to school, his breath slow and hot against Zac’s neck. His sigh sounded happy as he cuddled up, getting his powerful body as close to Zac as possible.

Zac tried to stay still and quiet. Bryce must have needed the sleep, or Zac figured he'd've gotten up and slipped out, so Zac didn't want to wake him. It felt good to be close to Bryce, too, but Zac made himself not think about that. Not thinking about that at all. Eventually, Zac couldn't hold back the little yawn or the stretch that came with it.

Bryce woke slowly, with all kinds of snuggling and happy mumbles. Zac was just starting to enjoy having his neck nuzzled when Bryce sat bolt upright with an explosive, "*Fuck.*" Then he was scrabbling for something on the floor and apologizing.

"Shit. Dude. I'm sorry. I just. I mean. Tired. I didn't mean. Fuck. Zac."

"Shut up," Zac managed, mid-yawn. He grabbed at Bryce's arm, flailing behind himself to get hold of it, then rolled over so he could see Bryce. "Jesus. It's too damn early for you to be apologizing so damn much." He yawned again and rubbed his face with his free hand. "Seriously, dude. As long as you weren't actually dreaming that I was a stuffed animal, we're cool."

Bryce's hair had dried in a wild halo of curls and his dark eyes were wide, his cheeks flaming. He looked simultaneously angelic and horrified. "I just. No. Dude. No. Not dreaming anything." That seemed to just add to his misery. "I should..." He managed to grab his shorts from the floor with his free hand.

"Are we cool?" Zac's brow furrowed and he frowned, bit his lip. "Bryce. I mean. You don't have to... I wouldn't, like... I mean, I'm the same guy I was before, you know? I wouldn't try anything." God, it would suck if Bryce really had *issues* because Zac was queer.

Bryce got one foot into his shorts before he sat up again, looking at Zac. "Zac. Dude. Yeah." His face clouded with worry and he reached out to touch Zac's cheek in a spontaneous, tender gesture. "I know. It's okay, man. It's not you. Seriously. I never even thought... no." He prodded the furrow in Zac's brow with his fingertips to make it go away, his own expression sad; God, he just got sweeter with time. "It's all cool."

"Then why are we freaking out?" Zac was still worried; he just wasn't sure about *what*.

"I just. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." Bryce just gestured vaguely. "Look, you won't tell Perry about last night, right? I was drunk and stupid." He leaned over and pulled his shorts on, trying to slither back into them, suddenly shy.

"Bryce..." Zac sat up and wrapped himself around Bryce from behind so he couldn't escape. "I'm not going to say anything to Perry. And you shouldn't freak out about it, either, whatever's going on. I mean. If you... Fucking *dead men* would want a piece of that, okay?" Perry was a living, breathing replica of Michelangelo's *David*, from the curls to the hot body, only Perry was pure gold instead of marble. "It doesn't have to mean... It wouldn't be a big deal if you do, okay? It wouldn't have to mean anything. If you do."

“I don’t. That’s... I mean, he’s like my big bro. Or he was. I just... don’t. Okay? Not him.” Surprisingly, Bryce leaned into Zac’s embrace and let Zac hold him, closing his eyes and giving up instead of pushing Zac away and making it worse.

“Okay.” Zac held on, bringing one hand up to stroke through Bryce’s hair. “Okay. Just... whatever’s going on, whether you want to tell me about it or not... I’m here, okay?”

“I kinda miss you, you know?” Bryce didn’t move as Zac touched him. He sounded lonely, like he had last night.

“I’m sorry, man. I’ve been kinda...” Zac ducked his head down onto Bryce’s shoulder. “Distracted. Self-absorbed.” After Perry had come out, Zac had felt simultaneously skittish and relieved, caught up in dealing with his own sexuality. He’d let his friendship with Perry overshadow a lot of other things in his life, because it had been such a relief to be able to be *open* about that part of his life with someone.

“It’s okay. I mean, you gotta be with people you can talk to, right?” Bryce reached up to stroke Zac’s smooth scalp. He was breathing like something hurt somewhere, deliberately slow.

“It... Yeah. It helped. Made it easier to get ready to tell other people.” Zac scratched Bryce’s hair, at that. He’d always *wanted* to tell Bryce that some of those one-night stands he’d had weren’t women, but he’d also always been terrified of saying it, like somehow the whole world would come tumbling down around his head if he admitted to being bisexual.

“I know. It’s cool.” Bryce was relaxed now, leaning into Zac’s arms.

Zac wrapped himself around Bryce a little more snugly. He had some ideas about what was going on in Bryce’s head, but he wasn’t sure, not nearly sure enough to actually say anything else, do anything else. He just relaxed against Bryce and held onto him. It felt so good. Bryce was all smooth, bronze warmth and he smelled sweetly masculine. Bryce let himself be cuddled a little while longer, wrapping his arms over Zac’s and holding on in return.

“I better make sure I’m not gonna bleed on the floor,” he said, after a bit. “This stupid cut still hurts like fuck.” He pulled away and did up the button on his shorts, then bent to grab the rest of his stuff.

“Yeah, okay.” Zac let him go and sat there, legs crossed, watching Bryce get his stuff together. “Get some of that shit Kaede’s mom sent him, okay? The antibiotic whatever that you put on under Band-Aids. Coach’ll kill us all if you bleed all over the pool,” he teased.

“I’m a big boy. I just wish we had some Little Mermaid bandages or something,” Bryce teased back. He got up and limped to the door. “See you later, man.” He managed a decent smile for Zac before he slipped out of the room.

When Bryce was gone, Zac flopped back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. *Well. What the hell?* Maybe things would be better now; they seemed okay together, at least. Less awkward.

Naked snuggles were definitely less awkward. Zac wanted Bryce to come back, but he told himself that it was just that he'd gone too long without someone to snuggle... or more. Maybe he'd meet somebody new and change all that.

Chapter Two

Nothing really changed after that, except what had already changed. Bryce dropped the idea of socializing with anyone except the girls he managed to pick up at the gym or the library. It was insane, like suddenly he was giving off some vibe that drew women in, and he just didn't bother saying no. His phone rang all the time; he played the field and played it hard, and the players came back for more.

No question about whether or not he liked girls -- and they liked him back, a lot. Everything would have been easier if only it made him happy. It didn't.

The house was empty a lot. Bryce missed Perry and felt awkward around Zac. It *sucked*. Stupidly enough, he was still hurt because it had taken Zac so long to come out to him. It wasn't any of Bryce's damn business, so why did he care? Besides. Bryce had better things to do, like getting good grades, getting laid, and getting the fuck out of here. He'd just thought that senior year was going to be more fun than this.

He was sprawled in the living room, watching the sports channel, stuffed with pizza, trying to pretend he didn't mind hanging out alone, when the phone rang with the Imperial March from *Star Wars*.

His dad was calling, like he usually did, like clockwork. It wasn't as though they were close; Dad just wanted to keep tabs on Bryce. If he looked away too long, Bryce might go getting his own ideas about things.

Bryce sighed and got up, limping up the stairs as he answered it. He hid away in his room for the conversation, which was worse than usual.

Of course. That damned magazine article. Dad read *Game On*. Bryce hadn't even thought about it, but of course his father liked to keep track of the college sports news, especially the swimming. It was a big deal that Bryce had made the team; sports were the only damn things he was good at. Josh and Jake and Ethan had all been straight-A students, but none of them had gotten far in sports. Why couldn't Perry and Zac have kept their mouths shut, kept it private?

"I knew last year, Dad. It didn't make a difference then, right? You said my grades were great."

"You knew? Disappointed is an understatement here, Bryce. Your mother and I have always been clear with you about this."

How could someone be proud of him and think so little of him all at once? "Dad, it's no big deal. Lots of people are totally cool with the gay thing now. It doesn't matter." Bryce had to force the words past the lump in his throat.

"I won't pay for you to be surrounded by distraction." His father had the same clipped, precise tones he used when he was taking someone apart on the witness stand. Bryce had seen the

videos. It hadn't been cool then, and it felt worse when it was turned on him. "You need to reconsider your choice of residence, son. This is your last year."

"Exactly, Dad. Look, it's my last year. Moving would be a really big distraction." Bryce paced his room, trying to keep the panic out of his voice. He didn't want to lose his friends. It wasn't like they were around, wasn't like Zac wanted to do stuff with him, wasn't like Steve wasn't crazy-busy with the restaurant the fourth-year hospitality students ran. And Kaede, well, Kaede and Shelly were practically married. Bryce had spent more time talking to Shelly last year than any of them. But Bryce didn't know who he'd be if he didn't keep calling them his friends.

"Your mother and I feel strongly about the influences around you, we always have. For God's sake, Bryce, we had you on a waiting list for the right kindergarten before you were born, and it wasn't so you could live with people like that. We let you go to a school that wasn't in the Ivy League against our better judgment."

"Dad." *Not this again. I wasn't smart enough for the Ivy League, remember?*

"I'm sure your housemate would rather have his own kind of people around, anyway," his father said, like he was trying to keep his mouth off the words, like even talking about someone gay was risking catching it. "It would be better for everyone, especially you. Unless there's anything you need to tell us about, Bryce."

That stopped Bryce in his tracks. "No." He knew his voice was shaking. "Dad, no. Never has been. I promise, Dad."

He hated himself so much for how he couldn't bring himself to defend Zac and Perry, to tell his father that Zac and Perry were no different than when he'd met them and that he loved them no matter what. And still, he kept talking, agreeing with his father, saying anything to appease him. He would have said anything to make his father believe him, just like always. His dad loved him, wanted the best for him. It would have been easy to tell him to fuck off if Bryce weren't so sure of it.

By the time Bryce got off the phone, he was almost in tears, he was so sick of himself and sick about everything. He threw the phone so hard it broke into two pieces on the floor, then he kicked his trashcan across the room, sending it flying over his bed and into the wall. His chest hurt and his eyes were blurry. He couldn't leave. This was *his* house, too.

A moment later, somebody was knocking on Bryce's door, and then Zac poked his head in. "Everything okay, man?" Zac bit his lip, like he could see that everything wasn't okay, that nothing was okay. "Bryce? You okay?"

His dad knew about Zac. Zac. Bryce was never going to be able to bring Zac along to the lake house or out in the boat. He wasn't ever going to be able to say, *hey, I'm going to spend the weekend at Zac's*. Ever again.

Life sucked too much and Bryce couldn't do anything about it and they just didn't *get it*. None of them did. Zac and Perry were still mad at him about last year and his parents were mad at him about Zac and Perry and... this big split had opened up in his life and there was no way for him to be on both sides of it, ever, and no chance of it closing again. Bryce sat down on his bed, put his head in hands, and tried not to burst into tears.

"Hey." The door closed behind Zac, then he was sitting down on the bed beside Bryce. "Bryce, man..." He hesitated a second, then put his arms around Bryce.

Why couldn't life just be *simple*? Why couldn't his friends just be straight and his family not be fucking assholes and other people not suck so much? Why did he have to be such a fuckup he couldn't even stand up for his friends?

Bryce sobbed bitterly, unable to make it stop for a horrible minute before he managed to swallow it down. Zac just held on and let Bryce cry. He stroked Bryce's hair and waited while Bryce calmed down a little.

"I'm so done," Bryce said thickly. "I'm so fucking done." He was limp with exhaustion and the release of crying.

"What happened?"

"Dad read the article. About Perry. And you. I tried to be careful not to say anything before, after Perry, but it's a big deal for Dad for me to be on the team," Bryce said, wiping his face with his sleeve. "So, I guess he reads *Game On*. I forget, you know? That he cares. Dad's worried about me living here. My shithead brothers are bad enough and now they know, too, but Dad..." If his dad even knew Bryce had slept in Zac's bed, if he knew any of the truth... Bryce was so tired of the endless sense of having so much to prove and not even being sure it was true.

"I'm sorry, man." Zac really sounded sad for Bryce. "That sucks. I didn't realize they were... that it'd be an issue."

"You have *no* idea." Bryce leaned over and grabbed tissues. "My dad doesn't even talk to my uncle Bryson. Like he's dead, only he's not, he's just gay. My dad doesn't want me living here now. He's pissed because I knew and I came back anyway." He shook his head and his breath caught. "Started in on me about it. You know, he doesn't yell or anything. He's just... he knows I'm going to 'do the right thing.' All he has to do is wait."

"Doesn't want you in the house? Because of me?" Zac sounded stunned, but more than that, he sounded angry.

"Pretty much, yeah. You know, he doesn't *say*, 'Move out.' He says shit like, 'I'm not paying for you to live in that kind of environment.' Or, 'I thought you'd have better taste in friends.' And shit like that." Bryce slumped back against the wall and stared at the pieces of the phone on the floor. "And, 'Unless there's anything you need to tell us about, Bryce.'"

“Because we might rub off on you, you know. Like germs.” Zac turned around to sit cross-legged, facing Bryce.

“Or, you know, naming me after my uncle might have been a bad idea. God, my brothers never did let go of that one. Especially Josh.” Bryce blew his nose and got up to pick up the trashcan. “Christ, don’t know what I did to Josh except get born after him. ‘It’ll happen to you, too. It runs in the family. That’s why they named you after him, they already knew, they could tell, everyone knows.’ I mean, when you get older, you know that’s shit. But.” Bryce shrugged and tossed the tissues into the trash.

“You’ve had enough girls around -- haven’t they laid off on that by now?” Zac flopped onto his back. “They’d freak out if you said you were gay or something, huh?”

“Freak out doesn’t even cover it.” Bryce picked up his phone and threw the pieces on the desk, then wandered back to stand by the bed that Zac was taking up. “Dad... he’s building his little empire. For the future. For *us*. It’s this big deal for him. He’s counting on all of us to contribute, including getting married and having kids. He’s kind of the alpha wolf, so when he goes after people, he does it for a reason. My brothers are like dogs.” His mouth twisted at that. “They’re already fed, so they hunt for fun. They just like to see weaker things hurt.” Like him. Like each other. Like anyone else.

Zac rolled to sit up, his legs hanging off the edge of the bed. He leaned back on his hands, tilting his head back to look up at Bryce. “Makes them feel big and strong, huh?”

“And it’s fun, in a way, being mean. Dad always said that if I learn to take it, and I learn to dish it out, it’ll make me closer to my brothers. So we’ll always be tight. I’m always letting him down. If I don’t move out of here, I can’t go back,” he said quietly. It hurt, because he wanted to be able to go home. “I wouldn’t want to live there after crossing my dad over something this big. Everyone thinks we’re such a nice family. Such good values. We are, I guess. As long as you’re like us, we really are. But I’m not like *us*. This just kind of seals it.”

“You’ve got a year of school left,” Zac said, nudging his foot against Bryce’s leg and then standing up to offer Bryce a hug. “Grad school, if you need more time. It’ll be okay. Time fixes stuff. You shouldn’t have to choose between your friends and your family.”

Bryce hid his face in Zac’s shoulder and hung on to him. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled. He didn’t deserve friends like Zac.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Zac petted the back of Bryce’s head with one hand and his back with the other.

“I’m such a pussy,” Bryce mumbled. Still, he didn’t let go. It was like he was soaking up the contact, drinking it in, clinging to Zac for reassurance in contrast to his words. It was good just to have someone understand. “I never cry about shit.”

“Then you’re not a pussy. This was big. Is big.” Zac was a lot smaller than Bryce, but somehow, he managed to make his embrace feel safe anyway. It had felt good to sleep with him the other night, and that fact scared Bryce so much.

“It’s not like it’s new.” Tears kept welling up to sting Bryce’s eyes. Zac being so nice and gentle made it worse, in a way. “Why am I so fucking tired?” Bryce made himself pull away and straighten up, turning away to blink the wetness out of his eyes.

“Because it’s not new.” Zac shrugged, his arms hanging limp at his sides now. “You’ve been dealing with this, with knowing both sides of it all, for a long time now. Hell, I’d be fucking exhausted, too.”

Bryce looked past Zac at the dent in the wall where the trashcan had hit. The distraction and the little jolt of what he’d done made Bryce hurt less inside. “Oh, man. I’m sorry about the crash, dude. Were you studying or something?” He stepped around Zac and poked at the dent. Cheap drywall dust crumbled out of the hole and drifted down onto his covers. “I need to fix that; I think we have some filler left from when we had to patch up the hall from that party last year.”

“Later,” Zac said firmly. “I was just reading. You want to come to my room, get some rest without having to stare at your wall and shit?”

Bryce looked at the drywall dust on his hand, and then wiped it off on his shorts. He bit his lip, wavering between giving in and pushing Zac away. He shouldn’t do it. Shouldn’t want it. The memory of how good it felt to sleep with Zac, how he’d actually *slept*, won out. It was okay if he got some sleep.

“Yeah. Okay. And I guess I’ll get a new phone later, too.” He sighed and rubbed at the back of his neck. “I’m such a fucking moron.”

Zac rolled his eyes and gave Bryce a smile. “Nah, man. You’re a good guy. C’mon.” He nudged Bryce’s arm with his fist. “Nicky sent me a new game for my DS; you can try it out if you can’t sleep.”

“Okay.” Video games were a good bribe and a good excuse. Bryce sighed and followed Zac back to his room like an oversized puppy. It was only to hang out. Like friends.

The handheld game was a good excuse for sitting close on the bed, while Zac gave instructions for how to play, and then proceeded to bounce, jerk, and wiggle as Bryce moved the tiny character around the screen.

“Dude, you’re making the bed shake,” Bryce protested. He got an arm around Zac and dragged Zac halfway into his lap, pinning him there, tucking his chin over Zac’s shoulder, and playing the game while Zac was trapped. “You are so fucking wiggly, man; it’s like you’re ADHD today.” Zac was the worst thing for his high scores.

Zac laughed and settled down a little. “If you’d jump when he jumps, I wouldn’t have to,” he protested. Zac insisted that moving with the characters made them move better. Bryce just laughed when he did it and kicked his ass again and again.

“Maybe your girly fingers can stay on the keys, but my manly fingers can’t,” Bryce said distractedly. His little character disappeared with a sad blooping sound, and he sighed. “See, you’re bad for my concentration, dude.” He tickled Zac with one hand for revenge.

That made Zac laugh and wiggle more. He grabbed at Bryce’s hand and pried it away from his body, turning around to get revenge with some tickling of his own. “Bad for your concentration, my ass.”

Bryce dropped the game at the foot of the bed, laughing, so he could defend himself. He was always one for horseplay; even as big as he was, he managed not to hurt people while goofing around. He was also really ticklish; it was a great way to get him winded and Zac knew it. Zac was intent, tickling his ribs and armpits with quick, darting motions that left both of them laughing like hyenas. Finally, Bryce had had enough and flipped Zac over, grabbing Zac’s hands and pinning him to the bed, still laughing and trying to catch his breath.

“Dude, truce,” he said, his nose only inches from Zac’s. His cheeks were hot from laughing so hard, and getting hotter.

“Yeah,” Zac agreed breathlessly, his laughter trailing off. “Truce.”

The way Zac looked -- his dark skin a stark contrast to the white pillow, his eyes bright, his pretty lips parted -- was irresistible. Fuck being straight or gay or bi or anything. Bryce couldn’t imagine anyone not wanting to kiss Zac right now. He wanted to, for so many reasons. Zac made him so damn *happy*. God, so happy.

But Bryce couldn’t just *do* it. That wasn’t fair to Zac, who let him be this close without flinching.

“Can I...” Bryce swallowed hard and shifted to let Zac’s hands go. That wasn’t nice; he knew his size could be intimidating. He felt his face go even hotter with shame and fear. He had to finish the sentence now or Zac would weasel it out of him. Now, he couldn’t remember how he’d gotten into this. “Can I kiss you?” He made himself look at Zac, even though he wanted to run away now. “I just... I never...”

“You want...” Zac blinked, and then raised his hand to tentatively touch Bryce’s cheek, kept Bryce from turning away. He was so serious, his mouth soft and his eyes dark with a little worried crease between them. “Yeah?” Whatever Zac saw in Bryce’s face must have given him the answer he wanted, because Zac curled his hand around the back of Bryce’s head, drawing Bryce down as Zac leaned up.

“C’mere,” Zac said, and then he pressed his lips to Bryce’s, just a little, like he was expecting Bryce to pull away as soon as they touched.

Bryce almost did pull away; his first reaction was to tense up and pull back, but Zac was so good to let him just... just try. Even Bryce being jumpy didn't make Zac give up. He kissed Bryce anyway and Bryce couldn't help kissing him back. It wasn't much different from kissing girls; Zac's lips were soft and full. Zac kissed him sweetly, not pushing for anything. That made it easier.

It wasn't bad. It was actually kind of nice. The way Zac was so strong, it felt good, and the way Zac didn't pull away was a rush. God, and just doing it. It wasn't like he could make things worse, was it? If he hadn't been so intent on kissing Zac, he'd have laughed with relief.

Bryce shifted so he could cup Zac's cheek in his hand as he brushed his tongue against Zac's lips. Zac's mouth opened up, Zac pulled him a little closer, and then they were kissing. Really kissing. Zac was licking into his mouth, sucking at his tongue, and Zac's fingers were sliding into Bryce's hair. Zac's strength, the rasp of his unshaven cheek against Bryce's palm, those were new, but they only made heat race through Bryce's veins.

Bryce couldn't even think to wish his father's head was exploding right now. He was good at this part, good at kissing, and he kissed Zac back passionately, half showing off, unable to keep from making soft, needy noises. He wanted Zac to want him, wanted Zac to be crazy for him, wanted Zac to be *his* again. It was a little wrong, but Bryce couldn't help himself. They hadn't said how many kisses, or how long. Did this count as one kiss? He didn't want to stop.

Without thinking, he moved his hand to cup Zac's ass; before he could remember who he was kissing and why he shouldn't think the wrong thing, the thought of how sweet and tight and hot it was flashed across Bryce's mind. Even the realization that he was thinking that about *Zac* couldn't derail him right now.

Zac moaned softly, arching his hips back into Bryce's touch. That little moan made Bryce shiver, and he kissed Zac like he was trying to devour him, hungry and fierce, pressing closer. Just a kiss. It was only kissing, but kissing hadn't been this good for years, with the pure pleasure of it setting him on fire. He hadn't expected it to be this good, hadn't expected to get hard just from this. It was an effort not to do more, not to touch more.

Zac moaned again and his grip on Bryce's hair tightened. The tug made Bryce stop, and he pulled back with a gasp. He was panting like he'd stopped breathing until right now. He felt wild-eyed and hot and afraid, looking down at Zac and realizing what he'd done. He pulled his hand away from Zac's ass as though he'd been stung and touched Zac's cheek instead.

"Is everything... are you... are you okay?" Bryce was overwhelmed, but not ready to be sorry for what he'd done, not yet.

"Yeah." Zac's hazel eyes were dark and wide. "I'm good." His cheeks were flushed, his lips were slightly swollen and parted, and his gaze was flicking between Bryce's eyes and his mouth. "You okay?" he asked, obviously trying to focus on Bryce's eyes as he loosened his grip on Bryce's hair and petted him instead.

“Yeah.” Bryce was totally distracted by Zac’s beautiful mouth, all over again. God. Now that he’d kissed that mouth, he could forgive himself for thinking about it; his instincts were right on. “I’m... yeah. Good. Can I...” He made himself not kiss Zac again, even if he wanted to like crazy.

“Can you what?” Zac’s eyes were on Bryce’s mouth again and he dragged them back up to Bryce’s eyes. “What do you...?”

“I just.” Bryce’s brain wasn’t working. He ran his fingers over Zac’s lips. He didn’t want Zac to be doing him any favors here, but Zac didn’t look like he was being inconvenienced. That was, if guys looked a lot like girls looked when they were turned on. “Do you want to kiss me again?” He managed to look Zac in the eyes this time.

Zac smiled slowly. “Yeah. I do.” He slid one hand out of Bryce’s hair and touched Bryce’s mouth with his fingertips. “I like the way you kiss.”

“Oh.” No pressure there. Bryce kissed Zac’s fingers first, because they were in the way, nipping and licking at them delicately. He wanted to feel all of this; he wasn’t expecting to do this again.

“I kind of meant my *mouth*,” Zac teased, but his voice was still low, like he was still turned on. He drew his fingers away and leaned up to nip lightly at Bryce’s lower lip. “But I’m flexible.”

Bryce’s eyes widened -- the teasing hurt in a way he couldn’t define, made him uncertain about everything -- but the little nip soothed him some. Maybe he shouldn’t have done that. Maybe it was stupid and girly. Was he not supposed to do that kind of thing?

“Okay,” he said obediently, kissing Zac on the mouth instead. Kissing Zac’s mouth was good, though he was tentative again. Maybe he didn’t know how to do this right.

Zac kissed him back, then pulled away. He made Bryce look at him, hands on both sides of Bryce’s face. “You want something else, you just gotta say so. Or do it. Or whatever. You can kiss me wherever you want, Bryce. I was just teasing. I like it.”

That was where Bryce lost his nerve. Suddenly, he had a glimpse of the whole picture through his father’s eyes, his brothers’ eyes, and it was all over. *Oh, God, what did I do? Why did I do it?*

“Okay,” he said again, nodding, but his heart was beating so hard that it hurt. He rolled off of Zac to sit with his back to the wall, trying not to hyperventilate, rubbing at his breastbone. *Panic attack is not really very butch*, he told himself, but he couldn’t stop feeling like there was a weight on his chest. The little bit of insecurity put him over the edge and, suddenly, he was terrified. If he hadn’t liked it, he’d have been fine.

“Bryce...” Zac sat up and turned to face Bryce. “Hey, man, it’s okay.” He put a hand on Bryce’s shoulder, massaging a bit. “It’s okay. You don’t hafta do anything you don’t want.”

“No, it’s just. It’s not that.” Bryce tried to calm down and pretended his hands weren’t shaking. “I just. I never did that. And.”

And he'd pretty much just done the thing he'd spent nearly ten years being terrified he'd do. His brothers were right. He'd never have the fact that they were wrong to stand on again. What was he going to say now when they started in on him? The thoughts wouldn't stop bouncing around in his head.

"It's okay. It's gonna be okay," Zac said quietly. "Kissing me doesn't... It doesn't have to be a big deal, man. You don't ever have to do it again, if you don't want to. It doesn't have to change anything, if you don't want it to. I'm not gonna say anything to anybody." He turned to lean against the wall beside Bryce and slid his arm around Bryce's shoulders. "It's okay, Bryce."

"I know." Bryce put his head on Zac's shoulder and sighed, slow and shuddering. "I trust you." Saying it reminded him that it was true and he relaxed a little. It was safe here. Zac was safe. No one would ever know. That was why he'd done this at all. And what the hell did it matter, anyway? Even if he was as good as he could be, no one believed him. "I'm tired and stupid. I'm sorry." He inhaled hard and his breath caught. "It was nice. It was," he admitted, too honest not to say it. Besides, Zac deserved to hear that, that he'd made Bryce feel good.

"You're not stupid," Zac said. "You're... I've been there. I know. It's okay." He rubbed Bryce's shoulder. "C'mon, I promised you I'd let you get some rest. You wanna lay down for a bit, while I finish this chapter for Pharmacology?"

Bryce lifted his head to look at Zac; Zac looked so worried. He was going to nod and tell Zac to go study, but he kissed Zac again instead. He wasn't sorry for this, he didn't want to be. He kissed Zac because he was angry, because it had been so good, because he needed to go a little further, because he wanted not to be ashamed of either of them. It was so good, it made him hot down to the ice in his chest.

"Bryce..." Zac kissed him back, softly. "You don't have to do this. Anything." He kissed Bryce again, so sweetly. He obviously didn't mean that he didn't want Bryce to kiss him, not with the way he kept kissing back.

"I know." Bryce's hand was shaking when he touched Zac's cheek. He stole one more kiss, this one fierce and angry, before he pulled away again. He could taste Zac on his lips "I'm just sick to death of feeling bad all the time," he said breathlessly, forcing himself to be calm and to man up about it. "But I should let you go do your stuff." He was feeling sorry already, like he'd used Zac or something.

"Then don't feel bad." Zac ruffled Bryce's hair, then leaned over to grab the DS off the foot of the bed. He traded it for the textbook on his bedside table, then flopped back into the pillows. "You look like you haven't slept in weeks. Too much action with the ladies, dude. If you're ever too tired you can send 'em over to me, you know. C'mon." He patted the pillow next to him. "I'm just gonna finish this chapter and do the questions at the end."

“Okay.” Zac was acting like nothing was wrong, and that made Bryce feel better. He lay down with his head on the pillow and, since he had nowhere else to put it, he slid his arm around Zac’s waist.

Zac had his textbook propped on his knees, and his notebook tucked behind it. He rested one hand on top of Bryce’s, lightly, like a note that he wanted Bryce to be there. It made Bryce feel a little less guilty to think that Zac seemed to like touching him still.

Bryce didn’t have time to think everything to death or to work himself into a state over having kissed Zac. Zac’s calm acceptance of everything -- kissing, not kissing, whatever -- made it hard to get upset without at least a little effort. Bryce was so tired. He wanted to worry, but sleep crept up and swallowed him whole.

Bryce woke in the middle of the night, confused. He realized, after pulling back and blinking into the dark, that he’d fallen asleep with Zac. He’d been kissing Zac. That memory went through him like he’d been shocked, making him jerk back further, his heart pounding.

The movement woke Zac, who rolled over to face Bryce and reached out for him. “Hey, Bryce,” he mumbled sleepily. “You okay, man?”

The best Bryce could do was to not actually climb the wall behind him. “I. Yeah. I’m sorry.” He should get out of bed; he really shouldn’t be in Zac’s bed *again*. He even knew that what was driving him to flee was something he didn’t want to believe, no matter if he was gay or bisexual or straight, but he couldn’t stop from saying, “I didn’t mean to. I should go. Sorry.”

“Hey...” Zac sat up and got hold of Bryce’s arm, just lightly. “Nothing to be sorry for, Bryce. I invited you in here, remember? So you could sleep. It’s okay. You’re not doing anything wrong, and you don’t have to go.”

“Oh.” Bryce had forgotten that part. “I just... I forgot. I’m sorry I woke you.” It was so stupid that sleeping in the same bed with Zac should scare him so much when he found himself doing it. Now he just felt dumb and shaken at once.

“It’s okay,” Zac said again, rubbing his hand over Bryce’s arm now. “Sleeping in a different bed sometimes freaks me out, too. Or, like, first night I’m back home for the summer. I can never sleep, ‘cause the bed feels weird.”

“Let’s be honest,” Bryce said, trying not to sound too bitter and trying to keep his voice steady at the same time. “That’s not why I’m upset.” He took a deep breath and reached out, his hand finding bare, warm skin. Zac didn’t flinch when Bryce touched him. “I... can I stay?” *Can I stay anyway?*

“Of course. I’m not going to kick you out, man. I know why you’re upset, yeah, but you didn’t do anything wrong. You can stay.”

“You shouldn’t be sleeping on the covers,” Bryce said by way of thanks. “Here.” He got up so Zac could get under the covers.

Zac slid under the blanket. “Thanks.” He held the covers up like an invitation. “C’mere.”

Bryce crawled back in to bed, lying down close. He reached out and put one hand on Zac’s bare chest, feeling silky skin and the beat of Zac’s heart. It felt good to be close to someone he trusted this much. It had been a while since he’d been with someone seriously. Could trust turn you on? Maybe that was it.

“Good.” Zac tucked one hand under his head and rested the other on top of Bryce’s hand. “It’s all good, Bryce. Really.”

“Okay.” Bryce’s throat felt tight. “I’m sorry, Zac,” he said thickly. “I am. I just am.”

“Bryce, man, you don’t have anything to be sorry for.” Zac rubbed the back of Bryce’s hand. “We kissed, and I’m definitely not complaining about that, okay? I’m not complaining about you having a hard time with it, either. Jeez, it’s not like I’d have any room to talk.”

“It’s not just that.” All Bryce’s jovial colloquialisms and cheery curses were stripped away as he tried to talk around the pain in his chest and the lump in his throat. “I just, I can’t say sorry to the people I was shitty to. All of them. I think about it a lot. I can’t stop. Every time I saw Perry... now, you, too... I think about it. And how much worse people are than me, how I’ve seen them do it, heard them laugh about it.” Once he was talking, Bryce couldn’t stop, gulping air between whispers as it all poured out. “I’m sorry for it. I am. They won’t stop, either. They don’t stop. They’ll never change. And I never said anything when I could. Because I’m a fucking coward. And I’m sorry, Zac.”

“Bryce...” Zac rolled onto his side, facing Bryce, and put his hand on Bryce’s chest. “Back in high school and junior high, when I was really trying to cover, really scared of getting found out... Well. I definitely said and did some things I’m not proud of. So. I can kind of understand where you’re coming from.” He ran his hand over Bryce’s chest, soothing. “People change, though. You changed.”

“I feel so sick,” Bryce whispered, not settling in spite of the soothing. “I go around pretending I’m this good guy, and I’m shit.”

“You are so not.”

Bryce rubbed his hand over his eyes and took a breath. “Just... there was this guy at the yacht club this summer, when I worked for Dad,” he confessed. “I try not to look, Zac, I do.” Talking felt like falling; God, he hoped Zac never told. “I mean, Perry, yeah, I can see why people think he’s hot. But I don’t *look*. I forgot not to look one day and this guy working the gas at the marina, he smiled back at me. Just this *smile*, like he already knew me. And I couldn’t *not* look at him that way anymore.”

Bryce swallowed hard, staring up into the dark. Pieces of the summer played across his memory like film clips taped together. He could still see that smile and the flicker of light in the other man's brown eyes. "Josh. Josh has this fucking radar. God. Worse, once he starts, it's like he sucks people in with him. And I know the guy needed the job. He must've, because no one would put up with the shit Josh said. I never told Josh to shut the fuck up, Zac. I cannot do this anymore. It's not me."

"Then don't do it." Zac slid his hand up Bryce's chest, curling it around the back of Bryce's neck and pulling him close for a hug.

"I won't." Bryce wound himself around Zac and clung shamelessly. "I'm just so sorry." He nuzzled into the curve of Zac's neck and tried to relax.

"I know, Bryce." Zac stroked Bryce's back, long strokes that went from the nape of his neck all the way down to his waist, Zac's hand warming him through the thin fabric of his shirt. "It's okay. You're okay. I know *you*. That's who I like. You're a good guy, Bryce."

Bryce clung for a long time, breathing in the scent of Zac's skin, letting the touches relax him. The sadness faded enough for arousal to surface slowly. Just this little touching and closeness was turning him on. Maybe that really was why this used to scare him so much. Because he wanted it. Because they were right. *They were right*. It was too late now.

Zac had said he wasn't sorry, that he didn't mind that they'd kissed. Bryce couldn't remember whether or not he'd felt Zac get hard under him. Had Zac really wanted him like he wanted Zac? He needed Zac to want him, too, so he wouldn't be alone with all this.

Bryce's lips pressed against the soft, damp skin of Zac's neck before he realized it, but then he did it again on purpose, kissing tenderly. Zac's neck must've been pretty sensitive, because the soft kisses were enough to make him shiver. Zac tilted his head, offering his neck up for more kisses.

Bryce made himself not think about anything but the taste and texture of Zac's skin as he slowly went from delicate presses of lips to lavishing wet kisses and bites and licks from Zac's shoulder to his jaw and up under his ear, everywhere Zac gave him to kiss.

As the kisses got more intense, Zac's breath came faster and he moaned softly. Zac's hand slipped down from Bryce's back to his ass, and he kneaded a little, pulling Bryce forward against him. Feeling Zac's dick hardening, even through the fabric of their clothes, was a rush of relief. Zac pulled Bryce closer, grinding up against him like he needed Bryce as much as Bryce needed him.

Bryce's tongue rasped against Zac's jaw and the texture of stubble made him whimper softly instead of turning him off. He could have spent all night worshipping the lines of Zac's neck. His teeth were digging in slightly, and he was sucking on the tender skin, feeling drunk on Zac's

moans. But Bryce couldn't leave Zac with a neck covered in hickeys. Even on Zac's darker skin, they were sure to show up.

Bryce made himself pull away, but Zac leaned in and then Bryce was kissing his mouth again, just as hungrily. Zac moaned into the kiss, licking at Bryce's lips until Bryce opened up for him. He was still kneading at Bryce's ass, cupping and rubbing as he arched to get them closer together.

Bryce moved, letting Zac pull him over slowly until his weight pinned them together. For all that he was on top, his kisses were desperate and open and submissive; he could feel it all the way through. He wanted to be good, he wanted Zac to want him, and he wanted Zac. He was achingly hard, his dick pressing through their clothes, and he was making needy little noises into Zac's mouth.

Zac got both hands on Bryce's ass, shamelessly stroking it through Bryce's shorts. His body was moving under Bryce's, but Zac wasn't pushing him away. He was rocking his hips, dragging his cock against Bryce's body. "Bryce," he moaned, and then he was pressing up into the kisses again, slicking his tongue into Bryce's mouth.

Bryce rolled them over so that Zac was on top. Now, he wasn't the one in charge of anything; it was all up to Zac how far they went. Bryce wanted so much that his want went past the end of what he knew and into the shadows of his fear and deeper still, leading him into places he had dreamed of in wet, desperate nightmares.

"God, yeah." Zac quickly settled over Bryce, braced on his elbows, his hips dragging against Bryce's. He kissed Bryce's neck and jaw and behind his ear, just like Bryce had done to him.

Bryce let his head fall back and offered himself up, his body speaking for him. He would do anything Zac wanted, so long as he didn't have to think about it. He was breathing so hard, he was dizzy. When he ran his hands up Zac's back, his palms pressed against rippled muscle under satin skin. He wished he'd taken off his shirt to feel Zac's bare chest against his.

This wasn't anything like any sex he'd ever had before. Zac's mouth was hot and sweet on his skin; he pressed up to get more of it, digging his fingers into Zac's back. The feel of Zac's dick pushing against him just made him feel good, wanted.

"Zac, Zac," he whispered, hardly aware he was even speaking. It felt like the words were echoing around in his head. He wasn't thinking anymore. "God, Zac. So good."

Zac groaned, mouth leaving damp trails down Bryce's neck, and then he yanked the collar of Bryce's shirt aside to get to his shoulder. He finally kissed back to Bryce's mouth, but only briefly, before he was on his way back down the other side.

Desperate for more, Bryce slid his hands down to Zac's ass, pulling him close and grinding up against him. Zac was driving him crazy; he'd never expected to feel like this with a guy, even if he'd felt glimmers of attraction. He hadn't been on the edge like this since high school.

God, Zac had a nice ass. The realization that he could touch all he wanted made Bryce's breath catch. He had big hands and Zac's ass fit them so perfectly. He touched everywhere from the small of Zac's back to his thighs, his fingers brushing the crease. As he touched, something in him whispered that he had always wanted to know how Zac would feel.

"Fuck. Zac. You feel so good." His voice was ragged with need. He *needed* Zac in a way he'd never felt before.

"Yeah." Zac spread his legs, straddling Bryce's hips, and kept moving. He kissed Bryce on the mouth again, licking past Bryce's lips and sucking at his tongue.

Bryce shuddered and arched up, groping and kneading and stroking Zac's ass. All he could do was answer Zac's body, follow Zac's lead. There was wetness on his belly from his dick leaking and he was moaning into Zac's mouth, but he couldn't have said what he needed right now, not even that he needed to get off.

Zac pulled back from the kisses to gasp, "God, Bryce, your *hands*," and then he was kissing Bryce again, harder, deeper. He moaned against Bryce's mouth, his hips moving faster.

Bryce wanted to touch skin, but not so much that he could make himself stop so they could strip. He could feel enough like this, fingers slipping between Zac's asscheeks, riding up between Zac's thighs to brush his balls, feeling all of Zac through the thin summer fabric of his pajama pants.

The kisses were driving him crazy; he was trembling with the rush of everything they'd done together. Zac was shuddering, grinding down and back against Bryce's hands and body. His moans turned into whimpers and then Bryce felt him roll his hips hard, like he was coming.

"Oh, God, Zac, oh, God," Bryce gasped, rocking against Zac as Zac rode him. "*Please.*" *Please come. Please let me make you come.* He kissed Zac fiercely, too caught up in Zac's orgasm to realize how close he was to coming, too.

"*Bryce.*" Zac tensed up, and then shuddered. "God, Bryce, so good." He kept moving, grinding down against Bryce's hard dick like he still hadn't had enough of feeling it against him.

"Yes. Fuck. Please." Bryce could feel wet seeping through to his skin, Zac's come soaking through their clothes, and his hands tightened on Zac's hips, hard. Oh, Christ, he'd made Zac come. "Zac..."

He couldn't stop, couldn't ask Zac if he could come, couldn't do anything but make helpless little noises as he came. Oh, God, it was so good, pleasure spilling out of him with jerks and whines. He'd never just *let go* like this before; God knew no one had ever made him come in his pants before.

“God, that’s so hot.” Zac relaxed into it, moving the way Bryce needed him to. “So fucking hot, Bryce.”

Bryce couldn’t speak or even parse what Zac was saying until he was spent, his boxers and shorts soaked with his come and Zac’s. He was wide-eyed, trying to see by the pale ambient light filtering in the window. He couldn’t quite see Zac’s face to know everything was really okay.

“Zac.” Bryce could hardly hear his own voice. Little shivers of pleasure were still racing through him, but he already needed reassurance. *Oh, God, oh, God, please don’t be mad. Please be okay.*

Zac stroked Bryce’s chest as Zac leaned down over him. He kissed Bryce on the mouth, softly. “So good, Bryce,” he whispered, and then kissed him again.

Bryce fumbled up Zac’s body until his hands cupped the nape of Zac’s neck and he kissed Zac back, trying to catch his breath, overwhelmed with emotion. “Yeah,” he managed to say. “Good, Zac.”

Zac sort of collapsed down onto Bryce, sprawling over him except where he was being held up by his elbows, and asked, “You okay? That was... it was good, right?”

“God. I... Zac. Yeah.” Bryce wrapped his arms around Zac and held on, burying his face in Zac’s shoulder. “Really good.” Coming like that had been amazing; he couldn’t even explain why it had been so good.

They stayed like that for a while, and then Zac sat up. “Sticky,” he said, wrinkling his nose. “I’m gonna...” He tugged at the waistband of his pajama pants. “You mind if I get outta these?”

“No, if I can, too.” Bryce wriggled under him. He was going to wake up feeling like he was fourteen again. It wasn’t like having clothes on had stopped them from getting all over each other. The excuses weren’t because he wanted to feel Zac bare against him, he told himself.

“Yeah. Yeah, of course.” Zac rolled up off the bed and onto his feet, and then wriggled out of his pajama pants. He balled them up in one hand and wiped at the mess on his belly. Bryce did the same, shedding his clothes and wiping himself off. He dropped his balled up clothes on the floor and sprawled across Zac’s bed. For a moment, he forgot to be self-conscious, he was so busy trying to see Zac’s face.

Zac was smiling when he turned around. The light was just enough that from this angle Bryce could see Zac’s face and the look in his eyes, and Bryce needed to see that more than anything else, to know that everything was okay between them.

Zac looked at Bryce and his eyes got wide, like he wanted what he saw. They’d been naked together before, plenty of times, but not like this, not ever with Zac looking at him like that. There was a raw need in Zac’s expression that was visceral and hot and unapologetic. No one had ever looked at Bryce like that before and it made his breath catch.

Zac came back to bed, crawling in next to Bryce. He skimmed one hand over Bryce's chest and leaned in close to kiss him on the mouth.

Bryce pulled the covers up and kissed Zac back, pulling him into his arms. He clung to Zac, murmuring, "Thank you." He felt scared and better all at once.

"Hey, man, my pleasure." Zac tipped his head up to show Bryce his grin. It gentled after a second, though, and he added, "You're welcome, Bryce."

Bryce laughed at him, quietly. "Just promise you won't badmouth me on Facebook because I don't call you in the morning, dude," he teased. The way Zac took him seriously was soothing, knowing Zac *got* him.

"Nah, but if you don't take me to the homecoming dance, I'm gonna be pissed," Zac teased back, laughing and settling down in Bryce's arms.

"Only because you put out." Teasing took the edge off and felt normal. They'd always given each other a hard time.

Bryce tucked them up together so that Zac's head was nestled under his chin. They fit together nicely and Bryce loved to cuddle; it was one thing he'd always managed to be nearly shameless about. Zac had always obliged him, too. Maybe he'd turned Zac on before. He wondered, and it wasn't just vanity. Bryce wanted to know what else he'd been missing all this time, since the'd been oblivious to so much, even the potential for his own attraction to Zac.

His mind was churning with what he'd just done, but trusting Zac and being furious with his dad made it all easier. He had to pick sides anyway, no matter what, and at least now he'd done something instead of being backed into a corner. Bryce was in it now, and his honesty would never let him go back on it. It felt better to be like this, to have *done* anything at all, even though he was afraid he was going to pay for it later, somehow.

Chapter Three

Being away from his family always let Bryce feel... real. Real was the word. Very real. Ten minutes before noise curfew on a Saturday night kind of real. It was so good to be back at school, even if things weren't quite the same. He was slouched in a worn-out armchair in the front room of a big old Victorian house rented out to seven girls in the Rec and Leisure program, a beer in one hand and a cigarette in the other, watching a pair of sophomore girls feeling each other up while they danced to some hip-hop song so loud he couldn't hear the words. Real was definitely a good thing.

Bryce wondered if the pair he was watching had any idea what they were doing; neither was that good-looking, but when you put them together and they took their clothes off, there was definitely some appeal. As the thought crossed his mind, one tripped and knocked the other over into a couple sucking face on the makeshift dance floor. Squeals rose above the music. That answered his question: *not a clue*.

The instinct to help untangle the mess was stifled by the realization that adding another body to the mix would make things worse. Too bad he hadn't thought about that before kissing Zac. Bryce stubbed out the last of his cigarette in the ashtray on the end table and lit another.

He was trying not to think about things with Zac. Last year had been almost as bad as being home, with an undercurrent of tension and secrecy that had made Bryce feel like he was the odd man out in his one safe place. It had hurt worse than he could ever let on to Zac. Now, he really needed to talk to someone about how he'd gotten off with his best friend and how much he loved sleeping in the same bed and... He had to stop thinking before he freaked out.

Calm down. On some level, Bryce realized that he'd always known that there was something going on between Zac and Perry. He was jealous, yeah, but not for the reasons they'd think, which was why he couldn't say anything to Zac about it, not then and not now. He was happy for his friends, that they got to be themselves and be together. It just hurt to know they were going somewhere he couldn't follow.

Or, he'd thought he couldn't. Now he didn't know where he was or how to get back or if he wanted to get back or...

"Hey, sugarbear." Someone leaned over the back of the chair to kiss the top of his head. "Trade you beer for a cigarette."

Bryce looked up to see his ex -- the only ex he was ever happy to see -- grinning down at him. "Rach!" He offered up the cigarette. "Trade?"

"Yep!" Rachel whisked around and took the cigarette at the same time as she plunked herself in his lap. She must have been a few drinks in because she only smoked when she'd been drinking. She never drank beer, either. Somewhere in this house, someone was making Long Island Iced Tea. "Here." She made her cute little icky-face and handed over the bottle.

Bryce put the empty under the chair where it wouldn't get broken and took the fresh one, still dripping ice from the cooler. Yummy beer. Yummy Rachel, too. She was dressed in a faded rugby shirt he was sure had been his at some point, but he wasn't going to argue about it since they'd broken up more than a year and a half ago, a short skirt, and striped socks that came up over her knees. Somehow -- and he was not going to think about the reasoning -- her sneakers had high heels. Girls would put heels on anything. She flicked him in the face with her ponytail and then snuggled up to his chest with her head on his shoulder.

It was probably the beer, or the fact that he'd been thinking about Zac, but Bryce was slow on the uptake. It was Rachel's second dramatically mournful sigh that made him remember that she was his ex-girlfriend because she'd dumped him for a guy in the year ahead of them and had been with the guy ever since. Matt. Bryce and Rach had stayed friends, but not like this. Good friends still did not sit in his lap and wiggle their asses. Well, unless they were *really* good friends. Now he wasn't sure if Zac had ever... *stop it, Bryce.*

Rachel. He could talk to Rachel. Maybe. Getting snuggled by a leggy blonde like Rachel wasn't cheering him up. Christ, maybe he had broken his brain or whatever it was that made someone want people. Girls. Rachel sighed again, this time with smoke going straight up into Bryce's face. Or he could just distract himself with whatever was eating Rach.

"What's up, kittenface?" They'd started calling each other stupid names long before they'd been dating. Sarah, the girl Bryce had dated before Rachel, had been unbearable about calling him pet names. That had ultimately been the deathknell for that relationship, but it had given Bryce and Rachel something to bond over.

"Matt. He's having second thoughts." Rachel leaned back against the arm of the chair so she could see him. He could hear her better this way, over the music.

"Second... why?" They'd seemed like they were made for each other. Two people going in the same direction by different routes, but it had seemed to work for them. Matt was a stolid, serious kind of guy, kind of on the churchy side, and Rach was anything but, but he seemed good for her and she seemed good for him. Seemed. Showed how much Bryce knew about people. He couldn't even figure himself out. Worrying about Rachel was a good idea.

"He says he wants me to experience life or something like that." Rachel took a drag from the cigarette and tilted her head back to blow smoke at the ceiling. "Says he thinks I need to live more and get stuff out of my system before I settle down. I'm obviously not ready yet."

"Since when does that mean second thoughts?" Bryce couldn't imagine that. "Isn't living more something you should do together? Being together isn't 'settling down.'"

"That's what I said. You know how he went on that home-building trip to Guatemala this summer?" Rachel's big blue eyes got teary, and she blinked until droplets clung to her painted lashes. "He hardly wrote me all summer. I wish I'd gone, even though there was all that mud and bugs. And then he came back and called and..." She shrugged.

“And?”

“He says he doesn’t want to be going out with me anymore,” Rachel said, all in a rush. “That he had a lot of time to think while he was away and he saw things and he realized that I’m just not mature enough for him and he doesn’t think that being with him is helping me grow up.”

“He strung you along all summer and then he dumped you?” Bryce always had wanted to punch the guy in his all-American, church-going face. The thumping dance music and flashing lights that turned the big room into a night club put him on edge, made him feel like fighting when his mood swung.

“Maybe he thought I wouldn’t notice. I mean, I’m kind of an airhead and I should be more serious, right?” She looked at the cigarette she was waving around and leaned over to put it out in the ashtray. Tears were trickling down her cheeks now, but she pushed Bryce’s hand away when he went to brush them off. “What’s a whole fucking summer of waiting to someone too dumb to tell time? I thought he loved me.”

“Aww, muffinhead.” Bryce batted her hand away at last and wiped ineffectually at her tears. “Sometimes people aren’t who we thought they were. Or maybe we aren’t who they thought we were.”

“I just... I wasted all this time,” she sniffled. “I thought he was the one.”

“You didn’t think I was the one?” Bryce snuggled her up, laughing a little at her. He could smell her sweet perfume this close, instead of the air that was heavy with sweat and smoke in spite of the open windows.

“God, no.” Rachel slapped at his chest, laughing through her tears. “You’re a nice guy, Bryce, but you’re a player.”

“I was always faithful,” Bryce protested.

“Reluctantly.” Rachel sighed and let her head fall on his shoulder.

“Never.” Maybe a little, but that had been nearly two years ago. “I’m sorry, bunnymuffin.”

“I just feel... I feel like I don’t know how to do this anymore. I only came to this party because you’re here.”

“You came to see me?” Bryce was genuinely surprised at that.

“You always make me feel better.” Rachel’s fingers drifted down the side of his neck and she leaned up to press a kiss under his jaw. “Always, lambcake.”

Oh. Bryce put his beer down beside the ashtray and wrapped both arms around her. Rachel felt good against him, curvy and soft and feminine. She wriggled in his lap again and, this time, Bryce felt the rush of *want* that made him want to growl.

“I’m sorry about Matt,” he made himself say instead. He didn’t want to jump into something just because he wanted to prove to himself that he still liked women, that the thing with Zac was a one-time thing. What happened to not thinking about Zac, already?

“I don’t want to be sorry about Matt.” Rachel shifted and wiggled until she was kneeling over his lap, facing at him. Her skirt rode up her thighs so high that when Bryce glanced down, he could see a flash of lace. In the flaring lights from the party set-up, she looked like an oil painting, dark shadows and glossy highlights. “I don’t want to talk about him. I want to talk about you.” Biting her lower lip, she looked at him from under her lashes.

“What do you want to know?” She’d moved and his hands were on her hips now; when she wriggled a little closer, they slipped down to brush bare skin.

Rachel leaned in so he could hear her and he could see the heat in her eyes. “Are you seeing anyone?”

“No.” The word jumped out almost too fast. No. Not seeing anyone. Not at all. Definitely not Zac. Whatever it was, it had been once, and it had been good, and Bryce was really lucky Zac was his friend, but it couldn’t happen again. “Just... a friend here and there,” he added, because honesty wouldn’t let him say otherwise. Zac aside, he hadn’t exactly been a hermit lately. “You know how it is.”

“We’re friends.” Bryce felt the words on his lips more than he heard them, right before her lips brushed his. “Right, snugglebear?”

“Yeah.” Bryce had no idea what his hands thought they were doing, but his fingers were brushing lace and soft skin. Rachel’s hands slid into his hair and then she kissed him for real this time, a kiss that went right down his spine to his dick and made him groan.

It was weird, how her kisses were so aggressive and Zac’s had been so gentle and patient, waiting for Bryce to ask for more. At least at first, and... *Not going there.* Not that Bryce didn’t love aggressive. He let his head fall back on the cushion behind him and Rachel followed him without hesitation. Her hands were tight in his hair, tilting his head back as she kissed him like she was trying to drive him into doing it right there.

Bryce gave into her, giving her all the kisses she wanted, one hand on her ass and the other up her shirt and under her bra before he had time to remind himself it wasn’t appropriate to do this here, even if there was a couple practically fucking over on the couch. Appropriate somewhere else, yes. *She needs it,* he told himself. They were still good friends. What else were friends for?

“C’mon.” Rachel bit his lip with a little moan, then pulled back. “Suzie said I could use her room.”

“You asked...” Bryce blinked through the testosterone haze to try and parse that.

Busted. Rachel gave him a wide-eyed look. “I just... I knew...”

“I’m that easy?” Okay, so maybe he was. Christ, he and Zac... and why did he keep thinking of Zac when he had one hand full of a really, really nice breast and the other full of a very pretty ass? Hell, he even knew how hot both bits were in person.

“That you wouldn’t say no to a friend in need.” Rachel grabbed his collar and pulled him in for another kiss.

That sounded better. Not thinking about Zac. “Did you...” Bryce had really not counted on getting laid tonight, not... *laid*. Maybe making out, hands, mouths... not fucking. He was without any kind of necessary protection. He hadn’t been planning on anything serious while he was still trying to work things out about... *no, no, no*.

“I’m growing up,” Rachel said loftily. “I got some stuff from Becky when I saw you were here. Come on, Bry.” She slipped out of his grasp. “Remind me why I’m sorry we broke up.” She smoothed her skirt down as she waltzed away, but not before he caught a glimpse of the twin, pearly curves of her asscheeks. God, she and -- not thinking of him -- couldn’t have been more different.

Bryce got to the landing before Rachel turned and leapt into his arms, wrapping her legs around his waist and kissing him again. Yes, still liking girls. Bryce got one arm around her hips and used the other to steady himself on the wall as he made it up the last six steps. This would put everything right, he promised himself.

Afterward, Bryce stared into the pink-tinted shadows thrown by Suzie’s lava lamp, wondering if he should get up and dress now, or wait until Rachel got back from the bathroom and see if she wanted anything else. He felt strange. Detached. Fucking was something he only did with a handful of people; Rach was one of them. It wasn’t any different now than last time he’d been with her, except that according to her he was even better than before, which was kind of nice, because he did try. He just tried to get it right.

“Hey, lollipop.” Rachel slipped back into the room; this time she *was* wearing his shirt, the one he’d shown up wearing. “Mm. Lollipop.” She crawled up over him and he had to laugh at her.

“Feeling better?”

“Yeah.” She flopped down in his arms and nuzzled his chest. “I just... being dumped fucking sucks.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Bryce said dryly. He’d been miserable after she dumped him. Zac had been there for him, though, alternately comforting him and kicking his ass. The memory made him smile.

“Shut up.” Rachel bit him vindictively for that; her sharp white teeth clamped on one of his nipples and made him yelp.

“Hey!” As soon as her teeth were off him, Bryce slapped her ass. “I was trying to be nice to you.”

“I know.” She snuggled him again. “And, yes, I feel better.”

“Good. You’re gonna be okay, sugarcube.” Bryce kissed her damp hair. The ponytail was long gone and her blonde hair was hanging in straggly elf-locks.

“I know. Do you think...” Rachel wiggled around until she was lying on her back, her head on his shoulder. “I really like him, Bryce. I mean, a lot. Do you think it’s dumb for me to try and get him back?”

Bryce sighed. Damn it, it wasn’t like he had any clue. He was still working on what body parts he liked. At least now he had proof that the world hadn’t ended and nothing bad had happened after what he and Zac had done. “It’s not *dumb*, honey.”

“But...” She craned her neck to look up at him. Even with her hair a wreck and her makeup smeared from more than an hour of rolling around in bed, she was lovely. Bryce had always thought she was prettier when she was being herself.

“I just worry that you’re doing something because it’s what you should. Not because it’s who you are.” As soon as the words were out of his mouth, he knew he might as well have been talking to the mirror.

“So, I shouldn’t?” Rachel looked so damn trusting. Why the hell did people have to trust him?

Bryce shifted so that he could lie on his side, propped up on one elbow, and he tugged the sheet up so that his bare ass wouldn’t be the first thing someone saw if they barged in. It didn’t feel like he could give good advice flopped out where she’d left him when she was done with him. Now he could think.

“I think you should do what’s right for you,” he said, trying to find the right words. “Not make choices because you’re scared of what will happen if you step off the path. You always were kind of charging off for a picket fence and minivan, then running away from it the next minute. Matt’s a picket fence and minivan kind of guy, Rach. I just don’t know if that’s you.”

“Maybe.” Rachel bit her lip and frowned up at him. “But I want...” She waved one hand around vaguely. “Someone. You know.”

“Yeah, I know.” Bryce kissed her on the forehead. “But I think you should be looking for *you*.”

That got him a surprised look. Rachel sighed, tugging his shirt down and smoothing it out over her belly, poking at her hipbones through it “Okay, it is just weird for two of my ex-boyfriends to be saying the same thing.”

“Maybe two dumb guys can get it right?” Bryce gave her a hopeful smile.

When Rachel looked up at him, she patted his face. “Maybe. Are you really okay, babycakes?”

“I’m good enough. Right?” Bryce waggled his eyebrows at her and she giggled.

“Hmm.” Rachel’s eyes narrowed and she crooked a finger at him. “I wasn’t paying attention last time.”

“Oh, thanks.” Bryce tickled her for revenge, but he didn’t turn her down. It wasn’t like he had anything else to do this evening, and he liked making Rachel happy. It didn’t hurt that it was reassurance that he was still himself.

Much to Zac’s surprise, Bryce wasn’t avoiding him. If anything, Bryce was spending more time with Zac. Sure, he was going out and being Bryce and doing Bryce things, probably involving various girls, but Zac wasn’t thinking about that.

Bryce had actually shown up to hang out in Zac’s room and study more than once. And he’d been totally cool with Zac practically sitting on him when they had friends over for a movie night. Bryce seemed okay. Quieter, but okay. Zac was so damn happy. Things were almost normal, and that was the last thing Zac had expected after the way they’d started the year.

Zac was okay, too. It just wasn’t easy, keeping his hands off Bryce. Bryce was his friend, just like Perry was, but it was different. With Perry, it wasn’t serious, and it had never been anything more than really good sex. With Bryce, Zac had to be careful. So careful. He didn’t want to hurt Bryce, didn’t want to make anything harder for Bryce. But, damn it, Bryce was hot *and* his best friend. Zac wished he could read minds. He wanted so much for what made sense to him to make sense to Bryce, too.

Instead, Zac kept his hands to himself. Not entirely to himself. He went out to a few parties and hooked up with girls. He was waiting for Bryce to make the next move, though, so he turned down the guys who came onto him, the one who had read the article in *Game On* and a couple who just put the moves on. It wasn’t like Zac thought that one night meant anything, but he didn’t want to take the chance that Bryce would catch him with some other guy and get the wrong idea. The next move never came, though, and Zac kept trying to keep busy.

After a party that devolved into a fistfight between the soccer team and the baseball team, Zac gave up on having fun. He went home, but his room was empty. Right. That was why he’d gone out. He didn’t want to be in an empty room, so he went to Bryce’s room, instead. He remembered to knock, though. Maybe Bryce wasn’t alone, just like Zac didn’t want to be alone.

There was a shuffle and then the door opened. Bryce, wearing nothing but his boxers, was there, yawning and bleary and absolutely gorgeous. “Dude.” He blinked and focused in the light from the bathroom down the hall. “Sup?” He stepped back to let Zac in. His room was the same as always, except for a slumping pile of books by the bed and a basket of clean laundry. No girl. No one at all.

Zac was just drunk enough that his rule about keeping his hands off Bryce didn't seem to apply right now. He slipped inside and let the door close behind him, then locked it. “Sorry I woke you,” he said, even as he was reaching for Bryce. God, Bryce looked good. “C'mere. I wanna...” He leaned up on his toes and angled his mouth against Bryce's.

Bryce startled a little, but he didn't draw back or freak out or anything awful, which was a bonus. “What's wrong, man?” he asked, when he pulled away, still looking like he wasn't completely awake. He was all concern, though; that was Bryce, wanting to make things okay for people.

Zac shook his head. Nothing was wrong. “Just a shitty party,” he muttered. “Nothing. I just... God, you're hot.”

“I...” Bryce looked baffled and he shook his head to stop whatever he'd been about to say. “Never mind. C'mere.” He drew Zac over to the bed. “You've been a fucking party animal lately. You must be beat. Come on, you can sleep with me.”

Zac deflated, sighing, and let Bryce lead him to the bed. He didn't want to sleep, though. He wanted Bryce. He'd wanted Bryce for longer than just since they'd kissed and so much more after that, and he'd kept his hands to himself.

“Bryce...”

Bryce stopped and turned to see Zac's face. “What's wrong?” His computer screen was on a dark screensaver with little fireworks, but there was enough light to see by, and Zac could see the worry on his face. He looked so good -- eyes dark and soft, cheeks warm from sleeping, and his lips full and kissable.

“I don't want to sleep, Bryce.” Zac hadn't gotten this far with Bryce by lying to him. “I want *you*.”

“Oh.” Bryce swallowed hard as that sank in, and then he nodded. His cheeks went deep red, a contrast Zac could see even in the low light. “It's not that I don't want... I don't know, Zac...” He could look really innocent sometimes.

“You don't have to do anything you don't want to,” Zac said, feeling guilty about the worried look on Bryce's face. “I just... I wanted to kiss you again.” He wanted more than that, too, but if a kiss was all Bryce was ready for, it would be enough. Last time had started with kisses, too. Zac stepped in again, hands against Bryce's warm, bare skin, and stood up on his toes to get what he wanted.

“Oh.” Bryce looked uncertain, but then he kissed Zac sweetly, gathering Zac up against his bare chest. The kiss didn’t stay sweet. Maybe Bryce just needed to change gears and had a kind of sticky clutch when it came to this stuff; Zac could deal. It wasn’t more than a few heartbeats before Bryce was kissing him hot and hungry, the way he had the first time.

Bryce was a really good kisser. Zac couldn’t help the little wanting noises he made, or the way his hands slid over Bryce’s bare chest and back. It felt so good to get his hands on someone he wanted like he wanted Bryce. He kissed Bryce back hard, letting Bryce feel how much Zac wanted him.

Bryce got his hands up under Zac’s shirt and moaned. He pulled Zac close, losing his inhibitions and waking up a little at the same time; he was already getting hard. There wasn’t any question that he wanted Zac, too. No need to feel guilty.

“Like that, yeah,” Zac murmured, before going back for another kiss. Bryce’s hands slid further up until Zac’s shirt was bunched up around his chest. Zac was trying to get closer, pressing his bared skin to Bryce’s, when Bryce pulled away from kissing him.

“What, are you...” Zac tried to pull himself together to work out what was wrong, fumbling through the haze of alcohol to remember what, if anything, had upset Bryce last time. Before he could get his thoughts together, his shirt was being peeled off over his head and his body was helping Bryce get it off with automatic motions. “Oh, good idea.” He’d much rather be out of his clothes. And, God, Bryce was only in those thin boxers and... as soon as the shirt was gone, Bryce was kissing him again.

All Zac wanted was to feel good, to feel more than good, to feel it with Bryce like before. Last time, sticky pants; he remembered that. Pants gone would fix that. He worked his hands between them and reminded himself not to tug down Bryce’s boxers, to concentrate on his own pants instead. Oh, God, he loved how Bryce kissed and the feel of Bryce’s big arms around him. Zac could hardly think, but he got his jeans and boxers down around his knees at last. Now, he had to push away from Bryce’s warm body to strip the rest of the way.

“Zac?” Bryce sounded so sweetly baffled, but he let Zac go. “What’s wrong?”

Zac managed to focus on Bryce; the only thing wrong with this scene was the thin cotton keeping him from seeing Bryce naked.

“You, too,” Zac said, as he fought his way out of the maze of his jeans and boxers and socks. It was a good idea. Best idea ever. Bryce needed to be naked so that Zac could look at him and so that they didn’t end up coming in their pants again.

Bryce slid his thumbs under the waistband of his boxers and stripped them off, standing in front of Zac bare and hard, his skin lit by the glow of the computer screen. “Better now?”

Oh, yeah. Yeah, that was good. Zac almost fell over as he stepped out of his clothes; he was more interested in sliding his hands over Bryce's hips, thumbs trailing in to brush the tight, dark curls at the base of Bryce's dick. Bryce had a really nice dick. Getting a look at it hard was all Zac needed to confirm what he'd felt when they'd rubbed off on each other. Zac wasn't a size queen, but he really did like something substantial and, God, Bryce was substantial and then some.

Bryce leaned in to place a kiss that was half bite on the curve of Zac's neck, both hands on Zac's shoulders to keep him close. The touches were making him shiver and he was pushing his hips into Zac's hands. *So fucking hot.*

"Yeah," Zac murmured again. "God, Bryce..." He curled his hands over Bryce's ass, pulling Bryce closer, so their dicks slid against each other.

Bryce whimpered a little at that, but he got one hand on Zac's hip and one at his nape, tilting Zac's head so he could kiss and lick and bite Zac's neck. He was surprisingly easy, and he obviously wanted Zac, far more than his behavior lately would have suggested. Zac couldn't make sense of that, didn't want to.

"Zac," Bryce whispered. "Just... God, Zac. Just tell me..."

"Bed." Bed would make it easier to touch, and Zac really wanted to touch. "I want... God, Bryce, you feel so good. I just want to touch you."

"Yeah, okay." Bryce crawled backward into bed, sprawling out, and reached for Zac. "Come touch me. I wanna feel it."

Zac just looked at Bryce for a moment. Bryce was tall and broad, powerfully built, and his dark curls and tanned skin made him look so hot. Zac crawled up onto the bed beside Bryce and cupped his cheek to kiss him again.

Bryce kissed him back hard, running his hands over Zac's chest. "Why?" he whispered when he pulled back. "I mean, why tonight?" He didn't stop touching, brushing Zac's nipples with his fingertips. "Are you okay?"

Why tonight? Why not every other night? Zac ran his hand from Bryce's shoulder to his hip and said, honestly, "I've been wanting to since last time. I just... I didn't want to push."

"Oh." The touch made Bryce shiver and his eyes were wide with surprise. "I..." He leaned up to kiss Zac tenderly. "I was just worried you were upset about something."

"No. I just... Blowing off steam, you know?" Zac's fingers traced delicate patterns over Bryce's hip. "The party I went to tonight was shit, though. Those fuckers on the baseball team started something with the soccer goalie -- you know Jeff, right? And so the whole soccer team ended up in some kind of crazy fistfight with the baseball team, and I kinda gave up, and came back here."

“Okay.” Bryce’s arousal hadn’t faded a bit while they were talking, even though his attention was on Zac’s words. He could be really sweet when he wanted to be. “As long as no one pissed you off or anything. I’d hate to have to go hit someone.”

Zac laughed; he liked that Bryce wanted to take care of him. “Nah, man, they all know my boyfriend’d come beat ‘em up for me,” he teased, moving to kneel over Bryce’s legs. He slid his hands up Bryce’s thighs, feeling the smooth skin and muscles under his palms. God, Bryce looked so good. Zac was giddy with getting what he wanted.

“I would, too.” There was a sudden flare of heat in Bryce’s eyes, something protective and angry, and a ripple of tension went through him. He pushed himself up on one arm, cupping Zac’s cheek in the other hand and kissing Zac fiercely.

Oh. Zac opened up to the kiss. Bryce was so easy-going, it was easy to forget that he could get riled up. Zac was always startled by Bryce’s protective streak, even if it was pretty consistent. Knowing that Bryce would get in a fight over him was... *such a fucking turn-on.*

The thought left Zac moaning, leaning down over Bryce to kiss him back down onto the bed. Bryce’s inhibitions were completely gone now; he was so sexy and easy when he was sleepy, just like before. His hands were all over Zac, touching, groping, and stroking. He was kissing Zac back with unfettered heat, hungry and needy, arching up to get as much contact as he could, like he’d forgotten to be afraid.

“God, Bryce...” Zac rode Bryce down onto the bed, licking back into his mouth, fucking Bryce’s mouth with his tongue. Bryce had such big hands, and they felt so good on Zac’s skin. He arched into every touch and touched Bryce in turn.

Zac skimmed his hands over Bryce’s chest and found a nipple to toy with, to see if Bryce liked that, but it was hard to tell, because Bryce had gotten both hands on Zac’s ass just then and he was completely into it. He sucked Zac’s tongue and pushed his hips up to slide his dick against Zac’s body. The little noises he was making were unselfconscious and incredibly hot.

Zac moaned and arched back into Bryce’s hands. “Yeah,” he whispered. “God, that feels good.” He kissed away so he could kiss Bryce’s neck and down to Bryce’s collarbone. He wanted to taste Bryce’s skin, to feel it on his tongue.

“Fuck. *Zac.*” Bryce sounded lost and desperate as he let his head fall back to bare his neck for Zac. “I want you.” He kept touching, running his strong hands over Zac’s ass and thighs, like he needed this as badly as Zac did.

“What do you want?” Zac asked, licking and kissing his way back up the other side of Bryce’s neck. He slid one hand between them, down, to skim over Bryce’s dick. Fuck, that felt good. Bryce’s dick was thick and long and hot against his palm, and he curled his fingers lightly around it. He wanted to get his mouth on that so badly.

“Oh, *Christ*.” Bryce clenched Zac’s ass at the touch.

“Whatever you want, Bryce,” Zac promised.

“God. Zac. You. I don’t know.” Bryce’s eyes were wide. “I want you to feel good. I don’t know...”

Zac kissed Bryce on the mouth. Bryce was so irresistibly hot when he was turned on like that. “Anything you want, Bryce...” He stroked Bryce’s cock slowly, lightly, moaning softly at the feel of it sliding through his hand. “Whatever you want. I just want you.”

“Oh, God. Zac.” Bryce looked stunned. He was breathless and pushing up into Zac’s hand, and his voice was so unsteady when he finally spoke again. “I just want to see your face, whatever we do. I want to see you.”

Zac kissed Bryce again, twisting his wrist to roll his hand over the head of Bryce’s cock. “I’m right here. You can have anything. I’m serious.” There was so much trust and affection between them, even before this, that Zac couldn’t imagine not wanting to give Bryce everything he could.

“Just touch me.” Bryce’s dick left slickness on Zac’s palm. His hands moved again, dipping between Zac’s thighs and stroking up the sensitive inner skin, exploring where he hadn’t touched yet.

Zac kissed Bryce again, muffling his moans, and stroked Bryce’s cock in earnest. He shifted around over Bryce, so that their dicks were lined up, and stroked them together, smearing their pre-come down the shafts to ease the way.

Bryce groaned and moved with Zac, kissing him and touching him, his fingers fluttering against the heaviness of Zac’s balls. Then he pulled back a little and slid a hand between them, his fingertips sliding tentatively over the head of Zac’s dick.

“I want to touch you,” he said, almost inaudibly. “Can I touch you?” He was getting braver about asking; his voice wasn’t as shaky as it had been when he’d asked to kiss Zac.

“Yeah,” Zac breathed, shivering a little. “Yeah, please.” He moved his hand out of the way and knelt up so Bryce could reach between them, so they could both see what Bryce was doing. He wanted Bryce to touch him, but he hadn’t wanted to ask.

Bryce’s expression was intense and his touches were gentle as he explored Zac’s cock from tip to root. When he ran his fingers up the underside, pre-come beaded at the tip and dripped onto one of his fingers. Looking up at Zac, almost for permission, he brought his finger to his mouth to taste the bead of fluid caught on it.

Biting his lip, Zac watched Bryce avidly. God, Bryce was hot. Zac had always wanted to look before -- hell, he *had* looked before and then told himself he hadn’t, really -- but now he could

let himself admire how gorgeous Bryce was, how sexy. “Hot, Bryce,” he murmured. “You are really hot.”

“You taste good.” Bryce sounded surprised. He reached up to stroke Zac’s cheek and then kissed him with a moan. His other hand found Zac’s dick as they kissed and stroked tentatively.

Zac cupped the back of Bryce’s neck with one hand, bracing himself on that arm, and curled his other hand around Bryce’s cock. He kissed Bryce, slow and hot, and slid his hand down to cup Bryce’s balls, toying with them gently.

Bryce stopped again and nudged Zac’s hip. “Can I...” His eyes were wide and his breath caught. “Will you roll over? I just. I want to look at you.”

Zac smiled slowly and kissed Bryce again before he rolled off Bryce and onto his back. He was surprised, but pleased, and he stretched out so that his legs were spread and his hands were tucked behind his head. He was so hard, his dick was leaking pre-come onto his belly, and he took a slow breath to calm down a little.

“You’re beautiful,” Bryce said, once Zac was all spread out for him. “I never... you just really are.” He ran a hand over Zac’s belly. “Just look at you.” He bent and placed a soft, open kiss on one of Zac’s nipples, exploring it with his tongue.

“You, too, Bryce,” Zac murmured, almost purring with how good Bryce’s mouth felt on his skin. “The way you look, like this... you’re just amazing. Makes me want to touch you all over. I want, God, the things I want to do to you.”

“I didn’t know,” Bryce said softly. He moved to kiss up Zac’s side, kissing the waxed-bare hollow of Zac’s armpit and breathing deeply, then moving up to lavish kisses and bites up under Zac’s jaw. “I want you, too.”

Zac couldn’t help but shiver; his neck was so damn sensitive, every little kiss and bite felt like it had a line straight to his dick. He tilted his head to bare his neck and mumbled, “I want, fuck, Bryce, I want you. Your mouth feels so good. I want to do that, too. I like the way you sound when I kiss you. I want to know what you sound like when it’s not just your mouth or your neck I’m kissing.”

Bryce worshipped Zac’s neck with little bites and growls, rolling up to kneel so his hands could be all over Zac’s chest and thighs and hips. The way he lost his inhibitions was amazing. He might need soothing later, but right now, he was pure sex, kissing and biting down Zac’s chest. He tongued Zac’s navel and moved lower, then stopped. He looked up at Zac and, without taking his eyes off of him, licked the head of Zac’s dick, just a brush of the tip of his tongue.

Zac bit his lip to muffle his moan, but he knew there was no way Bryce didn’t hear it or feel the way he shivered all over. “Bryce...” Zac took a breath to try to keep his voice steady. “That feels good,” was all he could think to say.

Bryce watched him intently, then curled his fingers around the shaft and stroked. He ducked his head and licked the pre-come off the tip with a hot wash of his tongue, then moaned softly. There was a bit of fear in his eyes as he looked at Zac, but the rest of his expression was all desire, like he couldn't figure out which way to jump.

"It feels good, Bryce," Zac said again. All Bryce had to do was get past the bullshit he'd been taught. Fuck, it felt so good. "If you wanna turn around, I'll do it to you, too." He really wanted to get his mouth on Bryce's dick, now or after. "I bet you taste really good."

Bryce shook his head. "I wanna pay attention," he said. He looked down and drew his fingers up the shaft of Zac's dick. "I just..." He ducked his head to nuzzle Zac's belly, seeking reassurance as his nerve wavered, closing his eyes.

Zac dragged his hand out from under his head and reached out to stroke Bryce's hair. "It's okay. You don't have to do anything, Bryce. Nothing you don't wanna do. You can touch me wherever you want, though. You're not gonna do anything wrong." Keeping going was good.

Bryce curled up around him with his head on Zac's belly, clinging. "Why're you so good to me?" He wasn't looking at Zac; he was looking away, down at Zac's dick, and he touched it again, spreading pre-come over the head with one finger.

"Um. 'Cause you're my friend, and I like you." It was hard to talk normally when Bryce touched him like that, but Zac hoped Bryce understood that he meant what he was saying. "I trust you. You're not, like, trying to hurt me or anything. You're not doing anything wrong. And, you know, I *like* you. Like, a lot. So." It felt weird, saying that, admitting it. They were friends, and liking each other was just a normal part of that, but not the way Zac liked Bryce, not now. Maybe not before. Maybe he'd tried to ignore it because he hadn't been ready to be out and he had been so sure Bryce wouldn't want him the same way.

"I'd never hurt you." Bryce kissed Zac's belly. "Not if I could help it. Ever." His hand slid down the shaft of Zac's dick and cupped Zac's balls instead. Leaning forward, he explored the head of Zac's dick with his tongue, working his way up to taking it in his mouth and sucking gently.

"I kn-- Oh, God." Zac didn't know what he was expecting, but Bryce's hand on his balls and Bryce's mouth on his dick wasn't it, even with all signs pointing that way. "Bryce. Fuck. Don't stop." He caught his breath and finished his earlier thought. "I know. I know you wouldn't."

Bryce didn't let him down, either. It might have been his first time, but he probably got sucked off a lot because he wasn't lost as to what to do once he got going. He couldn't take Zac in all the way, so he stroked up the shaft with his hand. It was experimenting, but it was pretty determined, passionate experimenting. Zac should have expected it; Bryce never did anything halfway for someone he liked.

It was crazy good. Zac tried to keep petting Bryce's hair, to keep touching him. He didn't want Bryce to feel like Zac was using him. "So good, Bryce," he murmured, just barely managing to hold still through the most intense of the sensations. He wanted so much to let go and enjoy it,

but he had to keep it together. At least this way, he got to watch how much it was turning Bryce on. *Oh, Bryce.* Bryce was loving every second of it.

Bryce moved, but it was only to prop himself up on one elbow so he could lean over and take Zac in deeper. Little shivers ran through him, and he made desperate little noises as he obviously found pleasure in what he was doing. His hand on the shaft of Zac's dick and on his balls was gentle but firm, coaxing Zac to let go, whether he knew it or not.

Eventually, it got to be too much. Zac was going to come; he was already shuddering with the effort of not arching up into Bryce's mouth. "I'm gonna--" Zac's hand clenched in Bryce's hair and he dragged Bryce's head away, bringing his other hand down to close around Bryce's hand on his dick, urging Bryce to stroke him faster, tighter. "Fuck, *please.*"

Bryce startled, wide-eyed and uncertain, but obeyed, giving Zac the friction he needed to get off.

Now, Zac's hips moved, jerking, as he fucked Bryce's hand. God, he needed it. His back arched and he cried out, coming hard all over Bryce's hand and his own belly. He was still shuddering when he forced himself to sit up, to *move*, because he wanted -- *needed* -- to kiss Bryce. He used his hand in Bryce's hair to tug gently, urging Bryce up enough that Zac could kiss him on the mouth.

"Fuck," he murmured against Bryce's lips. "You are so fucking hot. Jesus, Bryce. So good." Then he was moaning again, angling his mouth against Bryce's and kissing him hungrily.

Bryce was slow to kiss back, suddenly awkward and unsteady. He let Zac kiss him before pulling away to fumble for some tissues by the bed. "Here. You should. You're all..." He pushed some tissues at Zac and wiped his hand off, looking pale and tight like he was about to cry.

Oh, no. "Bryce..." Zac reached out for him, brushing his fingertips over Bryce's cheek before cupping it gently. "Bryce, what's wrong? Did I hurt you? Should I have stopped? I'm sorry, Bryce."

"No. I'm sorry. I shouldn't..." Bryce shook his head and pulled away. "I just. I need some water." He got up and lurched for the bedroom door. Catching himself on the frame, he pawed the lock open so he could go naked down the hall to the bathroom.

"Shit." Zac scrambled up, hastily mopping off his belly with the tissues, and grabbed his boxers from the floor. *What did I do?* He tugged them on as he stumbled after Bryce. The bathroom door wasn't locked, so Zac just went right in after him without bothering to knock. "Bryce."

The intrusion interrupted Bryce rinsing his mouth with mouthwash. The cup of water he'd poured himself bounced into the sink and rattled around in the bottom of it. He grabbed a towel to cover himself, knocking another off the shelf onto the floor, and backed up until he hit the wall by the shower.

Zac closed the bathroom door behind him, and this time, he locked it. “Bryce. Is it... I’m sorry. I should’ve stopped. I just. You felt so good, you were, and I didn’t. And then I couldn’t stop, but I didn’t want to, like, come in your mouth and choke you or something. I’m sorry.” Fuck, please let him not have fucked this up too badly. Suddenly, Zac was way, way too sober, and he could see in bold detail every reason why what he’d just done -- starting with knocking on Bryce’s door -- had been a really bad idea.

There wasn’t much room in here; at least Bryce couldn’t get away from him. Bryce held the towel with his arms crossed over his chest, hugging himself, and he wouldn’t look at Zac. “I shouldn’t have... I just can’t...” He covered his face with his hands and slid down to sit on the floor, making a noise that sounded like he was trying not to cry.

Fuck. Oh, Bryce. You are so messed up. My Bryce. Zac slid down onto the floor beside Bryce and slipped an arm around his shoulders, trying to draw Bryce over against him. “I’m so sorry, Bryce. I didn’t mean to fuck this up for you.”

Bryce put his head on his knees and wrapped his arms around his shins, pulling himself up tight and small. “Just... just go, Zac. I can’t do this. I just...” His voice broke and his shoulders shook. “I think I can and it’s so good and then something happens and I *see* myself... I *see* what I am... and I just. God. I’m so disgusting and stupid and I don’t know how to do anything right. I’m such a fucking loser.” He wrapped an arm around his head to hide further, hand clenching in his own hair. His shoulders shook and Zac could hear his breath catching in his throat.

“Bryce...” Zac wasn’t going anywhere. First, he had to make sense of what Bryce was saying. “I’m not leaving. We don’t have to do this. You don’t have to do this. But I’m not leaving. You’re still my *friend*, Bryce.” He rubbed Bryce’s back, slow strokes, trying to soothe his own nerves as well. “You didn’t do anything wrong, Bryce. I promise. You were doing everything right. I’m sorry I screwed it up for you. You’re *not* stupid or disgusting or anything like that. You’re so beautiful, Bryce.”

“I’m sorry,” Bryce got out between ragged breaths. “I want to, and I can’t... I just wanted you to feel good. I wanted *you*. I wanted to be happy with you.” His hand in his hair was twisted painfully tightly, the other clenched his own arm with a white-knuckled grip. Even his toes tried to dig into the floor. “I *am* like that, like they always said, and I don’t even know how to do it right. You gotta know I don’t hate you. I’m the one who’s disgusting.”

“You’re not.” Zac tugged Bryce against him, tipping Bryce off balance to fall against his chest, and then he wrapped his arms around Bryce and held on tight. Zac was used to not talking, just *doing*. He wasn’t ready for this. It seemed like it should have worked, to just get Bryce through the first time and then Bryce would know it was okay. Maybe it was stopping Bryce that was the wrong thing, but it had seemed like -- it *was* -- the right thing to do. How was Zac supposed to figure it out when it was backwards?

“You’re not disgusting,” Zac insisted, trying to make things right. “God, you’re gorgeous, Bryce, and so *good*. You did everything right. You did. It felt so good, and you were, you seemed like

you liked it, and that was good, too. I liked it. The way you were so into it. I liked it too much, 'cause I was gonna come and... You're not disgusting, Bryce. You're not."

And somehow, even if it had seemed so good and right, it still ended with Zac trying to fix whatever he'd done wrong and Bryce trying not to cry and failing.

"I can't do it anymore. I can't feel like this. I can't." Bryce was curled up tight in Zac's arms, his whole body rigid with distress. "How am I supposed to not do this anymore when I want to be with you?"

"I don't know, Bryce. But I wanna help." Zac held on, kissing the top of Bryce's head. He'd struggled with being queer, but not like Bryce. Zac couldn't even start to understand what would cause this kind of pain. He could only guess, given that Bryce's dad didn't even want him in the same house as a gay guy, that this had tormented Bryce for years. Bryce must have been so scared, and it explained so much. "I'm here, and I'm not going away. No matter what."

Bryce slowly unraveled in Zac's arms until he was slumped against Zac's body, barely awake. His breath still caught in little hiccups that felt like sobs and made Zac feel lower than low. Bryce pulled himself up and wiped his face with the towel he was holding. "I'm sorry," he said again, his voice raw. "God, I'm such a fuckup, Zac."

"You're not." Zac cupped Bryce's face in one hand and turned Bryce to look at him. "You're not. I'm pretty sure we screwed this one up together, if anything." Zac felt horrible for pushing Bryce like he had. He'd thought he was taking a risk, showing up like he had, kissing Bryce, telling Bryce he wanted him. He just hadn't realized what the consequences could be. He wondered if he'd known somewhere deep down that Bryce wouldn't say no. "I'm sorry. Can I... Will you still let me come sleep with you? Just sleep." Zac had the sinking feeling that he'd worked things out too late.

Bryce nodded and swallowed hard. "I don't want to go to sleep alone," he admitted softly. "You really want to?"

"Yeah." Zac leaned in to rest his forehead against Bryce's. "I wanna be with you. Just. Close to you. You know?" Even if this was over, he wanted to take care of his Bryce.

"I know. Sometimes I wish I could come get in your bed," Bryce breathed. He was still unsteady and the confession made tears well up again, but he blinked them away.

"You can." Zac was surprised by Bryce's admission, by the idea that Bryce would want that at all. "I'm not gonna... I'm not gonna send you away, Bryce. I like being with you."

"I just like being near you." Bryce closed his eyes. "It's like I could sleep better there."

"You wanna come back to my room, then?" Zac offered tentatively. "Wherever you want, Bryce. I don't... I don't care. As long as I get to be there with you." *Please?* He ached with the idea of not getting to curl up with Bryce again.

“My room is...” Bryce pushed himself to sitting and then got up awkwardly, trying to get the towel around his waist as he stood. “I mean... you don’t mind. My room. Right?” He looked worriedly at Zac.

Zac smiled gently and shook his head as he stood up. “I don’t mind. Your room’s good.” He smiled a little more, trying to let Bryce know things would be okay. “You’ve got more pillows, too.”

“Okay.” Bryce was still shaky as he unlocked the bathroom door and led the way back to his room. There, he pulled his boxers on before shedding the towel, then climbed into bed.

Zac kept his boxers on and grabbed his T-shirt, too, yanking it on over his head before he came over to Bryce’s bed to wait for permission to crawl in with him. He didn’t want to push any more than he already had; he’d already done enough damage. At this rate, he was never drinking again.

Zac felt worse by the minute, as the pieces fell into place, all the way back to Perry coming out; he couldn’t imagine how conflicted Bryce must have been all that time, caught between his family and his friends, scared of his own feelings. Zac’s brain had just taken too long to get around the fact that this was *awful* for Bryce, that even being close could be hard.

“You can come in.” Bryce moved the covers aside for Zac. He didn’t even make a joke about written invitations or anything.

Zac slipped in and curled up facing Bryce. “Thanks for letting me stay.”

“Thanks for... just... you know.” Bryce looked heartbroken about it all. That was the downside to being friends with someone with big brown eyes and long lashes: they did sad so well. He raised a hand to pat tentatively at one of Zac’s arms, begging to be let in.

Zac didn’t want to be thanked. He’d made this mess, and he felt horrible for pushing Bryce like he had. He lifted one arm, hesitantly inviting Bryce to move closer.

Bryce wriggled closer, nuzzling up against Zac’s shoulder, seeking comfort, and finally put his head down on Zac’s chest. He looped one big arm around Zac’s waist and settled down as close as he could.

Zac wrapped his arms around Bryce and held him close. He stroked Bryce’s hair and kissed the top of his head. “Night, Bryce.”

“Night.” Bryce’s voice was still rough. But he closed his eyes and, surprisingly quickly, he was sound asleep. He clung to Zac all night, even through acting restless and distressed and didn’t wake.

Zac lay there for hours, staring at the ceiling. He should have known better. God, he was so stupid to get drunk and do that. Bryce just wanted to make him happy and be good. *Oh, Bryce.* Bryce tried so hard. Zac kissed his silky curls.

Worse, Bryce wanted him, for real, and Zac had gone and screwed it up by putting Bryce in the position of having to turn him down or do something too soon. *Oh, Bryce.* He'd make it up to Bryce somehow, though he knew this wasn't ever going to happen again. He wouldn't let it, Zac promised himself. It hurt Bryce too much for Zac to fuck up.

Bryce woke first, finding himself achy all over. It took him a minute to realize that it was probably from clinging to Zac all night. Zac was still passed out, one arm around Bryce's shoulders, so it couldn't have been too bad for Zac to have to sleep next to him.

But last night. Bryce's throat and stomach clenched. *God.* How could he have done that to Zac? He slowly wriggled loose and picked up the towel from last night and some jeans, then he slipped away to take a hot shower.

He scrubbed himself from head to toe and tried not to cry. *I'm disgusting.* It wasn't the sucking Zac off, and it wasn't even the liking it that he hated himself for this morning: freaking out after and *crying* like a fucking pussy, *again*, was beyond the pale. Making Zac feel bad for something that wasn't his fault was a million times worse than crying, too. He turned the shower over to cold and stood in the icy water until the hot clench inside that felt like tears wasn't so strong.

How was he supposed to tell Zac he just wasn't brave enough to do this without hurting Zac's feelings again and again? *It's not you; it's me.* Bryce got out of the shower, toweled off a little, and pulled on his jeans. He couldn't just ask Zac to keep taking chances because he wanted to try out being queer.

Bryce knew it wasn't just wanting to try it out. He knew it was more like he wanted to stop pretending it wasn't true. He already knew, inside. All he wanted now was to go ask Zac to forgive him, but he didn't deserve it. He couldn't go back to his room. Downstairs, he put the coffee maker on and then went to the basement to take his frustration and pain out on the punching bag down there, bare knuckles and all.

Punching the bag, punishing himself as much as it, made him feel so much better. He lost himself in it, throwing one punch after another, the rhythm almost as soothing as the pain.

"Bryce?" Zac's tentative voice broke into his trance.

Bryce threw one more vicious punch at the bag. He could have been a hell of a boxer if he'd really had any heart for hitting people. Another way he'd never lived up to his potential. He caught the bag on the return and turned toward Zac, even though it hurt in his chest to make himself meet Zac's eyes. Zac looked really rough.

“Hey.”

“Hey. I, um.” Zac hefted the mugs. “I brought coffee.” Zac was staring at Bryce’s hands and, for a moment, Bryce thought Zac couldn’t even look at him for very long. Then Bryce realized that his hands were bashed to hell from the punching bag. He couldn’t help feeling like he deserved it.

“Thanks.” He reached out and took the cup Zac offered. That he didn’t deserve. Not with the way he’d made Zac feel so lousy.

Bryce wanted to kiss the uncertainty off Zac’s face, wanted to crawl back into bed with him and kiss and touch until they came like they had the first night. The urge made him swallow hard, because it was painful and unexpected, and because he knew he couldn’t do that ever again. He couldn’t take his chances with freaking out like that and hurting Zac, or anyone for that matter.

“I’m sorry,” Zac said, biting his lip as soon as the words were out. “I’m sorry I showed up like that, last night. I knew you weren’t.. I knew better. I’m sorry that I pushed you into that. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

Oh. Bryce had to turn away and take a drink of coffee to hide the way tears welled up in his eyes. Damn it, Zac needed to stop being so *nice*. “It’s not your fault.” He shrugged and wandered over to nudge a dumbbell lying near the weight bench, herding it back where it belonged with one foot. “It’s my problem.”

“It’s mine if I’m the one causing it,” Zac said quietly, staring down at his coffee like it might have the answers to their problems.

“You didn’t..” Bryce put his coffee down on the bench and picked the weight up to put it back in the rack. His hands hurt. His chest hurt.

“I woke you up while I was drunk and stupid, and started kissing you,” Zac pointed out. He didn’t look up. He looked like he was hurting worse than Bryce. “And I told you I wanted more than that. I’m pretty sure that’s the definition of causing the problem.”

“I could have said no.” Bryce sat down on the weight bench and picked up his coffee. God, Zac looked so sad. “I didn’t. My fault, okay? Just. Don’t worry about it. I’m sorry I fucked it up.” He really was so sorry. He hadn’t meant to act horribly. Zac had just been trying to take care of him and Bryce had fucked it up.

Zac came over and sat down on the floor in front of Bryce. “Bryce...” He took a drink of his coffee, then stared at it again. Finally, he looked up at Bryce with huge, sad eyes. “I like you. Like, *like* you, like you. But you’re my friend, too. My best friend. And last night, I kinda forgot which one was more important to me. Being drunk will do that, I guess. But it was stupid. And I still don’t think you did anything wrong, except maybe not telling me I was being a jackass and kicking me out of your room when I started hitting on you.”

Bryce breathed, feeling his chest tight against his inhalation. "I didn't want to kick you out," he said softly. Now it was his turn to look away. "I wanted to make you happy. God, I sound like a fucking *girl*." He rubbed his face with his hand. "You're my best friend, too, Zac. And I don't want to push you away; I want us to stay friends."

Zac slid forward so he could rest his forehead against Bryce's knee. "I'm not going to stop being your friend if you tell me not to kiss you, Bryce. Hell, I'm probably not even going to stop wanting to kiss you if you tell me not to kiss you. But it's not... You can always say no. I mean, of course you can, but you can say no and I'm not gonna be mad or anything. That's all. You... Well, you make me happy just being my friend."

"I just..." Bryce put his coffee down, afraid he was going to spill it. "I can't do it, Zac. I can't." He put his face in his hands, elbows on his knees. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry about last night." He felt mortally humiliated, beaten by his own mind.

Zac didn't look up. He just nodded against Bryce's knee. "Okay. You don't have to be sorry."

"I didn't want them to win." The way his voice broke made it worse. Bryce swallowed hard and sat up straight, pulling his hands away from his face. He had to be tougher than this. "I'm just not... I can't."

He wanted it. In his mind, he could see what Zac would look like under him on the weight bench, dark skin glowing against the black leather, his dick hard, his muscles taut, and it turned him on. It would be so good to make someone he cared about feel like that. But he couldn't. Something would happen and then he'd be throwing up bile and coffee and wanting to peel off his own skin and wash under it.

"It can't be about them, Bryce." Zac lifted his head to look up at Bryce. His expression was sad, hurt. "If you don't want it, then you don't. If you do, then... Then it's about what you're ready for, not what you're trying to prove." Zac's mouth twisted unhappily.

"Don't look like that." All Bryce's own concerns were washed away when he looked at Zac. He couldn't take it anymore. "Please. Zac. I didn't mean to make you sad. That's what I don't want to do." He was a shitty friend. He'd gotten Zac to do all these *things* with him and then freaked out and hurt Zac's feelings and made him feel bad about it all. "I do want it. I wouldn't ever use you to make a point, Zac. Never." His chest hurt and he leaned over to stroke Zac's cheek with one hand; just touching Zac made everything hurt less. "I trusted you."

Zac put his coffee aside. "I know you did. I'm sorry I didn't do a very good job of living up to it." He leaned into the touches and looked up at Bryce with those beautiful, clear hazel eyes. "I don't want to screw this up for you. Figuring this stuff out, there's no rush."

It was so hard to remember that when Zac was in his arms. That was the problem. Bryce hadn't been ready to *want* Zac so damn much, either time. "I don't want to make you feel bad, Zac. Last night... I don't want to do that again." Bryce stroked Zac's cheek, feeling soft skin and fine stubble. "I don't want to do that to you. It's wrong."

He wanted to kiss Zac so badly right now. It would feel so good to lose all the hurt in touching and kissing and... anything more. Everything more. Maybe a hot shower. Zac looked good when he was all sleek and... God, how the hell was Bryce ever going to negotiate a locker room again?

Zac shook his head, and then nodded, like he wasn't sure what the right answer was. "You don't have to do anything you don't want, Bryce."

"I mean freaking out... not... not the other." The words stumbled out, Bryce's honesty running away with his tongue before his brain could think twice. Bryce felt his cheeks burn so hot he was afraid his hair was going to catch fire.

"Oh." Zac bit his lip and looked up at Bryce through his lashes. "Okay. I, um. I mean, I understand why you freaked out, and it's okay. But. I'm glad you didn't mean the other."

"It's not okay." Bryce wanted to bang his head on something. He got up and went to the punching bag, hauling off and popping it a good one. "You shouldn't have to put up with that shit." He punched it with his left, imagining catching one of his brothers in the gut with it. Josh. Fucker.

"Bryce." Zac scrambled up to his feet and stood behind the bag to hold it. He peered around it, and said, "You can't expect to be okay with all of it all at once, Bryce. It's not that easy. It wasn't that easy for me, and I didn't have..." Zac didn't have Bryce's dad and his brothers just waiting for him to 'fail' by admitting he was gay like his uncle.

"I hate them." Bryce hit the bag again, hard, punctuating his words with one punch after another. "So much. I never would have even thought about it except they never. Ever. Shut. Up. About. It. Fucking. Bastards." He was breathing hard, trying not to cry.

The punches, the slaps, the mockery -- it never ended. It wasn't just at him. It never ended for anyone. For him, it was just being a 'fag.' There was a target on everyone's back, but it never seemed to hurt anyone the way it hurt him. Everyone else just got tougher, and he broke down. When he stopped hitting the bag, his hands were killing him.

"Bryce..." Zac let go of the bag and came around to stand in front of Bryce. "Christ." Carefully, he lifted one of Bryce's hands; the skin over the knuckles was broken and bloody. "C'mon. We gotta get you some Band-Aids or something."

"I'm fine. It feels better like this." Bryce ran his palm over his sweaty forehead and looked down at Zac, not trying to hide his feelings now. "I'm *so* sorry, Zac." Poor Zac, who was only good to him, having to put up with this shit. He wanted to do something to make it better. "I'm sorry." He reached out and touched Zac's pretty mouth with his fingertips, instead of kissing it. "I don't want you to feel bad; it's not your fault or your problem. Promise me."

“I can’t.” Zac shook his head just a little, not enough to displace Bryce’s fingers, not until he spoke again. “You’re... I’m not going to promise that I won’t worry about you, Bryce. I’d be lying.”

“I didn’t mean to get you into my mess,” Bryce said sadly. He wanted to kiss Zac so much right now. “I just wanted to kiss you. You... you looked so happy right then. I just wanted to know what it was like to kiss you. It was so good.” He traced Zac’s lower lip with a fingertip. Zac had a beautiful mouth. Bryce had never failed to see that. If there was ever a man he could have understood wanting to kiss, back when he’d first had to deal with Perry and everything, it was Zac.

“I was worried about you before you kissed me,” Zac said. “Now I just know why. But, Bryce... I’m glad you kissed me.”

“So am I.” Bryce didn’t want to feel like he had last night ever again; it had been horrible and humiliating. He never wanted to do that to Zac again, either. But right up to then, he’d been wildly turned on and he’d felt so *close* to Zac, so *right*. “I just don’t want to fuck up again, Zac.”

“It’s okay, Bryce. We’ll deal with it, if anything happens, if we screw up.” Zac raised one hand to touch Bryce’s cheek. “We, Bryce. If anything happens, it’s because both of us did it. Not just you.”

We. Bryce’s breath caught. He didn’t deserve Zac. *We*. He didn’t have anything he could say to that, so he leaned in and kissed Zac on the cheek, cupping Zac’s other cheek in an aching hand. He didn’t pull away, either, nuzzling back to breathe in the smell of Zac’s skin. Zac’s arms slid around him, holding him close.

Zac gave such good hugs, warm and comforting. Zac always hugged like he meant it. Bryce hid his face in the curve of Zac’s neck, trying to get close, sliding his other hand into the small of Zac’s back. Their bodies felt so good together. Bryce kissed the curve of Zac’s neck tenderly, trying to tell Zac he wasn’t mad about last night.

Zac shivered a little, then took a deep breath and said, quietly, “You’re gonna be okay, Bryce. We’re gonna be okay.”

Bryce nodded and closed his eyes, swallowing hard. “I want us to be okay, Zac.”

Zac smelled good, still warm and sleepy and sexy. God. Bryce was always fond of that warm scent; now his body was learning that it meant sex and it was turning him on.

“Good.” Zac slid one hand up into Bryce’s hair, petting him gently. “Good. Then we will be.” Zac sounded so sure, so certain.

Bryce sighed and let the tension go out of him. He didn’t want to give up on them... He hadn’t even known there was a ‘them,’ but apparently there was now. “Are you okay?” He pulled back to look at Zac closely, frowning.

“I’m okay.” Zac was still tight around the eyes, but he didn’t look nearly so sad or hurt anymore.

“You sure?” Bryce was pretty good at reading his friend. He stroked Zac’s cheek with his fingertips. “I mean... tell me, Zac?”

Zac smiled wryly. “Hangover.”

“Dork.” Bryce rolled his eyes at Zac, then he kissed him on the forehead. “Go back to bed. I’ll bring you breakfast, if you want it.” That would be nice, to do something good for Zac. He’d manage, before his hands stiffened up too much.

“Only if you promise to do something about your hands.” Zac raised his eyebrows expectantly.

“I will.” Bryce stroked Zac’s head. “Go on. You look like shit.” Actually, Zac looked incredibly kissable, but Bryce was resisting. They needed to talk about things like that first.

Zac rolled his eyes, laughing quietly. He looked pleased, though, maybe because of the petting. “Thanks. That’s exactly what I like to hear from the guy I’m flirting with.” He smiled at Bryce. “I’ll see you upstairs.”

Upstairs, Zac glanced at Bryce’s door, but headed for his own room, instead. He stripped off his smoke-and-beer-scented jeans and T-shirt, tossed them toward the hamper, and crawled into bed. His sheets and covers were cool on his warm skin. It felt good.

He watched the door, waiting for Bryce. He hoped Bryce was okay. Bryce had seemed okay when Zac left him in the basement, but he knew it might not take much to ruin that. He wanted Bryce to be okay, not only because Zac felt responsible for what had freaked him out in the first place, but also because Bryce was Zac’s friend. And because he wanted so badly for Bryce to be more than that, too. All this time, he’d never even thought about it being possible, and now he couldn’t stop.

Bryce was up about fifteen minutes later. Peeking into Zac’s room, he looked a little surprised. “There you are.”

Bryce had taped up his fingers, as promised. He was still bare, though, except for the tape and his worn jeans that hung low on his hips, so low that he probably wasn’t wearing anything under them. God, Bryce looked good. Zac tried to remind his body and his head that licking the line of skin where it disappeared into Bryce’s jeans was a bad idea.

“How’s your head now?” Bryce asked. He’d found a tray for their breakfast somewhere, probably left over from some party when they’d thought it was necessary to have one. He was even breaking his own rules and having waffles with butter and syrup and more coffee with Zac. He came over to the bed with the tray.

“It’s... ah, it’s better. I took aspirin a while ago. I think it’s kicking in.” Zac wriggled back in bed so there was room for Bryce to sit.

Bryce put the tray down beside Zac and sat down by Zac’s feet, tucking one leg up under him and tugging his jeans lower in the process. “Good. You looked really rough earlier.” He rubbed Zac’s knee with one hand. Speaking of rough, his hands still looked chewed to pieces, but he didn’t seem to care. “Eat some breakfast. I’m sorry if I woke you up this morning.”

“You didn’t.” Zac sat up so he could pick up a fork. “I kinda wish you had. Just so, you know, maybe we coulda talked about shit before you beat your hands all to hell.” He bit his lip and poked at a waffle, feeling nervous all over again.

“Eat your breakfast,” Bryce chided, taking a bite of his. “Those waffles didn’t get from the freezer to the toaster by themselves, you know.” He was still managing to use his utensils pretty well. “My hands are okay. Maybe...” He ate another piece of waffle. “Maybe we could talk after breakfast. If you wanted. You know.” He shrugged a bare shoulder.

Zac nodded. That sounded... well, it sounded terrifying, but it sounded good, too. He wanted to talk to Bryce, to figure some of this stuff out. “Okay.” He cut away a bite of waffle and ate it. He was hungrier than he’d realized and ended up finishing his waffles very quickly. He groaned contentedly and sat back with his coffee mug cradled in his hands, watching Bryce eat.

Bryce ate precisely and neatly, not wolfing his food down the way Zac had. He was slimmer than he had been last year; it was probably because he was staying away from the alcohol a little. When they were done, Bryce got up and took the tray with their plates over to the desk and came back with his mug in his hand.

“So.” He looked shy, and his cheeks got red. “What did you want to talk about?” He sat down half-facing Zac with one leg tucked up on the bed, eyes on his coffee, biting his lip.

“Um.” Zac stretched out one leg and tapped Bryce’s knee with his bare foot, nervously trying to get Bryce’s attention. “I wanted... I like you, Bryce. I know I said that last night. It wasn’t just ‘cause I was drunk. I like you a lot.” His stomach was tying itself in knots around the waffles and he could feel the heat in his cheeks spreading down his neck to warm his chest as well.

Bryce looked at him from under his lashes. His fingers kept twisting the cuff of his jeans. He was still blushing pretty deeply, too. “Okay,” he said tentatively, nodding.

“I mean. No pressure. You don’t hafta...” Zac shrugged and looked down at his coffee again. Admitting that he liked Bryce like that was harder than he’d thought. He’d slept around with guys, had a sort of friends-with-benefits thing with Perry, but he’d never really *liked* a guy like this, except for little crushes. Nothing that could mean anything. “I just thought you should probably know that, like, you don’t have to wonder if I want you around or anything. ‘Cause the answer’s yes.”

Bryce put his coffee down on the bedside table. “So, more than friends?”

Glancing up, Zac didn’t miss the nervous expression on Bryce’s face. He shook his head. “Doesn’t have to be. I mean, how I feel? Yeah. But. That doesn’t mean you gotta do anything different. I just... thought you should know.”

“No. No. It’s... it’s good.” Bryce bit his lip, then moved, leaning over to catch Zac’s mouth with his own. His kiss was awkward and sudden, but full of meaning.

Oh. Zac couldn’t help but smile against Bryce’s mouth, and then he kissed Bryce back, sweetly and softly. *Good.*

“I like you, too.” Bryce sounded so insecure. He touched the back of one of Zac’s hands, running his fingers over Zac’s. “I mean. A lot.” His cheeks were still dark red. “It feels nice when you’re around. It always has. And...” He swallowed hard and shrugged, looking down at their hands. “I never thought of... doing things... before. But I do now. Just. Only with you.” He looked at Zac now, looking a bit frightened by the admission. “So far.”

Zac put his coffee on the table by Bryce’s and leaned forward to kiss Bryce again, softly, on the corner of his mouth. “I don’t, like, date guys. I mean, I haven’t. Just girls,” he admitted. “I only really ever just had sex with guys. But I want. I mean...” He looked at Bryce helplessly. He was supposed to be the one who knew what was going on, but he was just as nervous as Bryce, in some ways. “I wanna be with you.”

“Oh.” The word was soft and shocked. “I. Really?” Bryce looked at Zac obliquely, blushing all over again. “You and me?”

“If. Um.” Zac bit his lip and nodded. If he spoke out loud, he was pretty sure his voice would crack, given how hard he was blushing.

“Yeah. I think...” Bryce ran his fingers over the back of Zac’s hand, blushing just as fiercely. “Maybe if we had some kind of arrangement, it would be good. I mean... I don’t want to wreck being friends, either, Zac. I don’t want to have some stupid breakup and not have my best friend anymore.” His eyes were dark and sad and frightened when he admitted, “But I want you. A lot. A lot of the time. It kind of sucks, except that it doesn’t.”

“Yeah.” Zac nodded. He didn’t want to lose his best friend either. When things were good with them, they were amazing, whether it was video games or sex. “I think. I think we could figure something out.”

“You’re more important than some girlfriend.” Bryce twined his fingers with Zac’s. “Or some boyfriend.” He had to swallow hard after saying that. “But I wanna be with you, Zac.” His voice wavered. “It’s like the whole world gets more *right* when we’re together.”

“Me, too,” Zac admitted, squeezing Bryce’s fingers gently. So gently. He didn’t want to hurt Bryce’s hands any more than they were already hurt. “We don’t hafta tell people, or anything. I know you can’t really... But as long as we know, then, maybe it’d be good?”

“Yeah. And then, I mean... if we change things, no one knows but us, right? Even... even after last night and everything, the only person I wanted to be with when I was all fucked up was you. You sure you want me all fucked up?” Bryce bit his lip, looking worried.

Zac smiled. That, he had an answer for. “I’m sure I want you. All fucked up or not.”

Bryce leaned over and kissed him, very tentatively, just like the first time. “Guess that means you got me, then,” he murmured as he hid his face in the curve of Zac’s neck. His cheeks were hot and his breath was soft on Zac’s skin.

Zac wrapped his arms around Bryce and petted his hair. The embrace was feeling familiar, now; they’d been like this so often lately. He hadn’t really expected Bryce to say yes, especially after last night. He hadn’t expected any of it, but at least they were still together.

“I trust you,” Bryce said, shifting to be closer. “*So* much. It’s so good. And... you know... someday. I wanna tell people, Zac,” he mumbled shyly. “If it’s okay with you. If there’s something to tell by then.” He cuddled up against Zac with a slow sigh.

“I...” Zac smiled and snuggled Bryce against him, kissing the top of his head. *Oh, Bryce.* There was a reason they’d been best friends, and this was most of it. Bryce was just so good and honest and sweet. “I think I’d like that. When we can. Someday.”

Bryce tugged Zac’s covers up over them. “You gotta be anywhere today?” He sounded surprised but okay. It was probably a major shock for him to find himself with a boyfriend. A shock for both of them, really.

“Nah, not today.” Zac had homework to do, eventually. Swim practice and a team meeting for a class project tomorrow, but nothing today. He curled up with Bryce and nuzzled against his cheek. “You?”

“Paper to write, but too tired.” Bryce nuzzled closer. “Slept like shit.”

Zac’s fault. He kissed Bryce’s cheek. “Sleep, then. You can write it later.”

Bryce nodded, then turned his head, yawning against Zac’s chest. “I can’t...” He wriggled to undo his jeans. “Is it okay...”

“Yeah.” Zac swallowed hard and tried to think about things like term papers and his grandmother and Coach Sullivan’s face when he saw Bryce’s hands. Not the fact that Bryce was stripping off his jeans.

Bryce wriggled out of them and then curled up against Zac shamelessly, sighing with relief and draping an arm over Zac's chest. "Can't sleep with pants on," he murmured; it was something he'd complained about since freshman year. Zac had been right; Bryce didn't have anything under the jeans except for his sleek skin and gorgeous dick.

Zac's boxers weren't doing anything to hide that he was getting hard. He hoped Bryce would just ignore it. He didn't want Bryce to feel like he was betraying all the trust Bryce was showing him now, being naked with him and touching him after last night. "Better now?"

Bryce's eyes were closed and, thankfully, he wasn't touching anywhere near Zac's boxers. He nodded and then pressed a sleepy kiss to Zac's chest. Worn out all over again, he fell asleep fast, all snuggly and clingy like before. Zac liked it, even if he didn't like the reason for it. Maybe Bryce would still do it after they were done upsetting each other and having awkward conversations.

This time, Zac managed to fall asleep pretty fast, too. Bryce was warm and heavy, a comforting weight that reminded Zac that everything was turning out okay, even after all the upset. Maybe they'd be okay.

Chapter Four

Well. So much for a ‘house viewing’ of a major swim meet that had been recorded so the four housemates could watch it together. That had been the plan. Instead, Zac and Bryce were left looking at each other from opposite ends of the couch, abandoned by their housemates. Last year, this had been ‘family time,’ and everyone would have been crowded onto the listing leather sofa. Apparently, now it was study time for Kaede and Steve.

“Epic fail, dude.” Bryce slumped in his corner of the sofa and picked at his pizza. He’d been missing Perry, and the way Kaede and Steve kept bailing on them all the time was starting to fuck him off, honestly. He poked the ‘play’ button on the remote and the 400-meter freestyle semifinals started up again. “We might as well watch it,” he said glumly.

They’d been here long enough to order a pizza and watch it cool after it had arrived at the house, and Steve hadn’t done anything but yell down to save him a piece. Kaede wasn’t even back from Shelly’s. Studying with Shelly. *Right.*

“More room on the couch, now,” Zac pointed out, stretching his legs out across the cushions to prod Bryce’s side with his toes. “And more pizza for us.”

Bryce got a piece of pizza from the box and leaned over to put it on Zac’s plate. Then, without any warning other than a quick glance at the stairs, he leaned a little further and kissed Zac on the mouth. It wasn’t a very chaste kiss. It was definitely a not-thinking-about-pizza kiss, and it surprised Bryce how much he wasn’t thinking about pizza underneath everything else.

Zac hesitated for just a split second, and then he was kissing Bryce back, tilting his head and licking at Bryce’s lips. Seemed like Zac wasn’t thinking about pizza anymore, either.

The kiss went on a little longer than Bryce intended, but then he pulled back, flushed. He bit his lip, looking at Zac, and thought about how much more he wanted to do. It sucked that they weren’t out, because right now, he wanted to go upstairs with Zac and kiss some more. And things. God, and here he was, thinking about being ‘out’ to his friends about his boyfriend. Bryce’s brain hurt some days. He still didn’t know how he’d gotten himself in this mess and didn’t know why he was so damn set on staying in it, but he was.

“Are you...” Bryce made himself settle back in his corner, still wishing he could be eating Zac up instead of pizza. “This weekend. Could we...” He really wanted Zac. He could keep it out of his head most of the time, but now just one kiss had his dick swelling in his jeans.

“Yeah.” Zac didn’t even know what Bryce was going to suggest, and already he was agreeing. “Um. Could we what?” He was looking at Bryce like maybe he was thinking the same things, that he wanted more kisses, too.

“Do something.” Bryce shifted a little and told his dick to shut up and wait until the weekend. “I don’t know.” He blushed and hated himself for it. *Damn it.* “Um, we could go shoot some pool or something.” They were kind of boyfriends now. Shouldn’t they be doing date-things? “Then,

um.” Bryce’s cheeks felt hotter. “If Steve and Kaede aren’t here, we could, uh, try again, you know.” He bit his lip and looked at Zac from under his lashes. “Like last weekend, only with less of me freaking out. I hope.” Zac wasn’t going to bring it up, not after last weekend, so Bryce figured he was going to have to do it.

Zac looked kind of surprised, but it was the sort of surprised Zac usually looked after winning a race, or something like that. The happy kind of surprised. “I’d, um. I’d like that. A lot. Friday night, maybe? After practice? I think Steve said he’s gotta stay late for extra laps with McGill all week, and he’s probably heading to see Lorna after. Or Laura. That girl from the synchro team. And I know Kaede’s got a date with Shelly, so he won’t be around.” Kaede and Shelly usually went back to her place, because she had an apartment all to herself on the other side of the student ghetto.

Oh, thank God. Bryce could breathe again. “Yeah. Friday’s good.” Now he was trying not to grin like an idiot. No one was coming down the stairs; he’d have heard them, even over the TV. He leaned over to kiss Zac again, realizing now how much he’d missed doing it. Everything was really normal the rest of the time; he had his best friend back and he didn’t hate himself like he thought he would. It was really hard to hate himself when it meant hating Zac, too, at least when he had a chance to reason with himself.

Zac put his pizza down on the table and met Bryce halfway, kissing him with a tiny, happy sound. *Oh.* That was the best noise. Zac rested one hand on Bryce’s thigh, not sliding higher or anything suggestive. Just a touch.

Bryce cupped Zac’s cheek in his hand and kissed him deeper, but kept it tender and slow. When he pulled away, it was reluctantly. Friday was really good. He couldn’t help smiling as he settled back into the arm of the couch and slid his legs up beside Zac’s. He petted the top of Zac’s foot. They could touch that much. They had each other. It wasn’t so bad at all.

Friday night came quickly -- though not quite quickly enough for Zac’s liking. He brought a change of clothes with him to practice, so he could get ready. For his date. With Bryce. He cleaned up in the locker room showers while Bryce was still talking to the coach about something, and then got dressed. He’d brought his favorite jeans, the ones that made his ass look really good, and a snug, mossy green T-shirt. By the time Bryce came into the locker room, Zac was already tying up his shoes. He looked up, flushing a little, embarrassed to be so eager for their date.

Bryce looked pleased at the way Zac was dressed, though, like he knew it was for him. He shucked his swimsuit and grabbed a towel, letting Zac get a good, long look at him naked. It wasn’t any different from how things were rest of the time. There were naked guys all around them. Bryce grabbed his bag of toiletries and padded off to the showers, letting Zac get another good look at his curvy ass.

Zac hopped up on the counter to sit and wait for Bryce. He hoped it wasn't too obvious that he'd positioned himself so he could watch Bryce showering. Everybody knew he was queer now, and he didn't want anybody thinking it changed anything about how he looked at his teammates.

But, God, Bryce was gorgeous. Broad and tall. Bryce had the best ass, too. Zac wanted to walk over there and lick the trails of water sliding over Bryce's skin. That kind of thinking wasn't going to help him stand up without making a fool of himself, though.

"You got a date?"

Zac dragged his gaze from Bryce's ass to see Kaede grinning at him. "Uh." What the fuck was he supposed to say to that?

Kaede laughed. "Dude. I know those jeans, man. Those are totally your 'I'm getting laid' jeans."

"Naw, man." Zac shook his head and hoped Kaede would believe him when he said, "Me and Bryce're just going out to shoot some pool. My other jeans're all dirty." There was a mound of laundry roughly the size of Everest in the basement, so it was a believable claim.

Kaede nodded sympathetically. "Yeah, man. I get you." He glanced over his shoulder, looking in the direction of the lockers, where Bryce was getting dressed. "You guys have fun. I gotta go meet Shelly. Later!" He gave a little wave and headed out.

Zac turned his attention back to Bryce. Bryce was wearing this faded red T-shirt that was just clingy enough for Zac to see how ripped he was getting, a pair of comfortable jeans that were almost too loose, but hung on his hips just right, and his boots that made him even taller. Just jeans. Nothing underneath.

Dressed, the fact that Bryce was big compared to other guys on the team really showed. And so hot, right under Zac's nose all this time. He'd been working out hard and making great swim times all year. Maybe Zac was good for him. Zac could hope.

Bryce shrugged into his leather varsity jacket, shouldered his bag, and wandered over to Zac. His hair was still wet, loopy curls, but it would dry and be all adorable and unruly. "Ready to go?" he asked, like nothing was up at all.

"Yeah. Let's go." Zac slipped down off the counter and grabbed his own jacket and bag. A date. With Bryce. On the list of things he wouldn't have expected to be doing this year, that was way up at the top. It was a very good surprise, though. "Where're you parked? Over in the orange lot by the field house?"

"Yeah. Less likely to have some asshat trying to make off with my damn BMW symbol like when I park on the street." Bryce rolled his eyes. "Fucking freshmen, man. Dad could have given me a less popular car and I'd have been fine with it. I wanted a truck." He held the locker door for Zac to go ahead of him.

Zac slipped past and juggled his bag to pull on his varsity jacket. “The big back seat’s gotta be nice, though,” he pointed out. Not like he was wondering if they’d get to use that later, or anything. Not at all.

“It mostly just holds my stuff.” Bryce took Zac’s bag without missing a beat. “The chicks I date lately are way too classy to do it the back seat.” He gave Zac a very, very sad and hopeful look.

“Maybe you’ll get lucky tonight.” Zac grinned and, once he had his jacket on, reached out to take his bag back so he could sling it over his shoulder.

Bryce wasn’t giving it back. He gave Zac a lofty look and, as they’d stepped out onto the back pathway to the orange lot, he explained, “I’m trying to be chivalrous, dude. You know. For the getting lucky and all.” There was a little smile tugging the corner of his mouth.

Zac laughed and shook his head. “I’m pretty sure you don’t need to work that hard at it.” It was nice, though, and Zac let him carry the bag the rest of the way to his car.

Bryce hit the remote to unlock the doors so Zac could get in, then tossed their stuff in the trunk. At this hour, at the end of campus away from the main buildings and residences, it was pretty empty and quiet. Bryce slid into the driver’s seat and looked over at Zac. “Hi.” His voice was really soft.

“Hey.” Zac smiled at him and reached over to lace his fingers with Bryce’s. “You look really good.”

Bryce flushed at that. “Thanks. So do you. You usually do.” He leaned over and kissed Zac on the mouth, just a gentle kiss at the corner, and squeezed Zac’s hand. “Ready for me to kick your ass at pool?” His grin was there, but there was softness in his eyes.

It was the first time Bryce had kissed him outside the swim house. Zac couldn’t help his smile and the warmth in his cheeks, but then he laughed and shook his head. “No way, man, but I’m ready to kick *your* ass at pool.”

“You’ll be too busy *watching* my fine ass to win at pool,” Bryce said. “I know your type.”

Zac groaned softly and turned his head to catch Bryce’s mouth in a kiss. “You do have a very, very fine ass,” he murmured, reluctantly drawing away from Bryce’s mouth. Bryce had an ass that made Zac want to do things that were probably illegal in twenty states and would get him arrested for doing them in a car even if they weren’t.

“You keep that in mind before you decide to try and beat me at pool, dude.” Bryce pulled away to start the car and gave Zac a wicked grin. Some things did *not* change, one of which was that Bryce played dirty pool. Apparently, *very* dirty pool.

The evening went really well, as far as Zac was concerned. Bryce seemed to be having a great time. While Zac lost every single game of pool they played, he was having a good time, too.

Every time Bryce took a drink of beer, Zac's dick twitched in his jeans as he remembered Bryce sucking him off. Every time Bryce bent over to take a shot, Zac's dick got harder as he was reminded all over again that there was nothing under Bryce's jeans. *Fuck*.

Bryce seemed happy as a clam the whole time, seemingly unaffected by Zac's afflictions. He was his old self, all the way through. It was kind of surprising and good to see at once. He hassled Zac something fierce over losing at pool and said next time they came, they were going to have to play some betting games, because Zac would be cleaning toilets at the house for the rest of the *year*, the way he played. He was merciless and unflirtatious, unless you counted an affectionate headlock and noogie as flirtation. It was good, for some value of it, to have *Bryce* back.

"I wouldn't have lost if you'd worn something under those damn jeans," Zac protested. He'd waited until they got back to the car to say it, but it was true. Or, at least, he'd have stood a better chance of winning.

Bryce laughed at that, and then looked at Zac. The flicker across his face was a clear message that he hadn't been really sure Zac was serious about that until just that minute. His eyes widened and his expression softened and he reached over to stroke Zac's thigh before starting the car. "Let's go home," he said quietly.

"Yeah. Home sounds good." Zac really wanted to be somewhere he could kiss Bryce again. Even if kissing was all they did.

On the way home, Bryce reached over and took Zac's hand in his, winding their fingers together. Somehow, he managed to shift gears without really letting go, keeping contact all the way home.

"I had fun tonight," Zac murmured as Bryce pulled into the orange lot by the field house. It was even emptier out here now. "Thanks for suggesting it. It's been a while since we've been out to play pool." He leaned over to kiss the corner of Bryce's mouth. Bryce kissed Zac back, still chastely, on the lips.

"I thought, you know... we should do stuff together," Bryce said shyly. Even in the diffuse light of the streetlamps overhead, Zac could see Bryce blush. "I mean... after we talked last Saturday. And. You know. About being together. It seemed like we should. Because. We're still us, right? Just. More us."

"Yeah. We are." Zac smiled and squeezed Bryce's hand. "It was a good idea. We should do it again soon. Maybe we could go see that new sci-fi movie, the one with the teleporting and the dragons?" He was reasonably sure neither Steve nor Kaede wanted to see it.

"Yeah." Bryce grinned at him; they always loved the sci-fi and adventure and even horror movies that no one else wanted to go see. "We have to go see that one." His grin faded to a soft smile. "There's lots we could do. We're never bored." They weren't, even when they weren't doing anything at all. It was one of the things that made it so easy to stay friends for so long.

“I’ll figure out when it’s playing.” Zac leaned over and kissed Bryce again, then let go of his hand so he could get out of the car. “C’mon. Let’s go home.”

Bryce locked the car up and got their bags out of the trunk, then they headed for their little shared house on the edge of campus. It would have been nice, but unwise, to hold hands. Bryce let Zac unlock the door and dropped their bags as soon as Zac had locked the door behind them. The house was silent.

“Sounds like everybody’s out,” Zac said, turning around to face Bryce. He curled his fingers through one of Bryce’s belt loops, but he didn’t pull Bryce closer. He didn’t want to be the one to make the first move, here.

There was no hesitation. Bryce cupped Zac’s face in his hands and kissed him with a lot of heat and tenderness at once, teasing his tongue into Zac’s mouth to kiss him thoroughly. *Oh, yeah.* That was exactly what Zac needed. He kissed Bryce back, opening up and licking at Bryce’s tongue, but he let Bryce take the lead.

Bryce pushed Zac’s coat off, then let his own fall to the floor. He took Zac in his arms, taking advantage of his greater height and strength, and pulled Zac close for a passionate kiss that almost took Zac off his feet. It was a kiss from a lover, hungry and naked and hot.

Zac wrapped his arms around Bryce and held on, moaning softly into the kisses. “Bryce,” he managed between kisses. “Fuck, Bryce...”

Kisses might have been the extent of Bryce’s true comfort zone right now, but he knew how to kiss. And he knew how to grope Zac’s ass, fingers almost sliding between Zac’s asscheeks, how to get a hand on the back of Zac’s head and tilt it back as he lavished hot kisses and bites all down Zac’s neck before returning to his mouth, again and again. Bryce’s breath got ragged, but he wasn’t losing any focus; they’d only gotten a couple feet inside the door, only gotten their coats off, and he was spending one long, long minute after another working at driving Zac insane without any hint that he might want anything else right now.

Eventually, Zac had to pull back. God, he loved the way Bryce kissed, but they had to get out of the entryway. Not that he expected anyone else to come home, but he wanted a little more privacy than this, even so. “Upstairs?” Not bed. Just inside one of their bedrooms. Just upstairs.

“Yeah.” Bryce bent to help gather their things. Leaving them spilled all over the entryway would be a little suspect. He headed for his room; the bed there was a little bigger and, as Zac liked to point out, had more pillows. Also, the bed usually had Bryce in it. And Bryce’s ass. “This okay?” Bryce looked over his shoulder at Zac to check.

Zac almost missed the question; he was busy watching Bryce’s ass again. “Wh-- Yeah. Yeah, this is good.” He smiled sheepishly and followed Bryce into his room.

“Dude, you were *not* looking at my ass.” Bryce hung his jacket over the back of a chair and opened up his swim bag to pull out his wet suit. He sounded disbelieving, not offended.

Zac dropped his bag and jacket on the floor and walked over to put his hand on the ass he wasn't supposed to have been looking at. "I wasn't?" God, Bryce had a great ass. Zac rubbed it a little, following the curve with the palm of his hand, getting a little distracted about what he was supposed to be saying.

"Maybe you were." Bryce turned from hanging up his swimsuit and slid an arm around Zac's waist. "Zac..." His expression was tentative, his teeth sinking into his lower lip.

Zac pulled his hand away and shoved it into his pocket so he wouldn't screw this up again. "Yeah." He tilted his head back so he could see Bryce's face. "Sorry."

"I just..." Bryce looked painfully uncomfortable. "I don't want this to go wrong tonight. I want it to be good. I want us to work." He was so very serious and managed to keep talking even though his cheeks were bright red. "Just. Maybe just touching. No matter how good it was to suck you off, I just... maybe it would make me think of last time and wreck everything. Okay?" His expression was worried and sad.

Zac nodded. He certainly wasn't going to argue about it. "Sure, Bryce. I don't wanna... Touching's fine. I want to touch you. So." He smiled tentatively and reached up to touch Bryce's cheek. "That kinda works out."

"I'm freaked." The words came out as Bryce made an obvious effort not to pull away. Now that they were back where it had happened, he wasn't quite as eager to get going. "God, I'm such a fucking pussy." He pushed away from Zac and stripped his shirt off on the way to throw it in the laundry hamper. "I don't want to feel like that again, though. It's just... fucked."

"You're not--" Zac reached out and got hold of Bryce's arm. "Stop being so angry at yourself, Bryce. It's not easy, any of it. Not for anybody." He was still kicking himself for having made such a mess of things last time. He'd made things so much worse for Bryce. "You can't expect to just... not worry about any of it, or anything. We'll be careful, but don't beat yourself up about it if you need more time."

"It should be easier than this. But the more I try and make it seem easy, the harder it gets, man." Bryce bent to get rid of his boots and socks. "I'm trying, but I keep thinking 'what if I freak out over something,' and I just go cold. And what if it gets worse?"

"Bryce... What if you do freak out over something?" Zac shrugged, trying to make it seem simple. "What if you do? What then? We take a few steps back, take some time to talk about it, and try again later. It'll be okay."

Bryce sat down on the edge of the bed and looked up at Zac, his expression miserable. "I just want this to be happy, Zac. I don't want anything bad touching this. Us. This already scares the hell out of me for so many reasons, but I can't say I don't want you. I really do. You know it, right?"

“I know.” Zac came over to stand in front of Bryce and petted his hair back from his face. “I know you do. And I want you, too, but that doesn’t mean we can’t take things slow. I don’t want to screw this up by rushing anything.” He wanted Bryce like crazy, wanted to touch him and kiss him and show him all the ways he could make him feel good, but after last time, he knew better than to push.

“I just want to forget everything but us.” Bryce stood up and unbuttoned his jeans, biting his lip, looking down between them for a long moment. “Take me to bed?” He looked at Zac from under his lashes, unguarded and open. “I trust you. Just. Take me to bed so I can be with you and forget about everything else, and maybe we’ll get lucky and make it all the way to morning. Please?”

In some ways, that trust was like a weight on Zac, the knowledge that if he screwed up, he was betraying that trust. But it was something special, too, because he knew that Bryce didn’t trust anyone else like that. “Yes.” Zac leaned up on his toes to kiss Bryce on the mouth and, at the same time, skimmed his hand down Bryce’s bare chest to get him out of his jeans.

Bryce helped Zac undress him, then tugged back his covers and sprawled in the sheets to watch Zac undress. His eyes were intense, wide and dark, fixed on Zac. He wasn’t relaxed; tension was written in the lines of his body, even though his dick was still half-hard from when they’d been making out in the hallway.

Zac shed his clothes into a pile on the floor, his eyes on Bryce. He didn’t want to draw it out and risk giving Bryce’s nerves enough time to flare and ruin Bryce’s mood entirely. Naked, he crawled up on the bed beside Bryce and trailed a hand from Bryce’s hip to his shoulder, fingers spread wide to cover as much skin as possible. “You look so good, Bryce,” he murmured, leaning over to kiss Bryce on the mouth, just lightly. Maybe he could tempt Bryce into kissing him like before.

As long as Zac had known him, Bryce had been a sucker for any kind of physical contact. He took the kisses Zac was offering and his body arched toward Zac’s, getting as close as he could. Unlike last time, though, he was keeping it slow. Slow was a good idea. Pushing things had made them both miserable last time.

Zac stretched out next to Bryce, half on top of him, one leg slung between Bryce’s legs. As they kissed, he traced the lines and curves of Bryce’s chest, just exploring what Bryce’s body felt like.

The kissing and touching relaxed Bryce until he was supple under Zac’s body. He still had little shudders when he inhaled, like he was trying not to cry, but his body was so responsive. It didn’t take long for him to get mostly hard, just from kissing and touching. He traced Zac’s face with his fingertips, stroked the back of Zac’s neck and shoulders, just keeping contact.

“I like how you kiss me,” Zac whispered, between kisses. Bryce deserved to hear it. He deserved to hear all the compliments Zac could think of. He was so nervous about what they were doing and about doing something wrong, and Zac wanted to reassure him that he was doing everything right. Zac petted the hollow of Bryce’s hip and skipped past his cock to trace delicate patterns over his thigh instead. He had muscular thighs, swimmer’s thighs, strong and solid and smooth.

Bryce didn't have a response for that except to get a hand on the back of Zac's head and pull him in for a deep, passionate kiss that started slow and built until it was full of adoration and need. He whimpered and spread his strong legs for Zac's touches, opening up for Zac to have him. He was shivering a little by the time he pulled away from the kiss, nipples tight and high, skin ridged with a chill, and he was breathing unsteadily.

Zac knew his own arousal showed just as clearly as Bryce's did, but he didn't draw any attention to it. He kissed Bryce on the mouth one more time -- just a quick peck on the lips -- and then pulled back again so he could watch his hand dipping between Bryce's legs to tease at the sensitive skin high on the insides. Just touching, that's what Bryce had asked for. Zac could do that. There were so many ways to make Bryce feel good with just touching.

Shifting closer, Bryce kissed Zac's shoulder and neck while Zac touched him. He was making soft, needy noises, one hand clenched in the sheets like he was trying to be good. He wasn't asking for more with words, but the noises and kisses and nips spoke clearly enough.

"You can tell me what you like," Zac invited softly, bringing his hand up higher to brush over the soft hair covering Bryce's balls and the base of his dick. "Or show me." Even just watching Bryce jerk off would be incredibly hot. He didn't touch Bryce's dick, though. He teased his fingertips back behind Bryce's balls, slowly so Bryce wouldn't get too nervous, and rubbed gently at the smooth skin behind them.

"I just..." Bryce shivered, a bit derailed, but then he recovered, nuzzling closer. "I never thought about it," he whispered. He let go of the sheets to let his fingers trail over Zac's hand between his thighs, stroking his balls and Zac's fingers, and then up to his hard cock. He parted his thighs more, bringing one knee up, and jerked off slowly.

Zac moaned softly, just from the sight, and arched a little to drag his dick against the outside of Bryce's hip. "So hot, Bryce." He toyed with Bryce's balls and rubbed behind them, watching Bryce's hand move over his cock.

"God. Zac," Bryce whispered. He arched into his own hand, shuddering, and stroked his fingertips over the head of his cock. When he slid his hand back down, he found Zac's hand and twined their fingers together, bringing Zac's hand up to stroke him at the same time.

Zac moaned again. Bryce's cock was so hard, hot and smooth under his palm. He angled himself over Bryce, leaning up to kiss him on the mouth as they stroked Bryce's cock together.

"Zac." Bryce's anxiety was written in his face and in his muscle tension, but his hips were rocking to fuck the circle of their hands, harder and faster.

"You have such a gorgeous dick, Bryce," Zac murmured, settling back a little so he could watch Bryce's face. He didn't want to make anything worse. "It feels so good in my hand. Does it feel good for you, too? It looks like it does. It looks like you're gonna come. I want to see that,

Bryce, see what you look like, like that. It was too dark, the first time. Can I lick you clean after? I wanna taste you. I bet you taste so good.”

Bryce’s eyes were locked on Zac’s like he was drowning. The questions, maybe even just Zac’s voice, soothed Bryce’s fear, but not his need to come. He whimpered little answers, affirmatives, to Zac’s questions as his body went taut and his hips came up off the bed. His free hand clutched at Zac’s shoulder and he bit his lip, hard, trying to keep control and failing.

“Zac...” His tone was pleading, and then he came, shooting up his belly and chest, dripping all over their fingers. His expression was all pleasure, eyes wide and cheeks flushed and lips parted to let out soft cries.

“So fucking hot, Bryce,” Zac murmured, leaning over to kiss Bryce on the mouth just as soon as the cries trailed off. God, it was just amazing, watching Bryce come like that. He kissed Bryce hungrily, showing him how it had made him feel, then pulled back again to make sure Bryce was okay.

Bryce seemed fine. Suddenly shy, but not upset. The fresh heat in his cheeks was definitely a blush. He turned his face, butting against Zac’s shoulder, and closed his eyes. His breathing evened out, but he was still shivery.

Zac kissed the side of his head, then his neck, moving slowly down his body. Shoulder, nipple, and then he licked at the trails of come spattered over Bryce’s chest. He gripped Bryce’s hip with his sticky hand and moaned at the taste. “God, I was right,” he muttered. He licked and kissed faster, messier, getting more and more turned on as he tasted more of Bryce’s come.

“Fuck. Zac.” Bryce was watching him with wide eyes, then he stroked Zac’s head, coaxing him to keep going. “That... that is so hot.”

Bryce sounded so turned on, and that made it even better for Zac. He cleaned up Bryce’s chest and belly, then found Bryce’s sticky hand and sat up a little to hold Bryce’s wrist with his clean hand, drawing it up to his mouth. He licked Bryce’s palm and sucked at his fingers, moaning all over again at the feel of them sliding in and out of his mouth.

“God. God, Zac.” Bryce swallowed hard and shivered. “I... oh, God. Do you... you like that...” He looked dizzy. “You are so hot, Zac. I want to feel your mouth on me.”

Reluctantly, Zac let Bryce’s fingers slip out of his mouth. “Yeah?” God, he wanted to get his mouth on Bryce’s dick, but he didn’t want to do anything Bryce wasn’t ready for.

Bryce nodded. “If you want,” he said breathlessly. “I just... I want to watch you like it the way you do. The way you want me, Zac. I just... I never...” He seemed overwhelmed by it. “You look so good. And. And I make you feel like that. Me. I just... oh, fuck, Zac.”

Zac took him at his word. “Sit up a little?” he asked, biting his lip to keep from just leaning down and shoving his mouth onto Bryce’s dick. It looked so good, still half-hard and waiting for him.

“I wanna...” He pushed at Bryce’s thighs, urging Bryce to move up the bed and bend his legs up and open so Zac could lie down between them. “Fuck, I want you so much, Bryce.”

When Bryce was settled, Zac stretched out on his belly between Bryce’s legs and dipped his head to just kiss and rub his lips over the come-slick shaft of Bryce’s cock. He wanted it too much, it felt like, and he needed to calm down a little before he let himself have it, because he wanted to make it good for his Bryce. Bryce’s hands were shaky as they stroked his head and shoulders and, finally, his face.

“I can’t believe you want me,” Bryce said breathlessly. “God, Zac, you are so hot. And so... fuck. Just so *good*. I just... you want *me*.” He was still stunned. “You want me.” Like somehow, Zac wanting him made things better.

“So much, Bryce.” Zac licked all around the base of Bryce’s dick, teasing both of them a little bit. He licked at Bryce’s balls, too, feeling soft hair rasp over his tongue. They tasted like sweat and sex, like Bryce, like come, and it made Zac moan and shiver. He rocked his hips against the bed, dragging his own aching cock against the sheets, and finally licked his way up the shaft of Bryce’s dick to take the head into his mouth.

“Christ.” Bryce grabbed at his knees instead of Zac’s shoulders and let his head fall back against the wall. He could look down his body to watch Zac like that; he was fixated. “Zac. Oh, my God.”

Bryce’s dick wasn’t fully hard yet, so Zac could get it all in his mouth. He moaned around it, feeling filled up and desperate for more. It was so good, still slick with come. Zac sucked gently, feeling it harden more in his mouth. Slowly, he drew back and teased at the head with his tongue. He let his hands play along the insides of Bryce’s thighs, just feeling Bryce’s skin under his palms and fingertips.

Bryce was all shivers and moans. He didn’t seem upset at all, or anxious, not anymore. The more Zac wanted him, the more he seemed to be able to cope with it all, as though if they were in it together, it wasn’t so bad. He relaxed under the touches and gave himself up to Zac, finally letting go of his death-grip on his knees to touch Zac’s head with one hand. “So good, Zac. Just... God, you’re so good.”

Zac couldn’t answer except with a moan. He gave Bryce everything he could, licking and sucking and kissing Bryce’s cock from root to tip, moving down to lick and play with his balls for a moment, and then moving back up to his dick. Zac wanted to make Bryce feel so good, to make him want it so much he couldn’t think. He dragged one hand down again to rub at Bryce’s perineum, rolling his thumb along the sensitive skin behind Bryce’s balls as he sucked Bryce down again.

Bryce was so sensitive behind his balls. The petting had gotten good reactions from him, but more pressure nearly sent him through the roof, in the best way. As he relaxed about being with Zac, it was easier and easier to tell what turned him on. He grabbed at the sheets, babbling softly

about how hot Zac was and how good it was and how much he wanted Zac and how no one ever felt like this before. He was lost in it, but still grounded enough to look Zac in the eyes.

Bryce was so fucking hot. Zac's dick twitched against the sheets with nearly every word from Bryce, and when Bryce's dick spilled pre-come into his mouth, Zac's hips moved without his permission. He writhed, fucking his cock against the bed, and wrapped his free hand around the base of Bryce's dick to meet his mouth with every stroke.

Bryce didn't stop talking; his voice got ragged, and he whimpered more than he spoke, panting and whining when he couldn't be coherent at all. He couldn't fuck Zac's mouth like this, but he was writhing as much as he could, his back arching. He slid his hands down his inner thighs, groping and stroking his own body unconsciously, opening himself more for Zac, as he was groaning with pleasure.

Oh, God. Bryce was so incredibly sexy like this, so open and honest with his body. Zac moaned around his dick, trying desperately to keep from coming before Bryce did.

It was a good thing no one was home. Bryce's whines and whimpers slowly turned into cries. It was taking him longer to come the second time, but he was no less desperate for it. He begged for it, shaking and on the edge. "Fuck. Zac. Please, Zac. Please. Make me come. Please. I wanna come for you."

Zac moaned, nearly fucking his mouth on Bryce's cock, he was sucking so fast and deep. He wanted to make Bryce come, wanted Bryce to come for him.

When Bryce finally lost it, he was far from quiet. His cries seemed to be ripped out of him as he jerked, pushing back against the wall to try and get his hips up, trying to get deeper, and came. There wasn't any self-control left in him at all; Zac's name came out of him like one sob after another as he flooded Zac's mouth with come.

Fuck, that was so good. Zac swallowed it all down and kept sucking until Bryce finally relaxed. He was barely holding on, himself, and as soon as he pulled his mouth away, he was crawling up over Bryce, panting, and reaching down to get a hand around his dick so he could jerk off, so he could come, because he needed it so bad. He'd been waiting so long, he was so hard, and sucking Bryce off like that was just too much for him to be able to hold off anymore. He kissed Bryce on the mouth, moaning, and fucked his hand, fast and rough and desperate.

Bryce got one hand on the back of his head, kissing him back fiercely, and nudged Zac's hand away with the other, wrapping his big hand around Zac's dick, growling in the back of his throat. He mumbled something into Zac's mouth that might have been, "Mine," as he jerked Zac off.

Zac moaned his agreement, bracing himself on both hands and fucking the tight circle of Bryce's big hand. He was so far gone that Bryce only got in a few strokes before Zac was crying out into Bryce's mouth and coming hard over his hand and chest.

Bryce stroked him through it and his kisses gentled until he was murmuring, “Oh, Zac, oh, Zac,” against Zac’s lips over and over in an awed voice. He petted Zac’s head with his clean hand, tender touches meant to soothe. Zac was so overwhelmed with his need and pleasure that it took a few moments for him to come back to himself enough to pull back and check Bryce’s face for any sign that he was upset or unsettled.

Bryce’s expression was soft, the kind of soft that could only be described as loving. He bit his lip and shook his head, like he couldn’t believe what had happened. Blushing, he leaned in, seeking a reassuring kiss. Zac gave him what he was looking for, kissing him softly, sweetly. It was such a relief, knowing that Bryce was okay after all that. Zac brushed Bryce’s hair back from his face.

“So good, Zac,” Bryce whispered. He was all shy and blushy, but that seemed to be the best reaction to his moments of uncertainty.

“It really was,” Zac agreed softly, pulling back to smile down at Bryce. God, it had been so, so good. “It felt good for you, too?”

“Yeah. God. Zac.” Bryce bit his lip and smiled all at once. “That was amazing.” And he hadn’t freaked out. Still wasn’t freaking out. Zac could see that realization dawning on him just by the way his eyes lit up and he sat up a little straighter.

“Good.” Zac leaned in to kiss him again, to kiss that smile. “I’m glad. I wanted to make you feel good.”

“You did. You... damn, Zac.” Bryce laughed and kissed him back. “Can we...” He looked down at himself. He was sticky with come, and they both smelled like a roadhouse from playing pool. “You wanna come take a shower with me now?” He gave Zac a shy look and blushed. “You always look so good in the showers and I can’t... you know... really *look*...”

“You mean, like I did after practice tonight?” Zac teased. Bryce blushed so easily. Zac liked seeing it. He kissed Bryce’s warm cheek and laced their fingers together. “Yeah, c’mon. Maybe I can touch this time, too.”

“Oh.” Bryce’s eyes widened. “Zac!” He held Zac’s hand, though, and sat up so he could get up when Zac climbed off of him.

“What?” Zac smiled innocently, slipping off the bed. “You’re gorgeous, Bryce. You really expected me not to look? Not to think about what it’d be like to be standing there with you, wet and naked and slippery, touching you like that? Kissing you like that, getting down on my knees and sucking you off in the showers, so you’d have to lean against the wall to stay on your feet?” Zac grinned, still teasing, but he was already getting hard again, just thinking about it. “Not a chance.”

“Oh. My. God.” Bryce got to his feet, his cheeks flaming. “I have to quit the swim team now, you bastard.” He didn’t look *that* upset, fortunately.

Zac laughed and dragged Bryce toward the door. “C’mon. You can sate all my awful urges here and I won’t be tempted to give in to them in the locker room.”

“I’m not talking about *you*, I’m talking about *me*. I can’t look at you in the showers anymore. I have to take cold showers now. I will have brain pictures, Zac!” Bryce let himself be led off to the bathroom, still complaining pitifully.

“The other guys get hard in the showers, too, Bryce,” Zac pointed out. “You just kinda... ignore it.” He grinned, pulling Bryce into the bathroom and locking the door. “And remember that whatever you think sounds good in the showers there, you can always ask me to do to you here. I’m probably not gonna say no. To pretty much anything.”

“I just want to touch you,” Bryce admitted, leaning in to kiss him. “I know it sounds really stupid, but I just want to hold you and feel you all naked and warm against me.” He was blushing all over again, for a new reason. “Your skin is so soft, and you fit in my arms, and...” He turned away, sitting on the edge of the tub so he could turn on the water and hide his embarrassment at once.

“It doesn’t sound really stupid.” Bryce had all these ideas that what girls liked, guys didn’t, or something. Maybe some of it was true, maybe Zac didn’t need hearts and flowers to be willing to fuck around, but he wasn’t going to turn down cuddling from his boyfriend, either. *My boyfriend*. Just the thought brought a smile to his face. Bryce was his boyfriend. “It sounds really, really good. I like it when you touch me, and I like just laying around with you.”

Bryce got the water hot and flipped the valve to the shower setting, then looked over his shoulder at Zac. “I don’t know if...” He took a breath. “I want to take you out. I mean, really... go out to dinner or something. I love doing all the ‘you and me’ stuff we always did, but... I want to do more things than that, ‘cause we... do more now.” He swallowed and gave Zac a shy look. “It just feels wrong to not do special stuff. Because you are. This is.”

“We’ll figure out how to do more, then.” Zac ran his fingers through Bryce’s hair and smiled at him. Bryce was so afraid of doing the wrong thing, but there really wasn’t a right or a wrong, just what worked for them. “Maybe drive out of town or while we’re at the next away meet or something.” The last thing Zac wanted was Bryce’s family finding out about this, so they had to be careful. It was hard to tell where it would be safest, but staying away from where people knew them seemed best.

“Yeah.” Bryce stood up and turned to kiss Zac tenderly. “Come on, let’s get in.”

Zac followed Bryce into the shower, pulling the curtain closed around them, closing them up in a tiny little world all their own. He waited while Bryce got himself all wet, then slid his hands up Bryce’s slippery back. Bryce’s skin was bronze silk rippling over muscle. “Mmm, maybe *I’ll* have to quit the swim team. Damn.”

Bryce sighed at the touch. “That feels so good, Zac. God, why does everything you do feel so good?”

“Cause you like me, maybe, or maybe just ‘cause I’m paying attention to what you like.” Zac rubbed at the tight muscles in Bryce’s shoulders and back, then urged him to turn around. “C’mere. I wanna pay attention to you liking the way I kiss you, now.”

Bryce pulled Zac into his arms, turning so that Zac was under the spray, hot on his back and shoulders. “I do like the way you kiss,” he said, smiling. “And I like kissing you back.” He ducked his head to prove the point, his lips slick against Zac’s.

Zac really liked the way Bryce kissed. He sucked and licked at Bryce’s tongue, trailing one hand down Bryce’s back to cup his ass, pulling Bryce closer so his hardening dick would slide against Bryce’s thigh. He didn’t need anything more than that, just to be close.

Bryce kissed him long and sweet, indulging him completely, caressing his back and groping his ass. He pulled Zac against him, moving to give Zac more friction. He wasn’t hard again yet, but he was obviously enjoying Zac’s arousal. Finally, he pulled away and gasped a little breath before murmuring, “Turn around. I wanna get you off,” against Zac’s lips.

“Yeah.” Zac kissed Bryce one more time, and then turned around, saying, “Yeah, yeah, okay.” He wanted Bryce to get him off, too. Whatever Bryce wanted to do.

What Bryce wanted to do was pull Zac against him, letting the hot water sluice down Zac’s chest, while one hand stroked Zac’s dick and the other played with his balls. “Fuck, you’re *hot*,” he whispered in Zac’s ear, on his way to ravishing the side of Zac’s neck with licks and kisses. He was moaning softly, his big hands unhesitating on Zac’s dick and balls, his mouth demanding on Zac’s neck.

“Oh, God. Yeah, Bryce.” Zac knotted his fingers in Bryce’s hair, holding him against his neck. Fuck, his neck was so sensitive, and Bryce always went straight for it, like there was some kind of instinct that told him it was a surefire way to get Zac aching and needy and ready *right now*. He braced his other hand on the shower wall and rolled his hips, arching into Bryce’s touches. “Fuck. God, I love your hands. You have such fucking big hands. Feels so good.”

Bryce’s desperate little noises suggested that he was enjoying this as much as Zac was, all his soft groans and gasps. His fingers slipped past Zac’s balls, rubbing along the taut skin there, and back further. It was probably inadvertent; his hands were big, and there was only so much room for his long fingers between Zac’s thighs as he palmed Zac’s tight balls. He rolled his other hand over the head of Zac’s cock and then slid the slick tunnel of it down, giving Zac something to fuck. Groaning, he bit up under Zac’s ear and sucked there, gently.

Inadvertent or not, the touches were driving Zac crazy. His breath came faster and he whined, spreading his legs apart as much as he could and arching to drive his dick through Bryce’s hand and push Bryce’s fingers against all that sensitive skin. “Please. Oh, fuck, Bryce...”

Bryce had to know what he was doing now, moving his hand and sliding his big, strong fingers back over Zac’s hole, giving him something to press against. He was panting in Zac’s ear

between bites, and he whispered, “Anything, Zac. Fuck. Tell me. Anything,” before kissing and biting down Zac’s neck again.

That sent shudders of need racing through Zac and it took real effort to bite back a plea for Bryce to just fuck him right then. It wasn’t a good idea for any number of reasons, not the least of which were the lack of lube and condoms and knowing Bryce wasn’t ready for it. Zac wanted it, though. God, how he wanted it. He asked for Bryce’s fingers, instead.

“In me, Bryce. Just...” He dropped his hand down from the wall and laced his fingers with Bryce’s. His head fell back against Bryce’s chest and he lifted his foot up onto the edge of the tub, then guided Bryce’s middle finger back to press just right. Just right. “I want. Will you?” If Bryce wouldn’t, it’d be okay. Zac could do it to himself. That would be enough. But Bryce had offered, and it was Bryce’s fingers Zac really wanted.

Bryce bit him again with a whimper and did what was asked without hesitation, slow and steady, letting Zac set the pace. “Oh. God.” It was barely more than a whine. “Zac. So tight.” The angle of his hand all but forced his finger to curl around just right, pushing in deep and sliding against Zac’s prostate.

Zac pushed down onto Bryce’s finger, shivering. The pressure forced out a moan, and Zac writhed against it, his back sliding against Bryce’s slippery chest. “Fuck. Yeah, Bryce. Yeah.” He guided Bryce’s hand to move, just a little, giving him a little friction inside and sending more shivers of pleasure through him. “That’s so good. You’re so... Fuck. Bryce. So good.”

It didn’t take Bryce long to pick up exactly what Zac needed, fucking him with strokes that matched the tempo of his hand on Zac’s dick. “Fuck. Zac. So *hot*,” he was moaning. “Want you so much.”

It was such a relief to hear Bryce so turned on by this. Zac had worried, a little, because some guys got grossed out about where they were putting their fingers. “Fuck me, Bryce,” he moaned. It felt safe, now. They could both pretend he was just talking about Bryce’s fingers. “Just like that. Fucking... Yeah. God, you’ve got such fucking big hands.” Bryce had a big dick, too. Someday. Zac moaned again at the thought and writhed some more, fucking Bryce’s hand and fucking himself on Bryce’s finger.

“You are so fucking tight,” Bryce whispered, sliding his index finger in with his middle finger on the next stroke. It was a tight fit, so tight, but not enough to hurt, and Bryce was careful not to push too deep on the first couple strokes; then he was fucking Zac with two big fingers, rubbing over Zac’s prostate, moaning, biting Zac’s neck, and still, never missing a beat, jerking him off.

“Oh, fuck,” Zac panted. Once Bryce started finger-fucking him, Zac couldn’t hold back. He writhed, arching into all of it, slippery and desperate and crying out Bryce’s name a hell of a lot louder than he should’ve.

“God, Zac. That’s everything I want,” Bryce said unsteadily. He was strong and steady with his hands, though, giving Zac all the pleasure he could, his body giving Zac support so Zac didn’t fall. “Oh, God, Zac. Just... yeah. Like that.”

Zac felt like his orgasm lasted forever. God, it’d been a long time since he’d gotten fucked, even just with fingers, and Bryce was doing it just right. “Fuck, Bryce,” he gasped, shivering hard as he came down. He was shaky all over, shivery and limp. “Fuck.”

Bryce slid his fingers out and let go, only to wrap Zac up in strong arms and hold him close. “Better?” he murmured softly.

“M good, yeah,” Zac murmured, leaning back into Bryce’s embrace. He felt perfect. The pleasure was still sparking low in his belly, sending tiny waves of heat all through him. “Mmm.”

“That was so good, Zac.” Bryce sounded awed. “I love doing that to you,” he added in a whisper, giving Zac a little squeeze.

“You can.” Zac had to catch his breath a little. He’d never expected Bryce to be this sexual, this open; it was like finding hidden treasure. He was going to be careful with Bryce; he didn’t want to be the one to ruin something that rare. “Whenever you want. Seriously. That was... really, really good. Fuck.”

Bryce cuddled him close, carefully shifting until he was in front of Zac, snuggling Zac against his chest and kissing Zac’s temple. “I was kind of afraid I wouldn’t be able to make you feel good,” he confessed.

Zac opened his mouth, and then closed it again. That was so ridiculous, he wasn’t sure what to say, at first. It was so *Bryce*, too, the big dork. After a few seconds, he tipped his head back to look up at Bryce. “Um. I don’t think you have to worry about that anymore.”

Bryce’s smile was half pleased, half sheepish, and he blushed. “Maybe not, no.” His long dark lashes were even darker and beaded with water; his hair clung to his cheeks in scrolling loops. “You’re. Just.” He kissed Zac passionately.

Oh. Zac slid his hands into Bryce’s hair and kissed him back. Bryce didn’t have anything to worry about, not at all, not on that front.

After, Bryce pulled back enough to nuzzle Zac’s nose with his own. He was positively glowing; it was hard to imagine a guy looking so blissful after sex when he wasn’t the one who’d come, but Bryce looked like he’d just had the best sex of his life.

“You ready to go back to your room?” Zac was ready. They were all rinsed off and he had some excellent ideas for how to spend some time back in Bryce’s bed.

“Yeah.” The look Bryce gave him was melting, then he turned off the water. He stretched to wring out his hair before they got out, giving Zac a chance to admire his wet, naked body.

Bryce looked so damn good. It was a shame he ever had to get dressed. Zac handed him a towel when they got out of the shower, and asked, “Do you have lube in your room? Like, for jerking off or, um, for your fingers, I mean?”

“Yeah, a couple kinds,” Bryce answered, before he could remember to be embarrassed about it. He was obviously feeling pretty relaxed now. So far, the evening had been really good for him, maybe good enough to start undoing last week’s damage. “Why?” He tilted his head and gave Zac an anxious puppy look.

Zac stopped rubbing the towel over his head to smile at Bryce, slow and hot. “So you can do that to me again.”

“Oh.” Bryce’s eyes widened, and then he gave Zac a look that suggested he was about to pounce Zac right then. “Yeah. I could do that.”

“Good.” Zac leaned up on his toes to brush a kiss over Bryce’s lips. “I really want you to. I’m glad you liked it, too. Some people don’t.”

“I can understand.” Bryce wrapped a towel around his waist. “But... it’s you. You and me. I guess I’m just trying to focus on that, you know? It’s not like I don’t have all this other stuff in my head I have to keep stomping on.” He bent and kissed Zac back, just as lightly. “It’s just us. Nothing else counts when it’s us. I keep telling myself that. It helps.”

Maybe eventually, Zac would get to show Bryce what it felt like. He finished drying off, then tied the towel around his waist and poked his head out of the door to check the hallway. No noises at all.

“C’mon. Maybe you can keep focusing on that back in your room.” Zac hoped so. He’d come twice, but just thinking about Bryce’s fingers inside him made his dick twitch. He could do three times, if he wanted to badly enough, and he *really* wanted to, and not just because he was still sure that if he could just get Bryce to feel good long enough, they could almost erase last weekend’s disaster.

Bryce let Zac get almost to the door of the room before whisking Zac’s towel away, laughing. He even had the nerve to skip out of the way to avoid revenge. What else was new? Bryce had been stealing Zac’s towel for years, since he had all that hair to dry and Zac had none. Laughing and being a pain was way better than the way he’d been last weekend.

Zac laughed and chased Bryce into his room, locking the door behind them and then diving onto him as soon as they were close enough to the bed. “Think you can get away with that?” he demanded, but he didn’t wait for an answer. He tickled Bryce mercilessly, all the way down his ribs and belly, until Bryce was gasping for breath.

“Mercy, mercy.” Bryce could hardly breathe. He struggled up to kiss Zac on the mouth. His towel was long gone now.

It was so good to see Bryce happy like this. Zac had worried that Bryce's fears would ruin any good feelings Bryce had after sex. "Only 'cause I like you so much," he murmured, kissing Bryce lightly.

"You mean my wiles are working?" Bryce laced his fingers together behind Zac's head and pulled him close for another kiss, a hot one this time.

Zac's purr answered for him. Yeah, Bryce's wiles were working. Zac kissed him back, hot and slow and deep, sliding his hands over Bryce's chest -- not to tickle this time, but just to touch.

Bryce rolled them over in his bed and cuddled Zac up under him, holding him close. He pulled back and looked down at Zac, looking pleased with himself, like a big dog who'd caught a bunny and planned to viciously give it a bath and a snuggle. "I think I like this boyfriend thing," he said, then nibbled at Zac's neck with a happy growl.

"Oh. Oh, good," Zac managed, half-laughing and half-moaning. "'Cause I think I do, too." Being with Bryce was way, way better than one-night stands or any relationship he'd had before now, even with how careful they had to be.

"You wanted something?" Bryce licked under Zac's jaw and then pulled away to give him a wide-eyed, hopeful look, then actually wriggled with anticipation.

Zac's eyes widened. He hadn't really expected Bryce to want to do it again. "Yeah," he murmured, his dick already hardening at the idea. "Yeah, I did. Will you?"

"Yeah." Bryce kissed him again, sliding his hand down to stroke Zac's dick slowly. "I wanna watch you," he murmured, his cheeks getting pink. "You were so hot in the shower, Zac. I can't believe I can do that to you."

"As much as you want." Zac bit his lip and breathed through his nose, biting back a moan. "Seriously, Bryce. I love it, and you did it so good. So, so good."

"Come on." Bryce nudged Zac toward the heap of pillows at the head of the bed. "I'll make you feel good again. I promise. Just..." He stole another kiss. "Don't stop me unless I screw up, okay?"

"Yeah, okay." Zac nodded and wriggled up to where Bryce wanted him. "Yeah. Just. Lube, right?" Bryce probably knew, but Zac didn't want to assume. It wasn't like Bryce'd had sex with a guy before.

"Yeah." Bryce reached over and fumbled around in his bedside table, coming out with a small pump-bottle of a popular thick lube marketed for men. "Good?" He flopped on his belly beside Zac and held it up for inspection.

“Good.” Zac was glad to see it wasn’t just glorified hand lotion. He leaned in to kiss Bryce, showing his approval that way, too.

“My favorite.” Bryce wriggled closer. “But I’ll share with my boyfriend.” He was on his belly at Zac’s side, feet up and crossed at the ankles, propped up on his elbows, giving Zac his sweet smile. That was what let him get away with being a big jackass sometimes, that he could look so innocent. And, under it all, he was that sweet and way more vulnerable than he ever let on to anyone but Zac.

“So generous.” Zac made it sound teasing, but it was true. Bryce was the kind of guy who’d give somebody the shirt off his back, if they asked for it.

“So worth it.” Bryce leaned in for another kiss, this one hot and hungry. He shifted so he could slide a hand over Zac’s chest and belly.

Zac kissed him back and arched into the petting, all stretched out and open and ready for Bryce’s touches. Funny, how all the time he’d joked that Bryce could get laid by thinking about it, he’d never thought that it might be because Bryce was *good* at it. He should have known. Bryce was good at everything except feeling good about himself.

Tonight had been so good. Bryce was feeling better all the time; tonight had been amazing. Being able to goof off with Zac, make out with him, make him come hard, all of it made him feel like he could be a good boyfriend to Zac. It made him feel right about all of this. Whatever his father and brothers had mocked him about, it wasn’t this. They didn’t have a clue.

He should’ve understood that it wasn’t even about being queer. What made his dad and brothers act so shitty was all about power. Being scared had kept him from seeing it. His brothers were being jerks, but Bryce knew his dad just wanted him to be strong. What even Bryce had missed until now was that being half the person he could be made him weak.

If Bryce had known how good it could be, he wouldn’t have been so afraid. If he’d known that he wouldn’t damage a guy he cared about by being his lover, he wouldn’t have been so skittish around Zac. He didn’t want to be like that anymore. Sex with Zac made him feel so good and Zac was so good to him.

He rolled up to lean over Zac and kiss him harder, feeling Zac’s dick responding in anticipation of what they were about to do. Dropping the lube, he ran his hands over Zac’s body and pushed Zac’s thighs open. God, he wanted to get his fingers inside Zac, to make him make those noises all over again. As long as he focused on Zac, his brain didn’t run away with him.

Zac opened up for him so easily, like he wanted it just as much as Bryce did. Like he wanted *Bryce*. That was so amazing.

Bryce got between Zac's thighs and used his knees to hold Zac open, finally pulling away from their kisses to sit back and look at Zac all spread out for him. Zac was hard again and Bryce bit his lip, realizing how much he wanted to get his mouth on Zac's dick. *Maybe in a little bit.* He couldn't even say why he wanted it so much except that having his mouth on it was delicious; that was what had got him in trouble the first time. He got lube on the fingers of one hand and rubbed the other over Zac's muscled belly.

"God, Zac. You are just fucking hot." Zac's lithe, fit body, luscious mouth, and beautiful eyes made him a hell of a package. And that dick. Bryce was liking the waxed-clean look. He petted Zac's balls and the base of his dick. "You gotta do this to me," he murmured. "If you want to, that is," he added. He wanted Zac to like looking at him.

"Yeah?" Zac looked surprised, but then his gaze skimmed Bryce's body and his eyes widened even more. "Yeah. We can do that."

Bryce watched Zac's face as he slid a slick finger down behind Zac's balls, rubbing the smooth skin there. He stroked Zac's balls and dick with his clean hand.

Zac let his head fall back against the pillows, shifting into the touches. "Feels good," he murmured, knotting his hands in the sheets.

Bryce shivered at that tone. He slid his fingers back and played around Zac's hole, remembering how wound up Zac had gotten in the shower just from being touched there. He cupped Zac's balls in his clean hand, caressing them gently and making sure he got a good view of what his lubed fingers were doing.

Zac's eyes slid closed as he moaned softly. His breath came faster with each passing moment, until he was growling and arching up against Bryce's fingers. "Bryce... Fuck, Bryce, so good."

Bryce gave him a little pressure, his fingers still moving in circles. There was nothing about it he didn't love: Zac's body spread out, the curves of his asscheeks, the way his dark skin darkened even more and got shadowy and puckered around that secret place that seemed to make him feel so good. Bryce wondered what it would be like to slide his tongue in there, if it would be dreadful or tolerable or good, and the thought shocked him, but not enough to make himself stop touching. Instead, he pressed his fingers in deeper to open Zac up.

"Oh, God. Yeah, please..." Zac was so tight, but his body opened right up with the pressure, welcoming Bryce's fingers inside. He panted a little, like he was trying to catch his breath, and then he was moaning, writhing to push himself onto Bryce's fingers.

It was beautiful, watching Zac's body begging him for more. Bryce was enchanted in a way he'd never let himself be about sex before. He watched two of his fingers slowly slide into Zac, teasing them back out and pushing them in to the first knuckle, then working them deeper and deeper. He rubbed at Zac's perineum with his slick thumb, feeling Zac's body so intensely and intimately that it took his breath away.

Zac let go of the sheets and grabbed the backs of his knees instead, pulling his legs up and opening himself up even more. As promised, he didn't say anything to stop Bryce. He moaned Bryce's name, sounding so good, sounding like Bryce was making him feel so good.

Oh. "Oh, Zac." Bryce hardly knew he was speaking. *So beautiful.* He got his fingers all the way in, pulling them out and sliding them back in with a twist, working until he found the perfect spot inside to make Zac writhe with pleasure. "More?" he whispered roughly.

At first, Zac's only answer was a moan. He bit his lip and his back arched. After a moment, he nodded. "Yeah. Yeah, I want another one." His voice was low, raspy, like he was already so far gone he could hardly speak.

"God." Bryce was so hard, but all he cared about right now was Zac. He worked a third finger in until he was fucking Zac with them to the last knuckles, turning his wrist to let Zac feel everything on the way in and out. He could feel the pressure of his thumb from the outside and that was such a fucking turn-on, to be *inside* Zac like this. His breath came raggedly and he was moaning in the back of his throat.

"Fuck, yeah," Zac moaned, as Bryce stroked his fingers in and out again. "Fuck me, Bryce. So good. God. I want." His hands were clenched tight on the backs of his thighs, keeping his legs up. He was holding still, probably out of necessity from the position, but his breath was coming fast and uneven, and his dick was leaking pre-come onto his belly.

Oh, God. Bryce wanted to be inside him so much right then. He didn't want to stop to grab a condom, he wanted to pull his fingers out and sink his dick into Zac's tight heat. No condom. Just bare. Just his mouth on Zac's mouth, his body on Zac's body, his dick *in* Zac's body. Just fantasy, a new fantasy, but so good.

Groaning, he pushed his fingers in deep, got his other hand around the base of Zac's dick, and leaned forward to suck it down. He loved oral sex with fingers when he was with women; it wasn't a huge leap to make here. He wanted Zac to go crazy under him. He'd give up watching to feel it and hear it.

"*Bryce.* Oh, God. Yeah." Zac was whimpering, even when he wasn't speaking, just desperate little noises that came out with each breath. "Fuck, that's so good. Just like that, Bryce. You feel so good."

Bryce groaned and went down on him hungrily. He wanted more; he wanted everything. He wanted a camera to watch this later. He didn't have time to be startled by the flood of erotic thoughts that accompanied the fullness of Zac's dick in his mouth and the tightness of Zac's ass around his fingers. He was writhing on his knees, worshipping Zac in a way he'd never have imagined he could.

Zac's dick was leaking pre-come into Bryce's mouth, slick and salty, and Zac was babbling breathlessly about how good Bryce's mouth felt, how good his fingers felt, how Zac wanted them deep inside him, begging Bryce not to stop, *God, please, don't stop.*

Bryce gave him what he wanted, fucking him as deep as he could, groaning around Zac's dick, sucking hungrily to swallow down all that slickness. It just turned him on, the way all he could smell and taste was Zac. He wasn't going to stop, desperate to make Zac feel good.

Zac's whimpers slid into needy gasps and he writhed under Bryce. "God, Bryce, I'm gonna. You. Fuck. You should. God. Harder, please. I need. I have to." He was mostly incoherent, but his balls tightening under Bryce's hand said what Zac couldn't: he was going to come soon, and if Bryce wanted to move, now was his chance.

Bryce had no intention of taking his mouth away, though. Zac's third orgasm of the night wasn't likely to gag him, and he wanted to finish what he'd started. He fucked Zac as hard as he dared, shoving his fingers in to the knuckles over and over again, feeling Zac's body clutching at him, angling his hand to hit Zac right inside. His moans were pleading, begging Zac to let go and give it up for him. *Please, Zac.*

He got what he wanted. Zac's gasps all sounded like Bryce's name, and the thrust of Bryce's fingers set off shockwaves through Zac's body, shivers that rolled through him from the inside out, and then Zac was coming, flooding Bryce's mouth with heat.

Moaning, Bryce swallowed Zac's come, shivering with knowing what he was doing. It was okay because he was doing it for Zac, for his best friend who would never tell anyone about them. And, God, it was so good to *feel* Zac come, to be the one who did that for him. So good.

Finally, Zac relaxed. He let his legs slide back down to the bed and he stroked the side of Bryce's face with one hand. "So good, Bryce." Even though he'd already come, he wasn't moving to get Bryce's fingers out of him; he was still writhing against them a little, still pushing down on them.

Bryce let Zac's dick slide out of his mouth, but instinctively, he was still finger-fucking Zac's ass. He kissed Zac's hand, then looked up at him, feeling drugged on Zac's pleasure. He hardly knew what he was doing, just that he was incredibly turned on right now and wanted Zac to tell him what to do.

"Hey." Zac smiled softly and cupped Bryce's cheek in his hand. "C'mere. I wanna kiss you."

Bryce slid his fingers out reluctantly and crawled up to kiss Zac, seeking reassurance. He cuddled up against Zac's body, his hard dick sliding against the hollow of Zac's hip and making him shiver. "Hi," he said between kisses.

Zac tangled his fingers in Bryce's hair and kissed him hungrily, licking into Bryce's mouth and, Bryce realized, tasting himself on Bryce's tongue. He was moaning into the kisses, arching up and hooking one leg over Bryce's to pull Bryce down against him.

“Zac.” Bryce whimpered, his own need and all the emotions around what he’d just done suddenly welling up in him. He got his arms around Zac as best he could, clinging to Zac, trying to reassure himself that it was all still okay.

“It’s okay, Bryce. You’re okay.” Zac kissed his cheek and the corner of his mouth and his lips. “You’re so good. You are. I want you so much.”

That helped. Bryce kissed Zac like he was drinking some kind of wine, little sips that went right to his head. “That was... I like that,” he admitted, letting go of his insecurity. Now, he was just emotional about it. He’d always fought back being emotional about sex, but he couldn’t keep it down with Zac. “I love it. Zac.” He kissed Zac again, trying to hide the expression on his face, knowing he looked overwhelmed.

“I love it, too,” Zac admitted between kisses. “Sucking you off, feeling you suck me off, feeling your fingers inside me, fucking me like that. All of it.” Zac arched up, rubbing his body against Bryce’s, the smooth skin at the hollow of his hip sliding along Bryce’s dick.

“It’s not just how it feels.” Bryce whimpered and bucked against Zac’s body, his hips moving instinctively. He bit his lip hard to make himself focus, then kissed Zac again. “It’s ‘cause it’s you.” He let himself move, then, tracing lines of wetness across Zac’s skin and whining into their kisses.

“Then keep doing it with me,” Zac answered, nipping gently at Bryce’s lips between words. He moved with Bryce, moved like sex, like just feeling Bryce’s dick sliding across his skin was a turn-on.

“Zac...” Bryce couldn’t believe how close he was to coming all of a sudden. “Zac, please...” He couldn’t think of what he needed, he didn’t know what he was begging for, just that he was leaking all over Zac’s belly and his balls ached with his rising orgasm.

One of Zac’s hands slid down Bryce’s back, and then Zac was cupping his ass, pulling Bryce in harder with each thrust. “C’mon, Bryce. I wanna feel it. Want you to come.”

Bryce buried his face in Zac’s neck to stifle his cries. “Zac, oh, God.” He was safe with Zac, and that made this all incredible. When he came, not even pressing his mouth to Zac’s skin helped to quiet him as he spilled come all over Zac’s hip and belly.

When Bryce finally came down, he collapsed against Zac’s chest, gasping. They were a mess all over again and his room smelled of come and it was so good. He closed his eyes and held on to Zac. Zac cuddled him and whispered quiet compliments in Bryce’s ear. His tone was contented and happy and it made Bryce feel better. Making Zac happy was really good. Bryce calmed and cuddled until he realized that his weight was all on Zac.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, trying to push himself up on rubbery arms.

“S okay,” Zac said, shifting a little and then coaxing Bryce back down against him. “C’mere. It’s good. Just lay back down.”

Bryce did as he was told, closing his eyes again. “S lots better this time,” he said, feeling kind of proud of that, even though he was having little moments when the ache and fear bit at him.

“Good.” Zac turned his head to nuzzle Bryce’s cheek and then kiss under his ear. “I’m glad. I wanted it to be good for you this time.”

“It was.” Bryce nodded. He took a deep breath and shuddered on the exhale. “I feel a little...” It was hard to admit, because things had been so good. “On the edge.” His voice broke. “You know?” He didn’t want to freak out now. *Oh, God, no.*

“You’re gonna be okay, Bryce,” Zac said quietly, kissing the soft skin beneath his ear. “Just relax. It’s all okay. You didn’t do anything wrong. There’s nothing wrong with this, with you and me.”

“Okay.” Bryce couldn’t stop his voice from breaking again. “I was scared I was gonna fuck it up again.” The admission loosened the tightness in his chest, and he sighed heavily. He hadn’t. It was okay. He still felt emotional and worn out from tension he hadn’t known he’d been carrying, but it was okay.

“You didn’t, and you’re not gonna.” Zac rubbed his back, soothing him. “Everything’s okay, Bryce. Just relax. You gotta work on that.”

Bryce nodded, knowing that he didn’t need to apologize to Zac for being freaked out. It was a good feeling. The comforting worked and he drifted sleepily. Zac wouldn’t let them fall asleep in bed together again. It wasn’t like anyone cared, anyway. Three times now and no one had said a thing.

Maybe they’re just not saying anything because they don’t know what to say.

“Bryce.” Zac was scolding him and kissing his hair before he even realized he’d tensed up and was staring blankly at the wall, wide-eyed.

“I just... the guys. You know, us being together so much.”

“Relax. We haven’t done anything wrong.”

Bryce exhaled slowly and nodded, closing his eyes again. Right. Zac was right.

“Dude, you guys totally missed the me-and-Perry thing,” Zac whispered.

Okay, Zac had a point. Bryce didn’t want to think about Zac and Perry -- it made him want to growl for no good reason -- but Zac was right. He and Kaede hadn’t noticed at all last year. Steve

was pretty much a zombie from all the work there was this year, and Kaede was off being nearly-married to Shelly.

“So relax,” Zac said, laughing a little and nosing his temple. “No one here cares. This is our house. It’s safe.”

That was why Bryce couldn’t leave. God, he hadn’t even thought of leaving, not even once. He was going to have to deal with the consequences of that, but he wasn’t leaving. “I know,” he said, nodding against Zac’s chest. He closed his eyes and tried to relax.

“I won’t fall asleep anyway,” Zac muttered. “Some big jerk got come all over me and it’s itchy now.”

Bryce wasn’t expecting that, or the laughter that broke out of him in response. “You asked for it.”

“I know.” Zac laughed at him. “I’m just saying. You can relax.”

“I would, but some little prick keeps *talking*,” Bryce said under his breath.

“Eyes *and* mouth closed, pretty boy,” Zac ordered. Bryce closed his mouth on more laughter and Zac kissed his hair again. “That’s better. Don’t make me put something in there to hush you up.”

There was no way Bryce was really going to fall asleep now, but he could fake it for a while. It felt good to lie here like this. Every day, reality wore his fear a little thinner so that Bryce could almost imagine what life would be like if it were gone.

Chapter Five

It was another week before they got to go to the movie. Zac picked up tickets to the ten o'clock show on his way to Pharmacology on Friday and, after swim practice was over, they headed out for their date. This time, they didn't have to take the car; they walked to the theater just off campus. They got a big box of Raisinets and the extra-large tub of popcorn and a large drink, and then they sat in the back of the theater so they could hold hands without wondering if anyone could see them.

Zac was a little nervous about how Bryce was going to handle it, at first, but it all turned out just fine. Bryce was as snuggly as he could be without being obvious about it, slouched down in his seat with his long legs folded up against the seat in front of them, his fingers twined with Zac's. The movie was pure B-grade schlock, just the way they liked it.

As the lights went up, Bryce slowly drew his hand away. Even though Zac didn't want to, he let go, and let Bryce walk ahead to throw out their empty snack packaging. Zac followed him, shoving his hands into his pockets to stay the urge to reach for Bryce's hand again when they walked out of the theater.

It wasn't easy, being out on his own, but closeted as a couple.

"Back to the house?" he asked, and bumped his shoulder against Bryce's arm instead.

"Yeah." Bryce bumped back gently, smiling down at him.

They took the winding shortcut through the pine trees at the edge of campus; few people took it at night, staying to the well-lit path close to the road. Once they were alone on the path and the lights of the mall complex were fading, Bryce stepped close and reached for Zac's hand. That was unexpected, and it made Zac smile. He slipped his hand into Bryce's and squeezed gently.

It was, for a little while at least, like they were a normal couple. "I liked the part where the dragon showed up inside the spaceship," Zac said. It had been a horrible movie, wonderfully bad and fun to watch. "The look on the captain's face was priceless."

"That was *great*. I knew they could make dragons and spaceships work." Bryce laughed. "God, Steve and Kaede would have hated it. Too bad for them."

Except for how Bryce checked over his shoulder before leaning in to give him a peck on the lips, Zac's fantasy about being a normal couple was still going strong. The little kiss was sweet, and Bryce was getting more daring, more confident every day they were together. He wasn't a cowardly guy, in spite of his self-loathing. He was protective and strong and could get in someone's face, with a fist if necessary, even if he was so likeable it wasn't ever necessary. There were just some things that were harder for him to deal with than others. Being with Zac seemed to be changing that.

“They have no taste,” Zac said, rolling his eyes. He was glad of it; it meant there were things he got to do with Bryce without having to explain them away.

“Mm. Taste.” Bryce laughed and stepped off the path, into the soft arms of the trees around them, pulling Zac with him.

Zac laughed as he let himself be led into the trees. It was dark here, concealed from all but the most pointed glances, and no one was around right now, anyway.

“They’re probably home tonight,” Bryce murmured, pulling Zac to him for a kiss. He had been good about keeping his hands to himself so far, right up until now. He stole that kiss and got a hand on Zac’s ass for good measure. “I missed you this week,” he added.

“Me, too.” They really had to figure something out, some way to be together even when their housemates were home. Weekends were easier because everyone was out of their routine and worn out from parties or hours of study in the library, but Zac wasn’t going to take too many chances on weekdays. The last thing he needed was to peel Bryce off the ceiling if they got caught.

Zac leaned up on his toes, got a hand in Bryce’s hair, and made this little break from reality really count. He kissed Bryce again, slow and soft. Bryce made a little noise and got his arms around Zac, holding him close while they kissed. The pine litter was soft underfoot and everything around them smelled sweet and clean. There was no one else in the world right now but them.

“Bryce,” Zac whispered, and then kissed him again. And again and again. He didn’t want this to stop. When they stopped kissing, they’d go back to the house, and go back to pretending they weren’t together. Zac wasn’t looking forward to that, not at all.

Bryce was breathless before long, and turned on; Zac could feel Bryce’s dick through their clothes when Bryce pulled him close, big hands on his ass. It wasn’t just arousal that made Bryce breathless. There was enough ambient light to see the sadness on his face when he pulled back to look at Zac, and there was softness there, a deep affection for Zac.

“Yeah,” Zac whispered. He knew exactly how Bryce felt. “Me, too.”

Bryce kissed his forehead and his cheeks and his nose and then his mouth. “Maybe we could do something in the week,” he whispered.

“Wanna go to dinner with me some time?” They could go to one of the diners or something, Zac didn’t care. Maybe hold hands under the table and share French fries. Whatever Bryce would let him get away with in public.

“Yeah.” Bryce nodded and kissed Zac again, slow and sweet. “We could do that together.” They could make the best of it. They’d manage together. It wasn’t like they weren’t incredibly busy; they didn’t have time to mope, and they had moments like this here and there.

“You ready to go back to the house?” Zac wanted to kiss some more, instead, but they could only put it off so long.

“No.” Bryce kissed him again, hot and sweet, sneaking his tongue into Zac’s mouth with a little moan.

Oh. Oh, good. Zac pressed up close to Bryce’s body and kissed him back. He swallowed down Bryce’s moans and a few of his own, trying to stay quiet even as he got one hand on Bryce’s ass, kneading gently.

Bryce cupped the back of Zac’s head in one hand and Zac’s ass in the other and held him as close as they could get, kissing him like it was going to be the last time ever. It felt like that sometimes. Since their first ‘date,’ they’d been through a whole week of mornings in the same bathroom and kitchen, swim practices and showers after, dinners in front of the television set, acting as though they were ‘just friends’ all the while.

Zac moaned into the kisses, hoping they were quiet enough no one would hear him. He just couldn’t help it. It felt so good to finally be kissing Bryce like this again.

“God, *Zac.*” Bryce forced himself to pull away. “I... we should get back.” He was breathing hard. “Maybe... I mean, after they’re in their rooms... or something...” He kissed Zac again, hard.

“Yeah.” Zac took a step back. *It’s the weekend. No one’s going to care.* God, he wanted to be right, and he couldn’t say no, and... “Yeah. I’ll, um. Want me to come to your room, or do you wanna come to mine?” He laced his fingers with Bryce’s and drew Bryce out of the trees, back onto the path. If they didn’t get moving now, they’d end up rubbing off against each other in the woods or something.

“Come to my room,” Bryce said, squeezing Zac’s hand. His room was at the end of the hall, past Zac’s room, away from the others. It was closer to the bathroom, but that was less of a risk. “Just come get in bed with me.” He stole one last kiss before they stepped out of the shadows.

The rest of the walk home was uneventful. It was nice, though, walking down the path with his hand in Bryce’s. Zac surprised himself all over again by how much he liked it, by how much he really liked Bryce. They were friends, had been friends for a few years, but that wasn’t the same. He’d never imagined himself with a boyfriend, or even a regular male lover. Bryce had changed all that, like Zac knew he’d changed everything for Bryce. It was pretty cool -- special, even -- getting to do all this together, finding out what it was like to be a couple and learning each other all over again at the same time.

Bryce let go of Zac’s hand at the last minute, and they slipped into the house together. Kaede was on the couch watching wrestling and someone was rattling around in the kitchen, probably Shelly or Steve. Bryce gave Zac a little smile as he kicked off his shoes. “Yo, dudes,” he shouted. “You missed a great movie.”

“There were spaceships!” Zac shoved his jacket into the hall closet, along with his shoes. “*And dragons! And teleporting. It was so cool.*”

“You guys are, like, eight.” It was Shelly in the kitchen, probably making Kaede a snack. They often stopped off to eat Kaede’s food before going to her place. “I thought that movie was supposed to be for little kids.”

“So?” Bryce made a face at Zac worthy of an eight-year-old. *Neener.*

“Fuck you,” Zac said, laughing. He didn’t care who the target audience was supposed to be. “It was fun. C’mon, Bryce. I can tell when our taste isn’t appreciated. Let’s get some popcorn and get out of here. I bet I can beat you on the new Mario game.”

“You wish. Go get your tissues ready, loser.” Bryce forged into the kitchen to get them a snack, leaving Zac to head upstairs on his own, with Kaede glaring after him.

Zac laughed and waved goodnight to Kaede, thumping up the stairs to his room. He got the tiny television set up with his game system and dumped a pile of pillows on the floor for them to sit on.

Bryce came up a few minutes later with a big bowl of popcorn and a carton of chocolate milk to share between them. “God, why don’t they just get married or something already?” he grumbled and kicked the door shut behind him. Handing the popcorn to Zac, he plunked into the pillows and opened the chocolate milk.

Zac shoved a handful of popcorn in his mouth. When he was finished chewing, he said, “I’m kinda surprised he’s living here, really, instead of with her. I asked, but he didn’t really answer. Maybe parents or something.”

Bryce took a drink from the carton and offered it to Zac, sitting back and sliding his arm around Zac.

Oh. That was nice. They hadn’t really gotten to do that at the movie. Zac snuggled in next to him and took a sip from the milk carton. “You ready to get your ass kicked?” He was kind of enjoying the cuddling, but it felt like he should at least offer up the game as an option.

“Soon.” Bryce kissed Zac’s head. “I’m snuggling my boyfriend right now,” he murmured in Zac’s ear. “Way better than video games. I’ll make you cry in a minute.”

Zac laughed and snuggled in closer. “You wish.” Snuggling his boyfriend. Yeah, Zac liked that a lot.

“I like this,” Bryce said. He was open with Zac, so much; it seemed to keep him stable, to get reassurance from Zac that how he was feeling was okay. “It’s... relaxed.” He put his cheek against Zac’s head and sighed. There wasn’t much tension in him at all. Zac was really happy about that.

“Me, too.” Zac put the chocolate milk aside and then plucked a piece of popcorn from the bowl and offered it up to Bryce. “It’s good, being with you.”

Bryce took the popcorn and ate it. “Same as before. Just better.” He nuzzled Zac’s ear. “I mean, I still like...” He stopped. “Does it bug you to talk about stuff?”

“I...” Zac stopped and tilted his head so he could see Bryce’s face. *Talk about stuff?* “Stuff?”

“Just. Stuff. I mean us. Me. Any of it.” Bryce looked sheepish. “We were just having a nice time and I started running my mouth and...”

“And I didn’t, like, tell you to shut up or anything,” Zac pointed out. Neither of them could talk about this stuff with anyone else. More than that, Zac wanted to know the good stuff as well as the bad, so he didn’t have to guess how Bryce felt. “Nah, man, I don’t mind. It’s good.”

“Okay.” Bryce kissed Zac lightly. “I just.” He pulled his knees up and wrapped his other arm around them. “I’m happy with you. More than with other people. Girls. I just don’t know what it means.”

Zac didn’t know either. “We’ve been friends for, like, three years now, Bryce. I probably know you a hell of a lot better than most of the girls you’ve been with.” That was Zac’s theory for why he was so comfortable and happy with Bryce, anyway.

“Yeah, I keep thinking that.” Bryce kissed Zac’s cheek and nuzzled against it. “I guess I already fucked up around you so much, I’m not always worried I’m gonna do it now.”

“You’re gonna have an ulcer by thirty if you keep worrying about fucking up so much.” Zac turned his head to steal a quick kiss. “You’re not gonna fuck up with me. We’re fine.”

“Yeah, we are. It’s good.” Bryce leaned in and kissed Zac thoroughly. “Better than good,” he added, murmuring it against Zac’s lips. “Thanks, Zac.”

Zac petted Bryce’s thigh with the hand that wasn’t holding the popcorn bowl. They were better than good. They were great. He wasn’t going to stop and dissect it, or whatever, to try and figure out why. He just accepted it and appreciated it. He was dating a guy, dating his best friend, and it was really good.

Bryce kissed him a little longer. “Ready for me to kick your ass now?” he teased, pulling away. His expression was soft, though.

“Ready for you to *try*,” Zac countered.

If Zac didn’t distract him, Bryce probably would kick his ass. For all that Zac was the one with video games littering his bedroom floor, Bryce was the one who was actually good at them. Like Zac wasn’t going to distract him, though.

There was a lot of laughing and elbowing, and it was a good thing they went through the chocolate milk fast because the carton got knocked over, then the nearly empty popcorn bowl. A sharp knock on the door gave them pause, and then Kaede peeked in. Popcorn and pillows were everywhere, and the video game was still going.

“You playing a game or wrestling?” Kaede rolled his eyes at the sight of them. “Right. *Both*. Why didn’t I know?” He retreated before either of them could throw popcorn at him. Midnight slid by and found them slouched on each other, still plinking along in the game.

Eventually, Zac leaned over and butted his head against Bryce’s shoulder. “I’m gonna go check around, see if Kaede and Shelly are still here.” He wasn’t really in a hurry, except that... yeah, he really kind of was. It was fun, playing video games with Bryce, but he wanted time for them to kiss and touch, too.

“I’ll clean up the mess.” Bryce tossed the carton in the bowl and disentangled himself. “Then I guess I’ll get ready for bed.” He brushed a kiss over Zac’s lips before pulling away.

“See you later.” Zac tossed the game controllers up toward his TV, then got to his feet. He stretched, groaning as his muscles adjusted to standing again. “I’ll take the stuff back downstairs. Just, you know, turn off the game and stuff. You don’t have to clean up.” He took the bowl from Bryce and then padded out of the bedroom. The hallway was dark, but that wasn’t unusual.

Downstairs, the television was off and the house was quiet. Zac dumped the bowl out into the garbage, checked to make sure the dishwasher wasn’t full of clean dishes, and then stuck the bowl in. He headed back upstairs and listened at Kaede’s door to see if Kaede and Shelly were in there. No noise. Steve was snoring away at the end of the hall on that side, though. No one could hear anything over that kind of racket. Zac went back to his room to get ready for bed. To get ready to go to Bryce’s room.

Bryce had tidied up the room a little, and he was gone. By the time Zac headed to brush his teeth, Bryce’s door was closed and his light was off, but he knew Bryce was awake in there. Waiting for him.

Zac waited a little while longer, tossing a change of clothes and a few other things into a bag to take down to Bryce’s room with him, just in case he needed to get dressed in the morning to make it look like he’d just dropped by before practice. When he was done, he padded down the hall to Bryce’s room and slipped inside, closing and locking the door behind himself.

Leaving the bag at the foot of the bed, Zac stripped off his T-shirt and crawled into bed beside Bryce. The boxers could come off later. Bryce turned toward him, pulling Zac into his arms. He was naked, half-hard, and deliciously warm from being under the covers. He didn’t say a thing, just moved to kiss Zac on the mouth.

Zac kissed him back, trying to be just as quiet as Bryce was being. There was a whole empty room between them and anyone else in the house, but he was feeling a little skittish now that

he'd started thinking about getting caught. Damn it. Bryce reached up and hit the button on his clock and soft electronica filled the room. Not loud enough to wake anyone at all, but loud enough that any low noises from their sex wouldn't stand out against the silence. Genius.

Bryce slung a leg over Zac's hips, pulling Zac close, and ducked his head to kiss under Zac's ear. Zac was doubly glad for the music now, because Bryce's mouth on his neck drew soft moans out of him. He shivered and tilted his head, baring his neck to Bryce, and then wrapped one arm around Bryce to feel the way the muscles bunched and shifted under Bryce's skin.

Bryce was utterly focused on Zac, like he was pouring out all the tension that had built up over the week. He rolled up over Zac a little, his hard dick pushing against Zac's hip. Hitting fabric made him grumble and he reached between them to tug at Zac's boxers. "Wanna feel you," he complained.

"Yeah." Zac couldn't remember why he'd thought leaving the boxers on was a good idea. He arched up under Bryce and wriggled out of them, dropping them on the floor. "Better?"

"Better." Bryce petted Zac's thighs and up to brush over his balls and dick. "Lots." He curled his hand around Zac's dick. "Zac, I wanna..." His words trailed off as he stroked Zac slowly.

Zac arched up into the touches. "Whatever you want, Bryce." He couldn't imagine Bryce wanting anything he'd say no to. "Just tell me. Or show me. Or whatever." He could always stop Bryce -- gently -- if he didn't like it.

"I don't know," Bryce whispered. "I just... I want you so much, Zac. I just wanna be close to you, touch you. Last time... God. Zac. I wanted to be in you so bad." His voice was low and ragged. "You kept saying... it was making me crazy."

He'd kept begging Bryce to fuck him, Zac remembered. With Bryce's fingers deep inside him, it hadn't felt like a risk to say that. "It felt so good," Zac whispered. "The way you touched me. You can, you know. If you want to. But, Bryce..." Zac stroked Bryce's hair back from his face. "Only if you want to." The idea of Bryce fucking him was enough to make Zac get hard, but he was nervous, too. What if Bryce didn't like it, or what if he did like it, and got scared?

"I want to. I... I just want to make you feel good so much. I think about it. Being inside you, seeing your face, kissing you, feeling you come." There was a little glow from various pieces of electronics in the room, barely enough to see each other by, but Zac could feel the heat in Bryce's cheek when Bryce nuzzled his hand. Bryce's hand kept moving over Zac's dick, gently and firmly, making it so hard to think. "I don't want to screw up. But I... I just want to feel like we're really *us*, too. Together."

"We don't have to fuck to be together," Zac pointed out, but he wanted it. He wanted Bryce to fuck him, wanted to feel Bryce inside him. "That's not... not everybody does, Bryce. Some guys never do. But... Yeah. I like it. If you want it..."

“I know we don’t.” Bryce rubbed Zac’s chest with his free hand. “But it matters to me. I know it doesn’t seem like it from outside, but it’s a big deal to me, with anyone. Special. Even more special with you.” He leaned over and kissed Zac on the mouth, just a brush of his lips. “I want to do that with you. Make you feel good.”

Zac wasn’t like that, didn’t really look at fucking as any different from other kinds of sex except that it was harder to find someone who knew how to do it right. There was something nice about it being a big deal to Bryce, though, that Bryce wanted something special with him. It made Zac warm and fuzzy, on top of being turned on as fuck. “Okay.” Zac kissed Bryce back, and then again. “I want that, too.”

“Oh.” Bryce’s little exhalation sounded relieved. He kissed Zac with a moan. “Tell me... tell me how you like it,” he whispered between hungry kisses.

“Use your fingers first.” Zac kissed Bryce again, hot and slow. “You want me to turn over? It’ll make it easier.” And then maybe he could muffle himself on the pillows, if he had to.

“Any way you want.” Bryce kissed him as he reached into the drawer to get out lube, and then there was the crinkle of a condom wrapper. “Just tell me. I wanna give you what you want.”

Zac liked being able to kiss, but maybe they could do that next time. It would be easier on his knees, at least the first time. “Let me,” he said, reaching out to snag the condom from Bryce’s fingers. “And then I’ll turn over.”

“Okay.” Bryce sat back on his heels obediently. The covers sliding off let Zac get a good look at Bryce’s body outlined in the faint ambient light, at Bryce’s dick hard and ready for him.

“God, you are really fucking...” Zac swallowed hard and sat up, skimming his hand down Bryce’s chest to his belly and his gorgeous cock. “You look really good, Bryce.” He stroked Bryce’s cock.

“Oh.” Bryce leaned in to kiss him. “It’s good you like how I look,” he said, sounding shy. He watched Zac roll the condom on, eyes wide. “Feels nice when you do it,” he murmured.

Zac tilted his head to kiss Bryce again. They wouldn’t be able to kiss once he turned over, and he really liked how Bryce kissed him. He whispered, “I like touching you. A lot. And I really like how you look.” He left his fingers slide down to tease at Bryce’s balls, getting in all the touches he could.

Bryce got a hand on the back of his head and kissed him back hungrily. “Me, too. I mean. You. I like how you look. I make sure I don’t look in the showers, because you make me feel like I can’t breathe,” he confessed.

Damn. That made Zac want to roll Bryce over onto his back and kiss him until neither of them could breathe. He kissed over Bryce’s jaw and down to the soft spot behind his ear, and slid his

fingers back behind Bryce's balls to rub gently. "Gonna fuck me in the showers sometime?" he asked quietly, mostly teasing, even though the idea was very, very appealing.

"Yes." There wasn't any hesitation in Bryce's answer, and he slid a hand down between Zac's thighs, mirroring Zac's touches. "In the back, up against the wall, under the hot water."

Once the natatorium was closed down for the night, it was dim and abandoned, even a little creepy unless you were with someone. Zac muffled his moan against Bryce's neck. He slid his hand back up to stroke Bryce's cock lightly, just tracing his fingertips over the smooth condom. "S gonna feel so good," he murmured.

"I want you like that," Bryce whispered. He slid his hand back, his fingertips teasing at Zac's entrance. "Just... I want to put you up against the wall and fuck you, drag you off into the trees and pull you down to the ground with me, I just... *you* make me think those things. So many things. I can't believe my own head."

"God, Bryce..." Zac could imagine all of that, how it would feel for Bryce to want him that much, that he couldn't resist doing it like that. The way Bryce's fingers felt, touching him like that, just made the image more intense in his mind. "I wanna feel you fuck me."

Bryce nodded unsteadily. "Turn over," he said roughly. "I will. I wanna make you feel good. Just... just tell me anything you want me to do."

"Yeah." Zac shifted away and turned over, settling on his elbows and knees. He looked over his shoulder at Bryce. "This okay for you?" He didn't want to do anything that didn't work for Bryce; Bryce liking this was almost more important than whether *he* liked it.

"Yeah." The word came out raw, like a growl. Bryce ran a hand over Zac's ass and moved to get behind him. "You look so good." A moment later, a slick finger was teasing Zac's hole, circling and nudging in.

"Oh, yeah." Zac arched back into the push of Bryce's finger. "Just... Just like you did before." Bryce had made him feel so good, last time.

"I keep thinking about that." Bryce's voice was a low rumble, just loud enough to reach Zac's ears. "You were so fucking tight and sweet. And your dick in my mouth... it was so, so good. I wanted to pull my fingers out and push into you, feel you hot around me, fuck you until you came..."

Oh, fuck. "I wanted you to," Zac admitted, resting his forehead on the backs of his hands. It was hard to be patient, but he wanted to really be ready for Bryce; he didn't know how big a disaster it would be if Bryce hurt him accidentally, but it would be more than Zac thought he could repair. "I want you to, tonight. I want. Fuck, Bryce. Another finger, please."

Bryce gave him what he needed with a groan. "I wanna be in you, Zac."

Zac's hips rolled into the little thrusts of Bryce's fingers. Fuck, he wanted that so much, wanted to feel Bryce push into him and fuck him. "Yeah, Bryce. I want that, too. I want to feel you like that."

By the time Bryce had three fingers working in and out of Zac, he was whimpering. He couldn't stay still, not quite, and Zac could feel the way he was trembling. And the little noises Bryce was making... It was so hot, how fucking easy it was to make Bryce crazy with need. Zac hadn't felt that from anyone else he'd been with, not like this. Zac was panting, now, almost desperate for it.

"Fuck me, Bryce." He had enough presence of mind to add, "Go slow at first. Gimme a chance to get used to it, okay?"

"Okay." There was a pause as Bryce slicked his cock and then the head slid against Zac's asscrack and nudged inside. Bryce's breath caught and he leaned in slowly, letting Zac take him in. "Oh, God," he muttered. "Zac..."

"Yeah. Just like that." Zac's words came out on a soft moan, and he pushed back onto Bryce's dick, taking it faster. "Fuck, that's good. So good, Bryce."

"You are so fucking *tight*." Bryce's voice was in his ear now, aching and breathless. He had his hands on either side of Zac's shoulders and as he slid in, he pressed close against Zac's back. "Oh, fuck. *Zac*."

"Yeah, Bryce. God." Zac could feel his body just opening up and letting Bryce inside. He loved that feeling, the way he felt so tight inside, so vulnerable. "Just... just give me a second before you start moving." He needed to catch his breath, to relax a little more.

"Anything." Bryce kissed the side of Zac's neck. "God, Zac. So good." He stayed very still, trembling a little.

"You feel good inside me like that," Zac murmured, drawing slow breaths to let his body relax and open up. He gave a little roll of his hips, testing, and moaned with it. "Yeah, yeah, that's so good." He pushed back against Bryce. "C'mon."

Bryce moved slowly, a few shallow strokes before he leaned back and took Zac's hips in his hands. He moaned and his hands tightened as he moved a little faster, longer strokes. "Zac, oh, fuck. Zac. Tell me what to do."

The long strokes felt so good and deep. Zac shifted around, trying to get just the right angle. "I like it hard," he admitted quietly, rubbing his cheek against his knuckles.

Bryce wasn't tentative about it. He was careful, but he moved harder, moaning softly, fucking Zac with long strokes and pulling Zac back to meet him at the end of each. "Zac..." He moaned Zac's name, low and drawn out as he responded to Zac's moving and shifting, giving him a better angle.

“Bryce, fuck.” That felt so good, and Bryce sounded so good. Zac pushed back into Bryce’s thrusts, taking it, moaning with it. Bryce was so big inside him. “God, yeah, like that. Fuck me. You. Damn. So good, Bryce.”

Bryce gave it to him a little harder, but not faster, meeting him over and over and over again. His breath was ragged, coming out in soft grunts of pleasure. His hands were tight on Zac’s hips, and he was getting the hang of it. After a while, Zac had to burrow his face into the pillows to keep from crying out too loudly. It felt so good, especially now, as Bryce really seemed to be getting into it.

Zac always envied the way Bryce could focus when he had to, the way physical skills just came naturally to him. Seemed it was the same with sex. God, Bryce learned fast. He was on the verge of losing it, though. It showed in the way his hips rolled and whimpers escaped him, the way he was fucking Zac with more desperation now, filling Zac up with his big dick over and over again.

Zac could feel him slipping, and it was such a turn-on. He shifted over to one elbow and slid his other hand underneath him to jerk off. On impulse, though, he slid his fingers past his dick to feel Bryce’s cock pushing into him. *Oh, oh, man.* That was hot. He’d never felt that before. He could feel his own smooth, slick skin and Bryce’s cock and, fuck, it felt incredible. Bryce moved with him, and before Zac was done touching, Bryce’s hand curled around Zac’s dick and Bryce moaned again, louder.

“*Bryce...*” Zac barely managed to muffle his cry, and he had to drop his hand back down to the bed so he could brace himself.

“Fuck, you’re so hard,” Bryce groaned. “This what you want?”

Zac shuddered hard, shoving himself back onto Bryce’s cock and then forward again into Bryce’s hand. “Oh, fuck, Bryce,” he ground out, heat spreading through him. “Yeah. I want.” He kept moving like that, tight around Bryce’s cock, with Bryce’s hand tight around him, until he was muffling his sharp cries in the pillow and coming all over Bryce’s hand.

“Oh, God. Zac,” Bryce whispered, sounding awed. “Zac, I love making you come.” He buried his face in Zac’s neck to silence himself as he kept fucking Zac through his orgasm.

Zac couldn’t say anything; he just gave little moans in response to everything Bryce was saying and doing. It all felt so good. *So good.* He hadn’t expected it to feel that good, especially since Bryce hadn’t been with guys before him. Still, Bryce was so good at listening to what Zac needed, paying attention to what felt good, and that made all the difference.

Bryce came with a soft sob against Zac’s neck, his hips moving faster, his breath catching. He stopped stroking Zac to cling to him instead, pulling him back into his uneven thrusts. “Zac, Zac...”

“So good, Bryce,” Zac whispered, arching to make sure every thrust hit just right. “Yeah, wanna feel you come for me.”

Bryce shook as he came, tremors running through him as he drove into Zac again and again. He didn't say anything, gasping for breath, forehead pressed against Zac's shoulder as he finally quit moving.

Zac let his body slide down onto the bed, taking Bryce down with him. He felt so good, sated and warm all over. He recovered enough sense to remember to be worried about Bryce, though. “You okay?”

Bryce nodded against his shoulder, hanging onto him. He moved to shove his face against the nape of Zac's neck, breathing hard. *Oh, good.* Zac just rested there, relaxing and catching his breath, letting Bryce do the same. After a while, Bryce shifted, reaching for the tissues and pulling out slowly. His breath caught, and then he'd moved away and was cleaning up.

Zac swallowed down the instinctive whimper that always came when he was left empty after being so perfectly filled up. Bryce had felt even more deliciously big inside him than he'd imagined; everything Zac could handle while being taken hard. He rolled over onto his back and stretched out, feeling lazy and good.

“You okay?” Bryce hit the trashcan with the balled-up tissue and condom, even in the dark, then turned to Zac. He leaned over Zac, smoothing his hand over Zac's bare scalp.

“Mmmhmm.” Zac arched and stretched again, rumbling at how he could feel everywhere Bryce had been. “M good.” He reached up, cupping Bryce's cheek in his hand, and drew Bryce down for a kiss.

Bryce curled around him, seeking reassurance and kissing him back. “That was good,” he said unsteadily.

Oh, Bryce. “Yeah, it really was.” Zac brushed Bryce's hair back from his face. He couldn't see Bryce's expression, but he could hear his voice. It was getting easier to tell when Bryce was feeling edgy or worried about things.

“Good.” Bryce hid his face in Zac's neck and didn't say anything more; he just breathed.

Zac kept petting him, hooking one leg over Bryce's to hold him close. He nuzzled into Bryce's hair, trying not to worry too much about how quiet Bryce was being. They had such a good thing, being together, and he didn't want to think that having sex like this, letting Bryce fuck him, could've ruined it.

Bryce's breathing slowed until it was obvious that he was falling asleep. His breath caught with little hitches once in a while, but otherwise he was still. Even in near-sleep, he was trying to hold on to Zac as best he could, as though Zac were going to disappear. Zac held onto him and relaxed, closing his eyes and following Bryce down into sleep.

Chapter Six

Bryce slept terribly, but he managed not to wake Zac with it. He kept waking up with a shock every time his brain remembered what they'd done. Then he fell soundly asleep just minutes before he should have woken Zac up to go back to his own room. The alarm didn't go off, either. The sun was coming in around the blinds when he finally woke again, with Zac cuddled up in his arms.

Zac was sound asleep, smiling a little and curled up against Bryce like he belonged there. He was still completely bare, his silky, dark skin slightly tacky to the touch where lube or come had dried, but in his sleep, Zac didn't seem to mind. God, Zac looked sweet.

And, *shit*. It was late. God, what if someone had looked in Zac's room? What if they'd found out that Bryce's door was locked? They could put it together, and... Bryce made himself breathe and look at Zac instead. There was no good in panicking when something more important was right there in Bryce's arms.

Zac was so beautiful. Looking at him made Bryce's chest hurt. He knew Zac was casual about sex. So was Bryce, except when it came to actual fucking. That, he did with someone he was serious about. It wasn't something he wanted to get into with a girl unless he really liked her. Maybe it was different with guys; he'd been in more of a hurry than he'd expected, but it kind of didn't count because it was Zac. Zac was a special case.

He was serious about Zac, and he didn't know how serious Zac was about him. He didn't want to seem like a girl, getting all emotional about taking the step to fucking, getting emotional about dating and being together. He hated what a loser he was and kept cramming it down inside and hoping no one noticed.

Slowly, Zac started to wake up. Bryce could tell, because Zac was shifting around, snuggling closer, and making sleepy sounds. *So cute*. Bryce couldn't help the thought.

Zac blinked sleepily up at him, smiling. "Morning."

"Hey." Bryce smiled back, feeling a surge of anxiety and affection at once. "We kinda slept in. Sorry."

"Mmm." Zac closed his eyes and rested his face against Bryce's chest. "How late? We didn't, like, miss practice or anything, did we?"

"I think we missed everything." Bryce twisted a little to see the clock. "It's almost ten. I must have hit the wrong button last night when I turned on the music. Sorry." *I'm such an idiot*.

Zac yawned and raised his head to blink at Bryce. "Coach is gonna kill us. Maybe we can call him and make it up this afternoon or something." He smiled and shrugged a little. "It's not the first time I've missed practice. Probably the best reason, though."

That helped a little, so did the smile. “Maybe I should call,” Bryce said quietly. “And I should go make sure no one else is here.” He was really worried that Kaede had checked in on them. He’d have woken up if he’d heard the doorknob rattle, wouldn’t he? Kaede was grumpy with them lately and Bryce didn’t know why. Maybe he’d just left, or he’d been gone last night. Bryce wished he’d checked twice.

“Mmkay.” Zac bit his lip. “I’ve got a change of clothes in the bag I brought. I can, like, get dressed or something, if you want.”

“You don’t have to.” Bryce blushed as he wriggled out of bed, reaching for his boxers. “I mean. If no one’s home...” He tugged his boxers on; they did nothing to hide his morning erection.

That was exactly where Zac’s gaze landed. He dragged it back up to Bryce’s face and nodded. “Yeah, okay. I’ll just. Um. Stay here.”

That made Bryce want to just get back in bed with him. He pulled his robe on to try and hide his dick, then he looked back to see Zac lying in his bed, dark and pretty against the sheets. God, Zac belonged right there. Bryce came back and leaned over to kiss him hard.

Zac leaned up on his elbow to press up into the kiss. He got a hand in Bryce’s hair and petted him a little, like he didn’t want the kisses to stop.

Bryce pulled away reluctantly and stroked Zac’s cheek. “I’ll be right back. You want me to make you coffee or anything? I could bring you breakfast.” It wasn’t like they could salvage the morning anyway.

“Gonna make me Eggos again?” Zac fell back into the pillows and smiled up at Bryce. “Or do you want me to see if we’ve got Toaster Strudels or something?”

“I can make things from scratch,” Bryce said, rolling his eyes. “I’ll get you Toaster Strudels, though. Dork. It’s not ‘breakfast in bed’ if you get up and ruin it.” He was keeping his voice low in case they weren’t alone in the house. “I’ll be back soon.”

Zac laughed softly and dragged a blanket over himself. “Yeah, okay. I’ll be good. Toaster Strudels are yum.”

Bryce crept out and checked each room one at a time, finding the house empty. He put the coffee on and then dialed Coach’s cell number. *Damn*. He wasn’t looking forward to the phone call.

“McGill.” The voice on the other end of the line sounded distant, just like if Coach had been calling out while Bryce was in the water. Coach must have still been in the pool area; practice was still going on.

“Hey, Coach.” Bryce wanted to bang his head on the cupboard. “It’s Bryce. Wanted to apologize for not making it today.” He wasn’t one to miss practice, ever; his dad didn’t take that kind of

crap even when he was little, and Bryce would never hear the end of it now if he got kicked off the team for missing practices. *You don't make it in this world if you don't show up.*

“Are you sick?”

“No.” Bryce couldn't lie. “Just had a shitty night's sleep and couldn't wake up this morning. I'm really sorry.” He leaned his forehead against the cupboards and sighed heavily.

“You'll be doing extra laps tomorrow.” Coach McGill sounded worried, maybe because Bryce had never missed practice before. “If you need to talk, son, you know where my office is. Door's always open.” And then, giving Bryce an out, he asked, “Do you know anything about Mitchell missing practice?”

“I usually kick him out of bed,” Bryce said, before he realized how it applied now. “So, that's kind of my fault, too.” Then it all sank in and he wanted to die. *Oh, God.*

“I'll make sure to talk to him about getting himself an alarm clock, if that's the case. It's his responsibility to get himself here on time.” Coach McGill didn't sound angry, just matter-of-fact.

“Yessir.” Bryce tried not to bang his head on anything. “We'll be there tomorrow, early, to make it up.” It would suck, but they'd manage.

“If you're not, you're staying after to do double the extra laps.” Coach McGill didn't wait for Bryce's response. There was a click, and then Bryce was alone on the line.

At least Coach wasn't mad. Coach was good that way; Bryce had spent most of first year being totally confused about how little Coach ever yelled at anyone, especially him. Bryce put the strudels in the toaster and poured some orange juice. When the coffee maker was done, he fixed their coffee and put everything on the tray to take it up to Zac. Missing practice sucked, but it was worth it, once, for this.

Upstairs, Zac was still in bed. He'd rolled onto his belly, and the blanket had slipped down around his hips. His arms were wrapped around Bryce's pillow and his face was turned toward the door, like he'd been watching for Bryce, but his eyes were closed.

Bryce closed the door quietly and put the tray down on the table. Then he knelt down by the bed. Zac was so beautiful. It wasn't a woman's beauty; Zac was very masculine, but he was still beautiful. That was the only word Bryce had that fit. It applied to guys just fine. Bryce leaned in and pressed a tender kiss to Zac's cheek.

Zac smiled in his sleep, and then started to wake again. He blinked lazily at Bryce. “Hey. Sorry. I meant to stay awake.” He leaned in and caught Bryce's mouth in a light kiss, just as tender as the one Bryce had pressed to his cheek.

“I don't mind.” Bryce felt melted inside. “I got to see you sleeping in my bed,” he said softly. He kissed Zac again, smiling. He'd forgotten about anything else, even what a loser he could be.

“You could come back to bed, too,” Zac suggested, looking more than a little hopeful. “But you gotta at least take the robe off.”

Bryce stood up and slid the robe off so he could hang it up. He turned back to Zac and hooked his thumbs in his boxers, giving Zac a quizzical look. He wasn't sure what was okay here. Girls sometimes preferred a guy to keep the boxers on. But he wanted to be naked with his boyfriend. His boyfriend. Bryce was getting to be okay with that, even to love it. It was so amazing to think it and not be scared or mad about it. And that was all because of Zac being Zac.

Zac smiled like Bryce was offering him something really good. “Yes, please.” He rolled onto his back, drawing the blankets back so there would be room for Bryce to slip in underneath. “Especially if I get to play with what's under there.”

“All yours.” Bryce slid his boxers off and left them by the bed where they fell. He crawled in and over Zac, kissing him passionately, just because he was so happy he couldn't contain it. God, everything was easier with Zac -- comfortable and happy and sexy all at once.

Zac seemed to like that a lot. He made a pleased sound and tangled a hand in Bryce's hair, kissing him back just as fiercely. His other hand slid down Bryce's back and curled around his hip, holding on.

“I like being with you,” Bryce whispered between kisses. “Being your boyfriend.” He kissed Zac hard. “Being *yours*.” He was. He knew it was a sappy, loser-ish sentiment, but he couldn't help it. His chest was going to crack if Zac didn't know.

“I like being your boyfriend, too.” Zac kissed away from Bryce's mouth, down to the side of his neck, mouthing at the spot behind Bryce's ear. “I don't really date much, you know? But. I like being with you.”

“I'm glad.” Bryce was achingly glad of it. “God, Zac. You make me feel so good.” He pulled away to look down at Zac, not trying to hide how he was feeling. “I'm glad we missed practice.”

Zac bit his lip, and then he nodded. “Me, too. It was worth it.” He kissed Bryce again. “What'd Coach say? Was he mad when you called?”

“Worried about me.” Bryce sat back on his heels, picked up Zac's coffee, and offered it to him. “Said I could come talk to him if there was something wrong. Said you need to get an alarm clock.”

Zac laughed and took the coffee. “He's probably right. I mean, I've got one, but I always sleep through it. Maybe I should find one that actually wakes me up.” Not that that had been the problem this morning, but it was every other morning.

“We could get you that one on wheels that takes off and runs around the room.” Bryce shifted to sit beside Zac, facing him, and put the tray with their breakfast on the mattress between them. If

Zac slept with him, he'd make sure Zac got to practice on time, but that wasn't an option. Sleeping together that much wasn't smart, and people really *would* think something was up if Zac kept making it to practice on time like Bryce did.

Zac picked up a Toaster Strudel, took a bite, and then took a sip of coffee. "Maybe that'd work. I'd at least have to get out of bed to turn it off..."

More and more, Bryce found himself struggling to remember why they were keeping this secret. "I like the idea of you running around first thing in the morning," he teased.

Then Bryce remembered his family and reality came crashing back in. Right, that was why. Being disowned would be a disaster; he was going to lose his whole family if he came out about him and Zac. Him and anyone who wasn't a nice girl. He was already taking his chances with refusing to move out. How much more was he going to push it? Now wasn't the time to decide. Lost in his thoughts and staring into his coffee, he lost track of what Zac was saying.

"Hey." Zac nudged him with one foot. "You okay?"

"Oh." Bryce almost spilled coffee on himself. "Yeah." He shrugged and gave Zac a smile. "Just thinking. Sorry." He felt sadder than he had a month ago, but so much better. Less of a failure. Less scared, but with more to lose. How that could happen was beyond him.

"I'm naked in your bed, and you made me breakfast," Zac pointed out. "Now is not the time to be introspective or mopey unless you're going to tell me what's up." He put on a little pout, batting his long, pretty eyelashes.

"Just remembering why we don't tell anyone about us, that's all. I mean, aside from me being fucked up." Bryce took a drink of coffee to cover the tightness in his throat.

It hurt. Even if he wanted to come out, he couldn't. Not until he was ready to give up his family. Fucked up as they were, they were still his family. And Zac. It felt like he was saying Zac wasn't worth it. How was he supposed to compare?

"Oh." Zac looked away, taking a slow bite of his breakfast before continuing. "There's... I mean, there are some people it would be safe to tell, you know. People who wouldn't tell anyone else, I mean."

"I hate the feeling I got when Coach was asking where you were and why you weren't at practice. I could have just said, 'We slept in,' to begin with. But I didn't. I couldn't. And I'm sorry." Bryce was so honest it made him want to bang his own head on the wall. Instead, he made himself look at Zac.

"You could... I mean. I don't think he'd say anything, if you asked him not to, you know? And even if you didn't want to tell him about that, you could maybe talk to Coach about your dad and that article in *Game On* and the house and stuff. He's a good guy, you know?" Zac looked so serious, and maybe even a little worried about him.

“I could.” Bryce was worried about himself as soon as he said it. He’d never realized how much his dad stressed him out before, how it felt like carrying a bag of bricks around on his back. “Anyway, sorry.” He mustered up a smile. Zac was... Bryce didn’t deserve Zac. Wonderful. That’s what Zac was.

Zac shook his head and smiled, then leaned all the way over to kiss Bryce on the mouth, just lightly. “Don’t be. It’s okay. You should eat, though.” He made a threatening motion toward Bryce’s strudel. “Or I might do it for you.”

Bryce leaned in and kissed him back, ignoring the threat, kissing him tenderly and chastely and trying to pour his feelings into Zac that way. He wasn’t even sure of the words for it. All he knew was that his heart was too big for his chest sometimes. When he pulled back, Zac was smiling like Bryce had done something pretty damn good. Sweet and soft and just *happy*.

“You really should eat,” Zac said. “But when you’re done, you could maybe do that again.”

“I could.” The look on Zac’s face made Bryce feel better. He turned his attention to eating. Breakfast wasn’t bad at all, and the sun was warm on his back.

Zac ate, too, and drank his coffee. When he was done, he piled everything up on the tray and rolled onto his back with his head at the foot of the bed, basking in the sun and waiting for Bryce to finish.

When Bryce finished, he put the tray up on the pillows and lay down next to Zac, propped up on one elbow. He was full of wonderment that this was so good, that he could have all the closeness that he felt with his friend and all the trust and that they were lovers as well. It was, he realized now, not because Zac was a guy that he was feeling so close, but because he’d known and trusted Zac so long.

For the first time ever, he felt really *lucky* to be gay or bi or whatever the hell he was. It didn’t matter what the word was. He just felt so lucky to get to have all this wrapped up in one person. The thought made him smile.

Zac smiled back at him, and reached up to touch his cheek. “I know we’re guys and, like, we’re not supposed to talk about this shit, but... You’re okay with last night, right? It wasn’t a colossal fuckup on my part, pushing you too far, too fast?”

“Last night was good.” Bryce felt a little wave of nervousness. “I mean, as long as you were okay with all of it.” Including him being a loser about it being all special. Sometimes, he embarrassed himself so much and he still couldn’t let it go. He gave Zac another smile. “You didn’t push me. I think I remember asking.”

“Yeah, but.” Zac shrugged, biting his lip. “I don’t wanna make you feel like you gotta do anything.” He shook his head, like he was shaking off his worry, and then he was smiling again. “And, yeah, I was okay with all of it. It was good. Really good.”

“You don’t. Zac.” Bryce stroked his cheek and kissed his forehead. “I wanted that so much. I want *you*.” He couldn’t help being soppy where Zac was concerned; he was just going to have to accept that. Zac knew him and hadn’t dumped him yet. He took a breath and plunged onward.

“I’m freaked out,” he admitted. “I have no fucking idea what to do about any of this. Half the time lately, I want to bang my head into something to stop feeling so shitty, and the rest of the time, I’m stupid from being happy. Careless. I feel like a big fucking loser, too. Last night didn’t make it worse. I already came to terms with this, I think, at least enough for now. It’s still hard, but not because of us fucking. Does that make things worse?” Yeah, hitting his head on something sounded like a great plan.

“No.” Zac shook his head. “You gotta tell me this stuff so I don’t, like, fuck up and freak you out even more, or something. I’m still here, Bryce. If you freaking out was gonna send me packing, I’d be gone already.”

“It’s not you. It’s not even me and you. It’s just…” Bryce swallowed hard. “My whole life is going down the drain. I mean, my plans, the way I thought it was going to be, my whole future I thought I was going to have since I can remember. And the worst thing is, I wasn’t going to be able to keep my head on straight if it stayed the same. You know?”

“Then maybe it’s time to get new plans.” Zac rolled onto his side, facing Bryce. “I know what you mean. It’s… kind of why I started thinking about coming out last year, because if things didn’t change, I was going to be hiding forever, you know? And that’s… I don’t even want to think about what that would be like. I mean, my mom didn’t even know until I told her over winter break last year, and she’s… Lying is one thing, but pretending to be somebody else, I think it was just starting to drive me crazy.”

“That’s exactly it.” Bryce nodded slowly. “I want you to be happy, Zac. I don’t know…” He bit his lip and stroked Zac’s hair back. “I don’t know why you started dating me when you’re already out. I mean. Kind of counterproductive.”

Zac shrugged, ducking his head a little and looking embarrassed. “You’re worth it.”

Bryce was a little surprised at that, then he nuzzled Zac’s nose. “Oh,” he said quietly. “That… you’re an awesome boyfriend, Zac.” Zac didn’t answer, just tilted his head up enough to catch Bryce’s mouth in a kiss.

Bryce leaned over him to kiss him deeply. They’d already missed practice. Bryce and Zac had all morning in bed while the other guys were at practice, and Bryce wanted to remind Zac of that little detail. Zac made a surprised noise that quickly turned into a low sound of pleasure as he rolled onto his back and drew Bryce up over him with a hand in his hair.

Bryce followed obediently. The feeling of being nude in bed with Zac without having any tension about it was blissful and liberating. He ran a hand down Zac’s side and pulled away from

the kisses just long enough to murmur, “I want you,” against Zac’s lips. It wasn’t like it wasn’t getting very obvious, the way he was getting hard so fast.

“Food,” Zac muttered. “We’re going to end up wearing it if we don’t get it off the bed.” He was getting hard, too, and the warning sounded awfully reluctant.

“Don’t move.” Bryce pulled away to slide the tray onto the bedside table. When he turned back, he had a good look at Zac, all warm and dark and kissed by streaks of sunlight. It amazed him now, how deeply the sight of Zac affected him, made him ache. It was as though he’d imprinted on Zac’s body.

Zac was looking right back at him, his gaze traveling over Bryce as he slowly stroked himself. His long fingers running over his cock were beautiful. “God, you look good.”

Bryce was so enchanted by Zac playing with himself that he hardly registered the compliment. “Thanks,” he murmured, crawling up over Zac and ducking his head to nuzzle at Zac’s belly. “Tell me what you want?” he said softly.

“You.” Zac gave a breathless little laugh that sounded like a choked-off moan, his belly moving under Bryce’s mouth. “Anything, Bryce. What do *you* want?”

“You.” Bryce kissed Zac’s navel, licking into it. “I want to fuck you again. I want to see your face this time,” he murmured.

This time, Zac moaned outright. No pretense, no hiding it or trying to muffle it. “Yeah. Yeah, I want that, too, Bryce.” He was hard already, and his hand slid away from his dick to stroke Bryce’s hair, instead. “I want you. Fuck me.”

Bryce looked up as he moved enough to lick the head of Zac’s dick, watching avidly to see Zac’s reactions; he loved the way Zac’s eyes got wide. “I’ll get what we need,” he said softly. He sat up again and reached for the drawer in the table.

Zac sat up and trailed his fingers over Bryce’s dick, tracing the ridge and the slit. He was making hungry little noises, and he curled himself around Bryce to lick and kiss the back of his neck while Bryce was busy gathering lube and condoms from the drawer.

“Zac...” Bryce couldn’t hold back a moan, and he tilted his head forward to let Zac kiss his neck. “God, you feel so *good*.” He loved the way it felt when Zac touched him. It was like there was some extra energy between them that made everything feel amazing.

“So do you.” Zac murmured the words with his mouth pressed to the nape of Bryce’s neck, and then he kissed his way down and over Bryce’s shoulders as his fingertips continued teasing at Bryce’s cock.

“Zac...” This time it was a sound of pure pleasure as Bryce let his head fall back. Zac had confidence and dominance that balanced Bryce’s temperament perfectly. He always felt like he

was performing with girls. Like he had to try too hard, take care of so much; there was always so much pressure he put on himself to get everything right. With Zac, it was all so safe and easy now. He'd screwed up so much already; he had to trust that Zac was there for him. Like Zac could take care of him, too.

The touches were making his dick throb with his heartbeat. Safe wasn't the only word for how Zac made him feel. Bryce wanted to turn around and pin Zac to the bed with his weight, cover him with kisses, push slick fingers into him, just... take him. The thought made him shudder and moan again. He'd never thought like that about anyone, not until now.

Zac kept trailing his fingers down the shaft of Bryce's cock and then teased at his balls. "I love the way you feel." He rubbed carefully behind Bryce's balls, then back up to his dick again, still kissing Bryce's shoulders and up the side of his neck.

"I wanna feel you," Bryce said again, and it came out as a low growl. It surprised him how predatory he sounded. "Zac. I wanna be in you." He trembled a little; he was trying to be good.

Zac bit the side of Bryce's neck, muffling a moan, and his hand slid away from Bryce's dick. "Come fuck me. You felt so good last night."

Bryce turned and kissed him hard, using his body to push Zac back, to get between his thighs, to get him all spread out with his head at the foot at the bed and the streaky sun all over his skin. He kept kissing Zac hard as he got lube on one hand, being messy and careless with it, and pushing that hand down to tease his fingers against Zac's hole. He wanted to shove right in as fast as Zac could take it, but he wanted to hear Zac want it more.

Zac pulled his knees up to brace his feet against the bed on either side of Bryce, and writhed, pushing down against Bryce's fingers. He moaned into Bryce's mouth, sucking and licking at Bryce's tongue. Those raw, sexy responses were like throwing gasoline on a fire.

Bryce groaned and teased two fingers into Zac, paying attention to Zac's body, letting him feel the stretch without forcing anything. He could just do this all day, feeling Zac's body open up for him as he pushed in and grasp at him as he pulled out. He curled his fingers, knowing exactly where he wanted to touch now, and finger-fucked Zac so he hit it on every stroke.

Zac broke the kiss to moan again, low and wanting. "God, *Bryce*." He moved with every thrust of Bryce's fingers, head falling back, and mouth open on another moan.

"Yeah." Bryce could hardly speak, his throat was so tight. "I want that." He worked a third finger in, watching Zac's face.

Zac threaded his fingers in Bryce's hair and dragged him down for another kiss, hard and deep and desperate. He was fucking Bryce's mouth with his tongue, like he was begging for it, even demanding it.

Bryce pulled his mouth away, panting. He needed to move to get a condom on, and he wanted to hear Zac, too. He grabbed the condom in his free hand, tore it open with his teeth, and got it out, all while fucking Zac hard and deep with his fingers. Zac's moans sounded like growls now, harsh and needy.

"Fuck me," Zac ground out. "God, Bryce, please."

Bryce got the condom on and slid his fingers out, but only to slick his cock. He guided it into place without a word, leaning over to kiss Zac on the mouth, swallowing down Zac's sweet noises. Zac was so ready and it felt *so* good to slide into him.

Zac hooked his legs around Bryce's hips, taking him in deep. He was almost purring, low sounds of pleasure muffled by Bryce's kisses, and he was rubbing Bryce's back, aimless strokes like he felt too good to know what his hands were doing.

God. This is so good. Bryce wiped his hand off on the sheets and braced himself on his elbows. He drew back from the kisses to look at Zac's face and pulled out a little so he could fuck him.

"So good, Bryce," Zac murmured, bracing his feet on the bed again and giving Bryce room to move.

Bryce moved slowly at first, watching Zac's face for signs that this was good for him. Pleasure was written all over Zac's face, from his wide hazel eyes turned deep green with need, to his flushed cheeks, to his lips parted on a moan. He was arching up into every slow thrust, writhing, taking Bryce's cock in deep every time.

It felt like Bryce could lose himself in Zac, that there wasn't anything else in the world that mattered in this moment. It was good. He felt free, like he'd finally found what mattered. He wanted to say so much, but he was caught in the silence that came with all the pleasure he felt.

Instead, Bryce ducked his head to lick and kiss Zac's throat, sucking gently at the soft skin there, moaning in the back of his throat at the way Zac shivered for him. Zac's neck was so sensitive; Bryce loved getting his mouth on it. Zac tilted his head, baring his neck like he was begging for more.

"Like that," Zac murmured roughly. "I like that."

Bryce bit gently with a soft growl, pushing in deeper. He loved feeling like Zac was his, reveling in how much Zac trusted him. He worshipped Zac's tender throat while they fucked, making soft noises of pleasure. Zac's breath came faster, interspersed with little whimpers and desperate little rolls of his hips.

"Bryce. Bryce, I need. Oh, fuck." Zac sounded shocked. He shuddered and suddenly he dug his fingers into Bryce's back as he arched up hard, fucking himself on Bryce's cock until he was shouting Bryce's name and coming all over his chest and belly.

All Bryce could do was move with him, give him what he needed as he came. “Zac, God, Zac,” Bryce whispered.

Even after Zac stopped coming, he kept moving. “Don’t stop.” He bit his lip, grinding his body up against Bryce’s to take Bryce’s cock as deep as it would go. “God, Bryce, don’t stop. So good.” He looked like he was made of need and intensity, his eyes dark like he was still desperate for it.

Bryce kissed him softly, a brush of lips, and whispered, “I won’t.” Zac liked it hard; he remembered that. He just hadn’t expected Zac to come so soon, hadn’t expected to affect Zac like that. It shook him a little, realizing all over again that Zac really *wanted* him, that Zac really *loved* getting fucked. Bryce kissed Zac to soothe him and kept moving, harder now, trying to give Zac everything he needed and more.

Zac kissed him back fiercely, messily, breathing little pleas and compliments between kisses. *So fucking good, Bryce. Want you. Just like that. You feel so good. So good.*

Bryce fucked him hard and steady. It was incredible to be wanted like this, to know that he turned Zac on and made him feel this good. Bryce kept waiting to feel wrong or dirty about it all, but the feeling never came. All he felt was amazing.

“I want you,” Bryce whispered, looking down at Zac’s beautiful face. “I wanna make you happy. I just wanna be good for you.” That was all he ever wanted, with anyone, but Zac was the one he could say it to.

“You are,” Zac said. “You do.” He rubbed at one of Bryce’s shoulders and said, “Roll over? I wanna... I want to ride you.”

It took a moment to work out how to make it happen, but Bryce managed to roll them both over and then he was sprawled in the bed with Zac straddling him. *Oh.* Zac looked so good from here. Bryce knew, before Zac even moved, that he liked this. He reached out, leaning up to kiss Zac.

Zac settled on his knees and bent to kiss Bryce hard, sucking at Bryce’s tongue as he moved. He moaned into the kiss as Bryce’s cock pushed in even deeper than it had before. “God, Bryce...” He kissed Bryce again, hot and deep.

“Oh, God, I like this,” Bryce whispered between desperate kisses. “I wanna watch you have me.” He wanted to be Zac’s so much, any way he could be.

Zac smiled against Bryce’s mouth and sat up again, letting Bryce see everything as he moved. Zac rode him slowly, sliding up and down on his cock. “Feels so good, Bryce,” he murmured. “You’re so... Fuck. So fucking *big* inside me. God.”

Big wasn’t always appreciated, as much as girls liked to go on about it. Bryce always tried to be gentle and careful in bed. But Zac... Zac was here, loving it, and it felt so good. “Fuck, Zac,” he breathed. “You can have it whenever you want.” He was starting to really love sex.

“Jesus. All the time, Bryce.” Zac looked like he meant it, too, impaling himself on Bryce’s cock over and over again. He seemed totally focused on how Bryce’s dick felt inside him, making little noises and pushing himself down like he could get more if he just tried.

“So gorgeous. Zac...” Bryce got his hands on Zac’s hips, moving under him to help him feel even better. It was amazing to see Zac all turned on like this, hard even after he came, spattered with come, riding Bryce’s cock hard. It felt so good, so hot and tight, that Bryce was panting.

Zac’s moans came even louder, faster, when Bryce moved under him. “Oh, fuck, Bryce. Yeah. Like that. Fuck me.” He sounded so needy.

How could Bryce do anything else? He was obsessed with watching Zac take his pleasure. “You can have anything. All yours,” he whispered.

Zac moved faster, harder, grinding himself down onto Bryce’s dick and shuddering with it. He was panting, gasping out little moans, obviously getting closer and closer to coming again.

Bryce bit his lip, feeling a sudden wave of heat. “Zac...” He grabbed Zac’s hips harder, heels digging into the mattress as he tried to fuck Zac deeper. He’d thought he was in total control and, suddenly, he wasn’t. He couldn’t even keep from crying out. He was so close and he didn’t want to let go, didn’t want to stop. Zac didn’t want him to stop.

“Oh, God. Yeah, Bryce.” Zac let Bryce move him, let Bryce *have* him. “Fuck, yeah. Just like that. Wanna feel you like that.” And then Zac was coming, arching and spattering Bryce’s chest and belly with his second orgasm of the day.

That was too much. Zac’s first orgasm had taken Bryce completely by surprise; this one was even more intense, and he got to see it. He was so close to coming already, he couldn’t stop it. He bucked up as the first wave of his orgasm hit, his head fell back, and he couldn’t stay quiet and he couldn’t stop driving into Zac, writhing and trying to get more of what felt so amazing. Zac rode him through it, fucking himself on Bryce’s cock until they were both well and truly spent. Then Zac slumped over, resting his forehead on Bryce’s chest, and mumbled something unintelligible, something that sounded happy, pleasure-drunk and satisfied.

Bryce didn’t remember having sex like that before. Ever. “So good,” he whispered. So worth missing practice.

“Mmm,” Zac rumbled, rubbing his cheek against Bryce’s chest and then kissing him there. “I think I actually came my brains out. God. I’m not sure I can *move*.”

“Me either. Wanna sleep?” Bryce was ready for it. A nap sounded good. He was going soft inside Zac and the condom wasn’t comfortable, but he didn’t care.

“Yeah.” Zac stretched up to kiss the side of Bryce’s neck, then settled down again. “Sleep sounds good.”

Bryce would put up with almost anything for more of this. This was bliss. “We can do that again anytime,” he murmured. He hugged Zac to him. “I love watching you come.”

“Feeling’s mutual,” Zac murmured, kissing Bryce’s neck again. “We’re good together, Bryce. I like being with you, any way.” He sounded drowsy already, nuzzling against Bryce’s chest and making sleepy little sounds.

Bryce loved every minute of cuddling as Zac fell asleep. He kissed Zac’s temple and luxuriated in knowing how *good* they were together. Hell, they were *perfect*.

They slept soundly, with Bryce waking only when they shifted enough for him to slip the condom off and get it into the trashcan. Then he cuddled Zac up again and fell back to sleep in the sun.

Chapter Seven

They had a blissful day, but Steve and Kaede were home by dinner, so they decided to sleep apart. Even the evening wasn't bad, though; the four of them got to hang out for once and Steve and Kaede hassled them mercilessly about missing practice. They did get to hold hands in the cold morning on the way to the natatorium and stole a few kisses on the path through the pines. Even that was good.

The extra laps sucked. Bryce was showering off, after, just feet from Zac, careful not to look at him. "I'm gonna talk to Coach," he said in a low voice. "So, you don't have to wait for me." Part of him wanted Zac to wait for him; he had no idea how he'd feel after the discussion.

"I've got some studying to do. I'll... Maybe I'll hang out in the lounge upstairs?" There was an athletes' lounge near the swimming and diving coaches' offices, with little desks for studying and couches for relaxing. "Um. If you want to come find me there, after."

"Sure." Bryce slicked his hair back and looked at Zac over his shoulder just once. "I'll find you." He wanted Zac to come with him, but he turned away and went to get dressed. He slowly pulled his clothes on and shouldered his bag. Taking a deep breath, he headed for the coach's office. The door was open and so he knocked on the frame and stopped at the threshold.

Coach McGill looked up from his desk and saw Bryce standing in the doorway. "Tellier. Bryce. Good work at practice today." He waved Bryce in. "Come on in. Everything okay?"

"Um." Bryce walked in and closed the door. "Kinda. Sorry I missed practice yesterday." He'd been off lately, in weird ways that weren't like him. Even when his times were improving and he was losing weight, there were other things, like lousy starts and lagging behind mentally. Didn't matter how much better he got physically, it wasn't worth it if his mind wasn't in it.

That was why Bryce had to say something; he had to quit letting Coach down and the only way to do that was to talk to him. He came in and bit his lip, debating whether or not to sit down. Coach had been patient about all his screw-ups so far, for more than three years now, praising the stuff he got right and ignoring the stuff he got wrong. Truth was, that was making Bryce nervous, too. He didn't want to lose Coach's respect.

Coach McGill gestured toward the chairs positioned beside his desk. The desk itself was pushed up against the wall on one side, opposite the floor-to-ceiling windows that let Coach look out over the pool. The chairs were far enough from the windows that no one could see who was there, which made Bryce feel a little better.

"Have a seat," Coach said. He took one chair, leaning forward and bracing his elbows on his knees. "You already apologized about practice, Bryce. Two times." Once on the phone and once at practice. "So I know that's not why you came up here, or at least, not the only reason."

“My dad...” Bryce sat down in his chair and rubbed at the knee of his jeans where they were almost worn through. He’d gone down on the asphalt playing basketball last spring. “He read that article in *Game On*, the one about Perry and Zac. A few weeks ago. He... um. He was saying he doesn’t want me living in the house now, ‘cause Zac’s still there.” He couldn’t look at Coach. The memory of the conversation made him want to cry all over again, or put a hole in another wall. Worse, now. It was pure frustration, nothing more. “I haven’t talked to him since.” He’d been letting the phone go to voicemail and not listening to the messages the last couple weekends.

“I see.” Coach nodded slowly. “You don’t want to move out, I take it? You never seemed to have any problems with Perry or Zac in the past.”

“No. Neither. I just.” Bryce felt his throat tighten more. “He’s always been like that. Him and my brothers. He acts like...” He shrugged. “...you know. I keep not answering my phone. He’ll get pissed whenever he has the time.”

“He doesn’t want you living there. Did he say anything about what he was going to do about that?” Coach pulled a Rolodex toward him on the desk and flipped through it, but he kept glancing up at Bryce; he was still paying attention.

“Stop paying for it, he said.” Bryce sighed and slumped back in the chair, feeling sick. “Or didn’t say. He’s not paying for me to live in a house with Zac, that’s what he said. He wasn’t pushy about it. He just expects me to move. He’s used to me doing what he says. But I’m not moving out. I can’t. I don’t want to, but I also *can’t*, you know? I’ll just... I don’t know. Get a job, probably.”

That was going to be a new one. Bryce had always worked for his father, at the firm or on the boat, or as a caddy, whatever was there to be done in the summer. It always seemed like a cool thing, working for the family and getting paid really well for it. Bryce was just now starting to see that it was also a way to make sure that he wasn’t getting anywhere in life without his family’s help.

Coach McGill copied something from a Rolodex card onto a piece of paper, then passed the paper over to Bryce. “Go down to the athletic department offices. You want Linda Post; her office number and information is on there. I’ll give her a call, let her know to expect you. Linda handles the scholarship and work-study funding; she should be able to find something for you.” He looked at Bryce seriously. “If you can promise me you’re going to be here -- *here*, with the team, focused -- for the rest of the season.”

Bryce took the paper and looked at it, nodding, then looked up at Coach, taking in his words. This felt like the real big step. “I’ll try and keep my mind on it,” he said quietly. “I gotta... you know... take care of things with my family. Just. Find the right time and get it over with.”

Then he’d be alone. He couldn’t believe it had come down to this. He really felt ill. He was going to say he wasn’t moving out of the house. He needed to come up with a good reason to

stay or his dad would draw the line and that would be it, he'd be cut off. All the good reasons in the world didn't make him less scared. But... he couldn't lose Zac or his freedom or his integrity.

"It's going to be okay, Bryce." Coach reached over to squeeze his shoulder. "My door's always open. I'll do anything I can to help, and you can always come by to talk, understand?"

"Yeah." Bryce put the paper in his pocket. "I hope when I tell him I'm not leaving, he doesn't freak and I can make it through the year like normal. If he finds out about me and Zac, he will," he added, in a rush. It felt like if he told Coach, it'd be safer, somehow. He felt clammy and terrified as soon as he said it, and he could feel the blood drain from his face. He was usually a blusher, and he hated it, but he felt white now.

"You and Zac?" Coach McGill's eyebrows went up, and then he just nodded, like it made sense. "Sometimes," he offered, "it's different when it's your own child. He's your father, not Perry's, not Zac's, and I'm sure he loves you." He squeezed Bryce's shoulder again. "But that's not something you have to tell anyone until you're ready."

"I'm not telling him. It's just... he finds things out. That's why we're not telling anyone else. I hate not being honest, but you don't know him." Bryce shook his head. "I know how he feels. Guess there's nothing I can do about it. Just hope for the best." He rubbed his hands against his thighs. "I'll concentrate better now, though," he said, making himself breathe slower. "I can focus. I promise."

"I believe you." Coach gave him a smile that was real, like he actually did believe Bryce. "You've got a good head on your shoulders, Bryce. And you can come talk to me whenever you need to. My door's always open."

"Thanks, sir." Bryce still felt off, but he felt better. Now he wanted to go hide in bed with his boyfriend and order Chinese, even if it was fattening, even if they had to say they were playing video games to get to be alone. He got to his feet and shoved his shaking hands in his pockets. "I better get going. I'll see you next practice."

Coach nodded and stood up with Bryce. He gave Bryce a one-armed hug, just enough to be comforting without being smothering. It was startling, but it felt good. Bryce realized that he hadn't expected anyone to touch him after they knew, and the thought made his chest twist.

"Tomorrow," Coach said. "Go get some rest. I want to see you in top form at practice tomorrow. And don't forget to go see Linda Post at the athletic department if you need to. She'll be expecting you."

"I will, sir. Thanks. I'll try and sleep." Bryce didn't even blush at that. He hadn't been lying about the bad night's sleep. "Thanks again," he said, with his hand on the doorknob. He closed the door behind him and his feet took him off to find Zac while his head was processing everything.

Zac was in the lounge, as he'd said he'd be. He was sprawled out on the biggest couch, but somehow he'd managed to turn himself upside down. The book he was reading wasn't exactly gripping material to start with, and his mind kept wandering to worrying about Bryce, so his body wandered, too. When Bryce walked in, Zac peered at him from upside down.

"Hey." He tried to wiggle around to sit upright, but just ended up falling onto the floor. "Um. Hey," he said again, when he'd righted himself. "How'd it go?"

Bryce didn't even laugh at his antics. "Okay." He looked pale, maybe even a little green, like he was sick. "He's going to set me up with some kind of finance counselor in case my dad cuts me off when I tell him I'm not moving out. She'll help me find work. I realized on the way down that I could just sell the car. I don't need it right now." He swallowed and shrugged. "Do you think we could go home?"

"Yeah, sure." Zac scrambled to his feet and dumped the book into his backpack. "Let's go." He walked over to Bryce and, hiding the motion with his backpack, he took Bryce's hand in his, whispering quietly, "You okay, Bryce?" Bryce didn't look okay, not at all, and it was making Zac's stomach twist up into knots.

Bryce's hand was cold when Zac took it and he held on tight. "I... not right now. I mean. Probably later, right? I just want to go home." He took a deep breath. "We can talk there." He looked crappy, but not quite falling apart, at least.

"Okay." Zac gave his hand a little squeeze and then, reluctantly, let it go. "Let's go." This time, he meant it. He led Bryce home, holding his hand along the seldom-used paths and staying close the rest of the time. He was glad Bryce had gone to talk to the coach, that someone other than him knew what was going on and was trying to help, but he didn't like the way Bryce was looking right now.

Bryce seemed to relax a little on the way home, but he held Zac's hand tightly. They had to let go when they got to the house; Steve was sprawled on the couch, on the phone with someone. Bryce kicked his shoes into the closet, hung up his jacket, and turned toward Zac. He still looked drawn, but not quite ill.

"Wanna play Mario?"

"You kicked my ass last time," Zac said, ditching his own shoes and coat, but keeping his backpack over his shoulder. "Let's play that racing thing, instead. My turn to win some." He aimed a wave at the couch and headed for the stairs, hoping Bryce would follow. "I'll come down for popcorn and Hot Pockets later."

"I feel like Chinese." Bryce tagged along at his heels. "And beer."

Zac looked back over his shoulder, surprised. "Yeah?" Bryce never ate Chinese anymore, because he was always watching his weight, but he'd slimmed down a lot with drinking less beer

and working out harder. Maybe now wasn't the time to be avoiding beer, though. "Okay. I got the takeout menu in my room. You know what you want?" He led Bryce into the room and closed the door behind them.

"Anything." Bryce nudged him up against the back of the door and kissed him, soft and needy. His breathing was fast and uneven and he pushed his cold hands up under Zac's shirt.

Oh. Zac dropped his backpack on the floor and wrapped his arms around Bryce. He kissed Bryce slowly, trying to use the connection to soothe him. It worked, some. Bryce relaxed, but it was more like slowly falling apart; not in some terrible way, just all the stress seeping out of him.

It had to have been hard for him to talk to Coach, especially with how badly he'd reacted just to the phone call. "I told him," Bryce whispered. His hands were shaking when he touched Zac's chest. "About us." His voice broke.

"Okay. I told you that you could. Coach is cool." Coach McGill had known before the article had come out that Zac was queer. Zac had gone to talk to him about the article before the interview, even. It was kind of a relief to know that Coach knew about his relationship with Bryce now, too.

"I kept thinking what it was gonna be like being around him all the time and waiting for him to work it out, not looking at you, not touching you, not even a little, and not knowing what he was gonna do and I can't do that, I can't let it hang over my head, Zac." The words spilled out of Bryce. "And I couldn't... I just didn't know what it was gonna be like, no one in the world knows but you, and I gotta look at every single person like 'do they know?' and 'would they still talk to me if they knew?' every day." Bryce barely managed to stop for breath.

"And he just nodded like it made sense and that was really fucking scary because what if he can tell, Zac, what if it shows, and I felt really sick. But then when I was going, he hugged me, and I knew I never expected anyone but you to touch me ever again, but he did, and..." Bryce ran out of words and pushed his face into the curve of Zac's neck, hiding.

Oh, Bryce... "It's okay, Bryce. Coach... he knows us." That was all Zac could think to say. Coach had known both of them for three years now. They'd been best friends for three years. Coach knew that. "He's known us for a while, you know. We've been friends a long time. And he's a good guy. He's cool. You saw him with Perry. He's not going to treat you different just 'cause you told him about us."

Bryce nodded, just breathing now, like he was trying to keep calm. "Part of me wants to just tell my dad. Tell him and say, 'Fuck you,' and walk away."

Zac just kept stroking Bryce's hair. He remembered how terrifying it had been to tell his mom, and he'd never heard her say anything like the things Bryce had listened to his dad and his brothers say about gay people. "When you're ready, Bryce."

“I’m trying not to do it out of wanting to kick him in the ‘nads so hard, I get a black eye,” Bryce said dryly. “Oh, God, Zac. I just want to survive this stupid shit and be happy with you and, you know... be with you. Without any crap.”

“We’ll get there.” Zac wanted it, too. “It just... it’s not gonna be easy, that’s all.”

Bryce moved to kiss Zac on the mouth, slow at first. He cupped Zac’s face in his hands and kissed him again and again, slow and sweet. “I’m still lucky,” he whispered. “I know it.”

“Me, too.” Zac kept his arms around Bryce’s waist and rubbed the small of Bryce’s back. “We’re gonna be fine.” He leaned up on his toes to get more kisses, angling his mouth against Bryce’s. Bryce’s kisses were addictive.

Bryce was making little moans as he kissed Zac now, kissing him deeper and hungrier. “I want you,” he said, his voice rough with it. He kissed Zac hard and hungry. “I wanna be with you right now, Zac. Don’t care what we do. Wanna feel you.”

The change was so drastic, from the uncertain lover Bryce had been a few weeks ago, to now, when he was so sure of what he wanted and maybe that it was okay for him to have it. “Yeah.” Zac slid his hands down to Bryce’s ass, cupping it and drawing him closer, pressing himself against the door with Bryce’s body. “I want you, too.”

“I wanna feel it and not be scared of it,” Bryce said, and then he whimpered a little, grinding his hardening dick against Zac. “I wanna know it’s gonna be okay, Zac. I wanna know you want me, that it’s good for you.” He sounded like he was caught between begging and demanding, restless and needy.

Zac arched to pull his shirt off, then dropped it on the floor. “I do want you. God, Bryce, so much.” He reached behind himself to lock the door, then stripped off his jeans, too, letting them fall to the floor. His boxers went next, and then he was naked. Bryce was still dressed, but not for long. Zac immediately reached for the button on Bryce’s jeans. Bryce needed to be naked now, too.

“Yeah, like that.” Bryce pulled off his shirt and let Zac undo his jeans. “I want you like crazy. *You* make all this worth it.” Together, they got him undressed.

When Bryce was naked, too -- and, fuck, he was glorious like that -- Zac gave him another kiss, hot and slow, and then slipped away for lube and a condom. When he came back, Bryce was still standing there, and Zac got a good look at him from behind. Gorgeous. He leaned up on his toes and kissed Bryce’s shoulder, his hand going to rest on Bryce’s opposite hip.

“You look so good, I could just eat you up.”

Bryce looked over his shoulder and looked down at Zac. “You could do that, yeah.” He bit his lip and his eyes were dark with need. “What do you want? You can have anything.”

“I want you.” Zac knew better, by now, than to take that at face value. Bryce might have meant it, but that didn’t mean Bryce was ready for anything. He slipped around in front of Bryce and cupped Bryce’s cheek in his free hand. “Kiss me again.”

Bryce kissed him hard, pushing him back up the door. Bryce kissed like he meant it, like he wanted anything Zac would give him. It was so good, the way Bryce managed to be so big and powerful and protective without ever being domineering. He tangled his fingers in Bryce’s hair and kissed him back, moaning.

“Tell me what you want,” Bryce whispered, and slid his leg between Zac’s thighs. He ducked his head and bit Zac on the neck, sucking lightly.

Zac wanted all kinds of things. He wanted to suck Bryce off and kiss him all over and fuck him through the floor. He wanted to turn around and feel Bryce push into him, too. That was the option he chose. “Fuck me. I want you to fuck me again.”

Bryce groaned against Zac’s skin. “Yeah. I wanna fuck you, Zac. So much.” He slid a hand down to tease his fingers in between Zac’s ass cheeks even as he was kissing up to Zac’s ear. “Wanna be in you, Zac. Wanna make you fight to stay quiet when I fuck you. I like fucking you. Gotta practice.” His fingers got in and stroked Zac’s hole. “Gotta make you happy; you make me so happy.”

“Bryce...” Bryce didn’t need to worry about practicing, or about making Zac happy. He was already doing that in spades. “God, Bryce.” He just couldn’t think of the words to say it, not when Bryce was touching him like that.

“Lube...” Bryce fumbled to take it away from Zac. “You feel so good. Love touching you,” he muttered between kisses. “Never thought I’d like it. Never thought I’d think what you make me think.”

“Someday, when you’re ready, I’m gonna show you what it feels like. How good it is.” Zac gave up the lube, but held onto the condom, kissing Bryce fiercely.

“You...” That derailed Bryce and he stepped back, mishandling the lube so that the lid went one way and the bottle went the other. “I...” He looked totally thrown.

Shit. “Bryce...” Zac bit his lip and tentatively pressed his hand to Bryce’s bare chest. “I didn’t mean now. We don’t have to. Not ever, not if you don’t want to. I just...”

“You want to?” Bryce backed up and bumped into Zac’s bed, sitting down before he fell over. “With me?” He crossed his arms in his lap, looking anxious.

Zac had no idea what the right answer was, here. He stayed by the door, giving Bryce some space. “Only if you want to. I mean. I want *you*, Bryce. However I can have you. But... do I like that? Do I think I’d like it with you? Yeah. But only if you wanted it.” Honesty was good, so was space.

Bryce looked lost, wide-eyed and vulnerable. “I just... I never. Never thought about... that you...” He bit his lip, trying to put it together in his head. “You know. Would want that with me.” He looked like someone had cut his strings, so uncertain so suddenly.

Zac double-checked that the door was locked, then grabbed his robe and came to sit on the bed beside Bryce. “Should I not?” That didn’t come out right. “I mean...”

“No, I just. I never thought about it... that way.” Bryce looked really upset, but Zac thought he might just be mad at himself as usual. “I guess. God, I think about sex with you a lot, but I try not to think about it... out of context. Or something.”

“Out of context?” Zac wasn’t sure what that meant. He hoped it didn’t mean Bryce had been thinking as long as he was the one doing the fucking, he wasn’t really queer. Zac didn’t want to go there, didn’t want to deal with that, because there was no good way to fix things if that was where Bryce’s head was. He took a deep breath and touched Bryce’s shoulder, trying not to make things worse by being too close, but he didn’t want to make Bryce feel like Zac didn’t want to touch him, either.

“I try not to think about...” Bryce took a slow breath. Naked and miserable, he could look pretty small for a big man. “All the stuff that used to be in my head when I was younger. Stuff I was scared of; what I was scared of being. Of being *done* to me. I try not to think of that. And us. At the same time.” He looked over at Zac, guilty and sad. “I just... I wasn’t expecting those brain pictures just now. Y’know?”

Oh. Now Zac felt guilty. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know it scared you like that. I just... You make me feel so good when you fuck me, you know? And so I just... wanted to let you know that I want to make you feel that good, too.”

“I know.” Bryce stared down at his knees. “That’s what makes it worse. I want to be able to do *anything* with you, Zac. Everything. I’m not scared of it; I’m scared of me. When I’m not careful, what I have with you just... it gets dirty in my head.” His voice broke and he shivered. “Ruined. I was just already feeling... wrong... ‘cause of telling Coach. Kinda naked and dirty. You saying it was a surprise, that’s all. You know?”

Zac nodded, even though he wasn’t sure what he knew. All the things he didn’t know left a sick feeling in his stomach, but he swallowed it down to deal with Bryce, instead. “You wanna maybe tell me some of the stuff that’s freaking you out? So I can, you know, not freak you out on accident.” He shuffled closer and Bryce slid an arm around him.

“The idea of you fucking me doesn’t freak me out.” Bryce leaned his head on Zac’s shoulder and sighed. “It’s just... when I already feel bad, and I think of wanting it, something in me starts flipping out, because I’ve been scared of it so long. I know sex is a *good* thing. God, I think you are the hottest thing in the world when you want it.” His voice broke again. “I wanna give everything to you, I want you to get to have all of me. And all I can think is I’m never gonna get to ‘cause I can’t stop from feeling so bad.”

Oh. That sounded... well. Better and worse than Zac had expected. "We'll figure something out." He tried to sound more certain of that than he really was.

"We will. I know we will." Bryce sounded hurt, but there was a surprising note of conviction in his voice. "I love you, Zac." He said it so easily, like it was stating the obvious.

Zac would never have said it first, but only because he didn't want to pressure Bryce while Bryce was dealing with so much other crap; he'd thrown out the idea of expecting to hear it, too. But he felt it. They'd been friends for so long, it had been an easy transition from Bryce being his best friend to Bryce being the man he was in love with.

"I love you, too, Bryce."

Bryce lifted his head to look Zac in the eyes. "I am *so* sorry I'm a freak, Zac. I don't ever want you to think I really think anything bad about us, okay? I think you're the best person in the whole world." His expression was so serious and sad and loving.

"You aren't a freak, man." Zac didn't know how to get him to stop saying that. "You're just... dealing with a lot of shit." He leaned in and pressed a light kiss to Bryce's cheek -- he wasn't sure if anything more than that would be safe. "Maybe sometime, you'll let me touch you a little -- just touching, nothing inside -- and we'll see if you like that. We can take it slow. If we never do it, it'll still be okay."

Even that made Bryce shiver, but he nodded. "Okay." He kissed Zac back, but on the lips this time. He cupped Zac's cheek in his hand and his tongue snuck out to brush Zac's lower lip. "God. I love you, Zac," he breathed, like it was just hitting him that he'd actually said it.

"I love you, too." Zac smiled against Bryce's lips, and then kissed him again, slow and soft.

Bryce slid a hand under Zac's robe to touch skin and yielded to the kiss for a long time. "I still want you," he said at last, with a catch in his voice. He stroked Zac's head and the back of his neck, and gave him little kisses while he spoke, his voice low and aching. "I want to be naked in bed with you, in your arms, Zac. I want to make love to you. I want to lie with you and know that's where I'm supposed to be."

Zac loved hearing Bryce talk like that. It made it seem like, someday, Bryce might really be okay with all of this. "I want that, too." Zac shrugged out of the robe and let it fall to the bed. "Let me go get the lube and stuff."

"Okay." Bryce pulled away and let him go. While Zac was picking up the scattered lube bottle and lid and putting them back together, Bryce pushed back the covers of Zac's bed and lay down, half-curved on his side, waiting for Zac to come back to him. When Zac turned around, Bryce shifted enough that he could hold his arms out to Zac. Zac slipped back into bed and rolled over to press himself up against Bryce. Bryce was so warm and so big, especially compared to Zac.

“Show me what you want to do?” Zac asked, handing over the lube and a condom, and letting Bryce take the lead. Bryce tugged the covers over them and shifted so he was on his back and Zac was lying on his chest.

“Like this,” Bryce whispered. He leaned up to kiss Zac, then got his hands on Zac’s thighs, slowly pulling them apart and opening him up. “God, I do want you, Zac. I think about you every night and every morning,” he confessed. “I never jerked off so much in my life like I do thinking about you right there in the room next to mine.”

Bryce’s big hands roamed Zac’s back and ass and thighs. They felt so good. Zac settled himself on his knees over Bryce’s lap, opening himself up to more of Bryce’s touches and leaning down over him to kiss him on the mouth. “I jerk off, thinking about you, too,” he answered. “You’re so hot, Bryce.”

Bryce moaned. “I like that. Fuck, Zac, I love you wanting me.” He slid his hands over Zac’s ass, stroking the curves, then dipped his fingers in to stroke Zac’s hole and up behind his balls. “Tell me,” he whispered. “Tell me what you think about. I want to hear it.” His voice was thick with lust, and he petted Zac with two fingers while opening the lube up with his other hand. “You tell me, I’ll tell you. I promise, no freaking out this time.”

“I think about...” God, Bryce’s fingers felt so good. So distracting. It was hard to focus on what he was saying, hard to remember he had to be careful, but talking was good. Less trouble later when they talked. “I think about this. About how your fingers feel inside me. How good it feels when you fuck me with them. When you fuck me. I think about your dick.” Zac kissed the side of Bryce’s neck, nibbling gently. “I think about how it feels, opening me up. God, Bryce, you feel so fucking *big* inside me. It’s so good...”

“I love touching you,” Bryce whispered. He tipped the lube to squeeze it over his fingers where they were petting Zac, making everything cool and slick. He shivered under Zac and took a breath. “I love to look. I think about that. I never thought I’d love to look at anyone like that, but I do. You’re beautiful. It turns me on so much.” He circled a finger and pressed in gently.

Bryce’s next words were little more than a breath. “I want... when I watch my fingers, when I touch you, I want to kiss you,” he confessed shakily. “I think about that. I want to lick you. To kiss you. To slide my tongue into you. I wonder what you’d taste like. Feel like. If you’d like it. How you’d sound. God, Zac, I never... you make me think things like that, when I look at you. And I can’t stop thinking them.”

Oh, God. Zac couldn’t help moaning at that. With Bryce’s finger pressing into him so slowly, he could imagine what Bryce’s tongue might feel like, and it made him shiver with need. “God, Bryce. That sounds so... I want that. I want to feel it. I want.” He pulled back to stare down at Bryce, catching himself before he asked Bryce to do it right then. Of all the things he’d imagined Bryce even thinking about, much less wanting to do, that one had never entered his mind.

“I think. I think about sucking you off,” Zac breathed. “Getting your dick in my mouth. I liked it, when you let me before. I like how you taste. I think about pushing you up against the wall in the showers and getting down on my knees and doing it right there. Or at the movies, holding hands, and then getting down on my knees and sucking you off and you’d have to be so quiet. So quiet, so no one would know.”

“I love you.” Bryce’s eyes were wide. “I want that. I want you. God, Zac. I just... you... *you*... are everything I want. I want you anywhere. Everywhere. I want to touch every inch of you. I just dream about that. Touching.” He bit his lip and slid a finger into Zac. “God. That. That is the hottest thing. Being *in* you. I want... I want you to feel that, too. About me. I just want to be yours.”

“I want to. I do, Bryce. I want to show you. Touch you.” Zac groaned softly and pushed back against Bryce’s finger. “I just want you. I don’t care who does what. You turn me on. I think about you, about everything, doing everything, with you. Anywhere, everywhere, wherever I can have you. Want you so much.”

“I want it, too,” Bryce whispered, giving him another finger. “I want... God, Zac. I want just you. Nothing between us. I want your bare skin,” he said breathlessly, his cheeks reddening like he was embarrassed about it. “I don’t mean being stupid... I wouldn’t. I just wish... I mean... I just want to be yours. You know?” He looked a little frightened.

Oh. Oh, man. Zac kissed Bryce on the mouth, giving himself time to think. Barebacking was a big deal. Not that everything else they’d done and said wasn’t, but barebacking was such a huge temptation, especially with someone Zac knew and wanted as much as Bryce. And loved. “We. Oh, fuck.” Zac rocked back onto those fingers, trying to focus through the pleasure. “We could. We could get tested. We could do that. I think. I think it’d be good. Oh, God, Bryce. Yeah. I want.”

“Me, too. So much. I don’t want anyone but you, Zac.” Bryce slid his fingers in deep and moaned softly. “I wake up and jerk off thinking about rolling over into your arms and sliding into you and fucking you, slow, so slow.” He slid a third finger in, fucking Zac with them slowly, to match his words. “I imagine kissing your mouth, feeling your dick on my belly, feeling you come, hot and wet... and I have to bite my hand to stop saying your name when I come. My arms feel empty when I’m done.”

Fuck, Zac wanted that. Bryce made it sound so good. Zac groaned and arched, begging with his body for Bryce to push his fingers in faster, deeper. “More, Bryce,” he muttered, burrowing his face against Bryce’s neck and clenching his hands in the sheets. Knowing that Bryce wanted him, just *wanted* him because it was fucking hot, was such a rush.

Bryce pushed his fingers in deep, twisting them when they were buried all the way in Zac’s body. “I want you up against the shower wall with my dick inside you, I want you from behind in the middle of the night, I wanna jerk you off slow, slow with my hand down your pants when we’re watching TV, I want you in the back seat of the car...” He was moaning and panting, writhing under Zac, finger-fucking him hard and deep. “...I want *you* like this, Zac.”

Zac was whimpering, his breath coming fast. He knew he wasn't going to last much longer. He wanted everything Bryce wanted, and he could hardly believe Bryce wanted it all, too. "Bryce. God, fuck me, Bryce. I want to feel you. I'm gonna come, and I want. I want you in me." He pressed his forehead to Bryce's shoulder and tried to calm down.

"Okay, okay..." Now it was Bryce's turn to be soothing, kissing Zac's scalp and then opening up the condom packet. He reached past Zac, moving him a little, getting ready, grabbing the lube. Then the next moment, he was sliding his fingers out of Zac, his clean hand on Zac's hip. "C'mere, Zac." He pushed his hips up, nudging his dick between Zac's asscheeks.

"Oh, fuck, yeah..." Zac arched into it, reaching down and back to guide Bryce into him. "I need. Fuck. Bryce." He pushed down onto Bryce's dick, moaning as it filled him up. God, Bryce's dick stretched him wide, went so deep, and felt so good.

Bryce moaned and pushed up under him, shivering with the effort of being patient. "Oh, God, Zac," he whispered. "You're so..." He didn't finish the sentence, whimpering with pleasure. His breathing was ragged and too fast already. "I love you wanting me."

As soon as Bryce was all the way inside him, Zac moved. He didn't go slowly -- he didn't have the patience or the self-control for that. He fucked himself on Bryce's cock, driving it in hard and deep and fast.

"Oh, *fuck*." Bryce grabbed Zac's hips and moved under him, fucking him. Bryce was big and strong, all muscle, and he kept up with Zac's pace, every thrust getting a groan of pleasure out of him. Riding him was incredible.

Zac was already shuddering, making needy little noises that he knew gave away how close he was to coming; he didn't need to hide it. He barely had a hand around his dick when his orgasm hit and he spattered Bryce's chest and belly with come.

Bryce didn't last any longer than Zac did. He managed to keep quiet; soft, desperate sounds escaped him, but nothing more. His back arched and his muscles stood out as he came, pushing into Zac again and again, fucking him through his orgasm.

God, that felt so good. Zac slumped over Bryce and nuzzled into the curve of his neck, murmuring, "So good, Bryce. So good."

"Oh. Christ," Bryce whispered. He was shivering, holding Zac to him with both arms wrapped around Zac's back. "Tell me I was quiet, please. That was so good. I... God. Yeah."

"I think. Yeah. I think so." Zac wasn't really sure. He didn't remember screaming or anything, but it was hard to tell, with an orgasm like that. They'd find out if Steve came to bang on the door, he guessed.

“I’m gonna have a fucking stroke trying to be quiet if you keep doing that to me,” Bryce said, still breathing hard.

Zac laughed softly. “You? What’d I do? Jesus, Bryce, I was gonna come just from your fingers.”

“The way you fucking lose it, Zac. Need it. Nothing is better than that.” Bryce kissed his head and held him close. “I *love* fingering you, turning you on like that.” He was so sated and happy that his voice sounded like purring.

Zac wanted to do that to Bryce, to make him let go like that. Someday. He really thought they’d get there, even if Bryce had moments like he did tonight. For now, Zac relaxed on top of Bryce and closed his eyes, enjoying the closeness. “I love it when you do that to me. It feels so good. You’ve got such big hands, Bryce. So good.”

“Anytime.” Bryce tugged the blankets over them. “Tired?” he murmured, cuddling Zac up.

“Mmm.” He was and he wasn’t. Mostly, it was the sated exhaustion that came with an orgasm. Then there was the cuddling. He liked the cuddling a lot.

Bryce kissed his hair tenderly. “I’m sorry about earlier,” he whispered. “I was just in a bad place.” One hand moved in slow circles between Zac’s shoulder blades.

“It’s okay.” Zac wished it hadn’t happened, but things would get better. He raised his head to look down at Bryce. “We should talk about that stuff, though. So it’s not so... I dunno.”

“Surprising?” Bryce looked chagrined. “I’m sorry, Zac. I am. I’m trying. I don’t feel bad right now.” He gave Zac a little smile. “I feel amazing. I never knew it would be like this. When I’m here and now, it’s all good.”

“It’s okay. We just... we gotta talk about it, ‘cause then maybe it won’t be so bad.” Zac wasn’t a big fan of talking about sex like that, not really, but he knew they needed it.

Bryce nodded slowly. “Yeah, I know. I don’t mind talking about it, you know, I just... times like now are better. ‘Cause I’m kind of past the worst already. And I can put things straight in my head.” He brushed Zac’s cheek with the fingers of his clean hand. “Zac, I wanna make this work so bad.”

“Me, too.” Zac turned his head to kiss Bryce’s fingers. “Not just the sex. All of it. I don’t wanna screw this up by, like, pushing you into something you don’t want, or you’re not ready for. Or anything else.”

“Me, either.” Bryce touched Zac’s lips with a fingertip. “You make me happy. You always did, just being my best friend. I missed you like crazy last year. I mean, you were *right there* in the next room, and I missed you anyway. Even when we hung out, it was like there was a wall between us. I don’t want that again, Zac.”

Zac felt guilty about that. He'd spent so much time with Perry last year. "I'm sorry, Bryce. I won't do that again. It was... It wasn't that I didn't want to hang out with you, you know?"

"Yeah." Bryce looked sad right then, in spite of the smile he gave Zac. "I still would've been your friend. You know that now, right?"

"I know. I just... had to be ready to tell you." Zac hadn't known any such thing back then, not really, and it hadn't been all Bryce. Perry had been safe, though, because Perry was gay, too. It hadn't felt safe to tell anyone else.

"I'd be kind of a jackass if I didn't understand that," Bryce admitted. He still looked sad, but he exhaled slowly, like he was letting it go. "Just... I just want to be good for you is all." He leaned up to kiss Zac on the mouth.

"You have been." Zac shrugged a little. "I mean, you know now and you didn't, like, totally freak out or anything." Bryce had acted weird after the article had come out, but he hadn't done anything crazy, hadn't said anything he needed to regret.

"I wouldn't." Bryce kissed him again. "I'm sorry about, you know, the party and stuff." *That* part hadn't gone particularly well.

"I... yeah. That was kinda my fault, though. I shouldn't have said what I did." Zac frowned and kissed Bryce back. "I'm sorry. If I'd known what was going on, I never woulda teased you like that."

"I know. I kinda lost my shit and I'm sorry." Bryce nuzzled Zac's nose with his own. "It's okay now, though, right?"

"Yeah." Zac smiled and brushed a little kiss over Bryce's lips. "Yeah. It's okay now."

"We're pretty good at fixing things up." Bryce took a breath and let it out slowly. "This stuff, about my dad and all. We'll fix that, too, right? You're still gonna love me when I'm broke and have to work twenty hours a week on top of everything else, and all that shit?"

"We will, yeah. We'll figure it out. And I don't give a damn if you're broke." Zac sat back. "Sounds like Coach is trying to help, too?"

Bryce nodded and gave Zac a little smile. "Yeah. I'll be okay. I mean, about money. It's not the end of the world, getting a job, it's just new. Mom's dad gave us kids trust funds, for when we're twenty-five or we get married." He sat up, muscles bunching, and wrapped his arms around Zac to kiss him. "It's nothing like Dad's money, but enough to get me started on my own."

That was good. Zac felt something ease inside him, like he'd been holding his breath and didn't know it, way down in the bottom of his chest. Like he'd been feeling a bit guilty about being part of Bryce getting rejected by his family. He could make up for Bryce not having his family,

maybe a little, but Zac was totally not qualified to make up for Bryce losing financial support. “Your dad can’t mess with it?”

“No, Granddad didn’t much like Dad and he just wanted us to have a little something for ourselves, so we could have our own lives. I wish he was still around.” Bryce kissed Zac again, softly. “It’s not even about the money.” Bryce sagged back into the pillows, and his voice got tight and sad. “I just don’t wanna lose my stupid, shitty, bigoted, fucked-up family. I love them.”

“It’ll be okay. They’re your family; they love you, man.” Zac had held out hope for his own dad for way too long, and he still hoped his dad would stop being an ass. His dad had remarried, and the new wife was white like Zac’s dad, and so were the kids, of course. Zac and his sister might as well have disappeared. But Zac kept hanging on.

“I can’t make it okay, and I hate that.” Bryce nuzzled Zac’s nose. “I’m just gonna try and not fuck up what I can control. And I’m gonna try and be happy. ‘Cause I have a lot to be happy about.”

“I’m glad you think so.” Zac felt like he had a lot to be happy about, too.

“Mm. Were you paying attention just a few minutes ago?” Bryce teased. He groped Zac’s ass to make his point.

Zac laughed and wiggled his ass in Bryce’s hands. “I don’t think I could’ve missed it. I think we can probably manage to make you happy like that pretty often, if we try.”

“How about we order Chinese and see if we can’t make each other happy again after we eat?” Bryce ducked his head to place little nibbling kisses up Zac’s neck.

“Mmm. That sounds like a great plan.” Zac tipped his head back and let Bryce nibble as much as he wanted. Today was turning out to be a pretty good day, after all.

Chapter Eight

Bryce had sweaty hands. He had a churning stomach. He was beyond anxious, and it wasn't just because he'd sucked it up and emailed his father and said he wasn't going to be moving out, that he was just too busy to do something so disruptive to his routine. He dried his hands off on his thighs, one at a time, as he drove up to the student center to pick up Zac. The clinic across town would be open at two, and they wanted to get there when it opened to get their tests done. He pulled into the waiting zone, checked his watch, and looked for Zac.

They were going to go get tested. That meant they were really a couple, in a big way. That was scary enough; it meant that Bryce really was gay. Queer. Whatever. He still liked girls, he knew that. His attraction to them was pretty knee-jerk. But he was starting to see how he could be attracted to guys. When he thought about guys he already knew, it was easier to notice.

Like Perry. Bryce realized that now, if Perry showed up and wanted to go out with him, he'd actually consider it, except for the whole thing where he loved Zac. Well, and the part where he wasn't quite okay with everything, even if he wanted to be. It kept him up at night sometimes, realizing that if he wanted to live a whole life, he could lose his family. But that was why he'd gone ahead and emailed his dad, because he was accepting all the other parts of living his own life, so it was time to get on with it and accept the difficult parts as well.

The other thing that was scary was the sex. Bryce knew they'd talked about Zac touching him, fucking him. He wanted it. That was the bitch of it all. He loved Zac and desperately wanted to give that to Zac. Worse, he felt guilty because he was fine with fucking Zac, but not with having the tables turned. It wasn't like he thought anything bad about Zac, ever, so why was it so hard to imagine Zac touching him?

It was hard for him to admit that he touched himself. He'd tried it a couple times, and it actually hadn't been bad. It hadn't upset him. The first time, it had been just weird and stupid. The second time, he'd told himself that he wanted to know what felt good so he could do it right for Zac. He'd surprised himself with how *big* his fingers were; how the hell was he going to manage Zac's dick?

The third time, it was almost nice, but he'd felt terrible after. Gross. He'd wanted to cry, to go break up with Zac or something. Anything not to be like this. He'd talked himself down in time, but that was why he was scared. He was going to fuck up and ruin everything. He was going to hurt Zac. His brain kept jabbering that he was a loser and a disaster and a fag, and it was only a small relief that the last part wasn't bothering him so much anymore.

After a few minutes, Zac came out of the glass doors, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. Just seeing Zac made Bryce relax. A flood of love and happiness washed through him; suddenly, everything was all better. Zac was *gorgeous*. The afternoon sun made his dark skin glow and the way he walked -- like he was happy down to his feet -- made Bryce want to jump out of the car and run to meet him.

Zac glanced around, and then spotted Bryce's car and smiled as he headed for it. When he slipped into the car, he turned his smile on Bryce. "Hey."

"Hi." Bryce smiled back. He knew his emotions had to be written all over his face, and he didn't try to hide them. It was so hard to hide them the rest of the time. "Ready to go?"

"Yeah." Zac looked at Bryce's lips like he was thinking about kissing Bryce, then shook himself a little. He threw his backpack into the back seat and pulled on his seatbelt. "Ready."

Bryce pulled out and negotiated the campus, then the road that would let them cut across town. "Good day?" He looked over at Zac and smiled again, letting his hand drift across to brush Zac's. Zac made him so happy. He wanted this to work. Now that they were together, his fears were fading.

"Yeah." Zac glanced down at their hands, then laced their fingers together. It was low enough no one would see. He smiled at Bryce. "Pharm lecture was pretty good today."

"You're so smart." Bryce grinned at him. Zac was really smart; it was one of the things Bryce loved about him. Gorgeous, smart, sexy, funny, and just not quite as good at video games as Bryce. The perfect person. Man. Perfect *man*. And Bryce loved him. Bryce gave Zac's hand a squeeze instead of kissing him.

Zac laughed and squeezed back. "How were your classes today?"

"Oh, lovely. You know how much I love modern business communication and golf course design and geriatric lifestyle development." Bryce rolled his eyes at that.

The truth was, he'd probably have a good time working at any kind of leisure or athletics facility. He really should've been working on his golf game lately; his dad was right. He was a good golfer, though it wasn't something he was going to come out and admit. His dad thought it would make for better business in the long run if he could get on a tour, get some credentials for work as a golf pro at a big course. If he ever wanted to work for himself some day, have his own club or resort, he'd need to know the right people. It was time to start thinking about those things.

"Maybe it's just me, but it feels like it's getting easier."

"It's our last year. We'd better be getting the hang of this shit," Zac joked, rubbing his thumb over the back of Bryce's hand.

They crossed a set of train tracks and were on their way into the other side of town. The car was traveling in a void, a little break in the traffic, so Bryce brought Zac's hand up and kissed his knuckles. It had been days since their last kiss. "Out into the big world next year," he said quietly. He wanted to go there with Zac, and wondered if they'd get there together.

"Yeah." Zac returned the gesture, flashing Bryce a sweet smile. "Gotta start interviewing soon. Do something with this athletic training degree. I don't wanna have to move back in with my

mom. I mean, she'd have me, but Nicky's going off to college next year. I think she's looking forward to having the house to herself."

"Feels too soon." Bryce checked the GPS on the dash and had to let go of Zac's hand to make the next turn. He changed lanes to avoid getting nailed by a rattletrap Dodge coming out of the corner gas station, then glanced over at Zac. The idea of getting a job in a different city and not seeing Zac again hurt.

"I know what you mean. I mean... I don't wanna go to school for another year, don't get me wrong, but it doesn't feel like that long ago, we were sharing our freshman dorm room. Now, we're in our last year of school."

"Just like that."

The cramped and odd-angled streets of the older section of town were a pain in the ass, but Bryce made the next couple turns correctly and then they were on the street behind one of the free clinics that served the queer community. As the website had suggested, he parked on the street. Once the engine was off, Bryce sat there a moment, staring at the rusting, sticker-cluttered hatchback of the car in front of them.

"Do you..." Bryce took a breath. "Do you want this to last past the end of the year? I mean. If it does?"

Zac opened his mouth to answer and then closed it again. After a moment, he reached for Bryce's hand again. "Yeah. I mean. I want it to. As long as we... Yeah. I want it to last."

"Okay." Bryce took Zac's hand in his and turned to look at him. "Me, too." He leaned over to kiss Zac; it wasn't like they were likely to get ambushed by anyone they knew here. Zac met him halfway, and Bryce kissed him slowly.

"I emailed my dad to say I'm not moving out," Bryce said quietly, when he pulled away. "We'll see what happens. I'm not going to tell him about us." He looked Zac in the eyes. "Not until we graduate. But then... yeah, I will. Okay?"

"Okay." Zac gave him a smile, but it was tinged with sadness. They'd talked, some, about how hard it was for Bryce to do something that basically risked him getting cut off by his family, not just financially, but also emotionally. Bryce knew that Zac understood. It was the emotional part that mattered, to both of them, and Bryce was so glad Zac got it.

"As for everyone else..." Bryce ran his fingers over Zac's cheek. "Maybe we can just be us for a while, before we have to deal with everyone else? Let me stop freaking out so much, figure out where all the landmines are?"

"Yeah." Zac turned his head to kiss Bryce's palm. "I can wait."

“I won’t make you wait too long,” Bryce promised. He didn’t want to wait. It wasn’t like he wanted to go out and tell people; he just wanted not to hide their relationship. His watch beeped at him and he checked it. “Okay. Ready to get this done?”

“The sooner we get it done...” The sooner they could have sex without condoms. Zac flashed Bryce a wicked little smile, then slipped out of the car and waited, bouncing on his toes, for Bryce to join him.

Bryce got out, laughing at Zac. God, he loved Zac. The sex without condoms thing wasn’t a big deal for him in terms of the pleasure of it; the emotional part of it was what mattered. Again. He knew Zac didn’t feel quite the same about sex, didn’t take it as seriously, but that part didn’t matter either. Bryce had thought it would. It just didn’t. Zac loved Bryce, and Bryce was certain of it. He didn’t understand how or why Zac loved him, or how it could seem so unconditional, but he believed it.

Bryce caught up with Zac and took his hand. In public. He liked to be honest. It overrode any fear he had, for the moment. They walked toward the clinic, in the lower floor of an older office building.

Zac was nervous, but he was excited, too. The fantasy Bryce had described, waking up and rolling over and fucking him bareback, was too much of a temptation for any nervousness to slow him down. He wanted to feel Bryce inside him like that, and he wanted Bryce to know that it was okay. All of it. From how much they wanted each other down to whether or not they were being safe and smart about it. They signed in with false names, as suggested, and sat down to wait their turn for testing.

They weren’t the only ones there, though no one they recognized was in the room. Bryce slid his arm around Zac as they sat down, pulling him close and leaning in to briefly nuzzle behind Zac’s ear. His breath huffed against Zac’s neck as he settled in. He wasn’t ever like this in public. Maybe this was how it would be once they were really okay.

Zac leaned into it, enjoying it while he could. It made his stomach twist with nervousness, a little -- he’d never had the chance to be like this in public with anyone, before now -- but it felt so good. He dropped his backpack between his feet and put one hand on Bryce’s thigh, returning the contact and intimacy. The only looks they got were envious ones. Zac would have envied them if he were someone else; they probably looked really good together.

“Bring the DS?” Bryce murmured. “I think you have a few high scores I need to wipe out. Again.”

Zac groaned. It wasn’t fair that Bryce was better at the damn games than he was. He fished out the DS from his backpack and handed it over. “You’re bad for my ego,” he accused, but he was only teasing. Bryce was too nice, too sweet to be anything but good for him.

“You want an ego boost, I know what you could do,” Bryce muttered, eyeing Zac and flipping the game open. He was pretty susceptible to Zac’s wiles and skill in bed, that was certain. To Zac, it felt like Bryce had made some kind of internal decision about their relationship since telling Coach, and since the talk and sex they’d had on the weekend. Maybe Bryce was still stressed, but the look in Bryce’s eyes when he caught Zac’s gaze was loving.

Zac grinned and bumped his shoulder against Bryce’s. “When we get back to the house tonight, I’ll give you a boost.”

Bryce snickered at that like they were twelve and bumped Zac back. It was more like it used to be, like Bryce had turned a corner, a blend of their old, goofy ways and new love. Zac leaned into Bryce and relaxed, watching him play. Bryce kept close, inside Zac’s personal space, while he wiped out Zac’s high scores.

When the nurse came and called the names Zac had given them, Bryce flipped the game shut and looked from Zac to the nurse. “Guess it’s time,” he said quietly.

“I’ll hold your hand when they stick you with the big, bad needle,” Zac promised, trying to keep the mood light. He held his backpack open for Bryce to drop the game inside, then zipped it up and stood, slinging the backpack over one shoulder and holding his other hand out to Bryce. “But only if you promise to do the same for me.”

“You know I will.” Bryce took his hand and let the nurse lead them back into the lab room. A male nurse who was doing the blood draws gave them each ID numbers and a bit of a mandatory ‘counseling’ about safer sex. He was an older guy, openly gay, given the tattoos, and kind of cute in a round and cuddly way.

As promised, Zac held Bryce’s hand when the nurse drew Bryce’s blood, and then held on when it was his turn. For all his bravado, he wasn’t a big fan of needles. Little pokey things going through his skin and into his veins? No, thanks.

Bryce held Zac’s hand, smiling at Zac behind the nurse’s back in a way that reminded Zac of exactly why they were going through all this. He looked happy.

After, the nurse stepped out to take care of the vials, and Zac slumped against Bryce’s shoulder. “Okay, okay. I am a total chicken when it comes to needles.” He was still feeling ashy and ill, but it had been easier with Bryce there, holding his hand.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Bryce put an arm around him and pulled him close. “Zac...” Bryce kissed his forehead and wrapped the other arm around him in a warm, tender hug. “I love you, you big dork,” he murmured.

“You were nervous enough without adding my mess into the mix,” Zac muttered, embarrassed by how much the hug helped soothe his anxiety. “I love you, too,” he murmured, burrowing his face into the curve of Bryce’s neck.

“Everything okay?” The nurse stepped back in with some information pamphlets in hand, and a package that probably contained condoms and lube.

“Yeah.” Zac made himself sit up again and look at the nurse. He could tell the man didn’t believe him, but he didn’t care. Zac’s fear of needles was none of the nurse’s business, honestly.

“We’re fine, thanks.” Bryce kept his arm around Zac. “Was there anything else?” He found Zac’s hand again and held that as well, his grip warm around Zac’s cold fingers.

The nurse gave them the pamphlets and the package that, sure enough, had condoms and lube inside, and even little lube injectors. He talked to them about safe sex and the testing procedures and, finally, let them leave. Zac was more than ready to go, by then. He held tight to Bryce’s hand as he stood and fled the room, dragging Bryce after him. By the time they got out to the street, Zac was laughing.

Bryce looked a little worried, but he was laughing as well. “What’s so funny?” He tugged Zac toward him and got an arm around Zac’s waist, pulling him in to look down at him and make sure his boyfriend hadn’t lost his mind.

“I was afraid we’d never get out of there,” Zac said, still laughing. He leaned up on his toes and kissed Bryce on the mouth, sure that it was safe here, since Bryce had been so snuggly in the clinic and had kissed him in the car.

Bryce kissed him back, holding him close for a long moment. “It’ll be worth it,” he murmured against Zac’s mouth. “I just wish we knew now.” They were probably both fine, but their precautions were against the rare odds that could hurt both of them.

Zac murmured his agreement. He wanted to know, wanted to go back to the house with Bryce and have sex and know there was nothing between them. “Soon,” he promised both of them, kissing Bryce again.

“Yeah.” Bryce stroked Zac’s cheek. “You wanna go get something to eat? We could go somewhere nice.” He kissed Zac’s forehead. “Or we could go home...”

“Let’s go out.” They were already on the other side of town, and it wasn’t like they’d have this opportunity very often. Zac wanted to take advantage of it. They could go home after, and play.

“Good.” Bryce’s smile was brilliant. “A real date.” He backed away and held his hand out to Zac. “Let’s check the ‘net for recommendations for restaurants around here. Maybe we can do something dorky like go walk in the park, too. Hold hands.”

Zac smiled, slipping his hand into Bryce’s. “Yeah. Lemme check on my phone. We can find something.”

Bryce led him to the car and opened the door for him. “After you, dear.” He kissed Zac’s hand and helped him into the car, laughing. Whatever was going on his pretty head, it was working out for Zac.

It was a real date. They walked down by the river until it was time for their reservations. They held hands at dinner and stared into each other’s eyes until the waiter startled them out of their trance.

Dinner was amazing. It was a really special night. Bryce had tried not to focus too much on what they were doing today, what it meant. Now that they were done, it was sinking in. It was a huge leap of faith, an act of trust. They were really together. When he opened Zac’s car door up after dinner, it was instinct; he realized that he’d really accepted being Zac’s partner. He just hoped that meant things would be a little less rocky from here on out, though he knew there were no guarantees.

Zac held his hand on the drive back to campus. Once they parked in the lot by the field house, he had to let go, but the smile he gave Bryce, sweet and happy, almost made up for it.

Bryce loved that smile so much. He was really in love with Zac. It amazed him how things could change so much and so little at once, how close being best friends could be to being in love.

“Sleep with me tonight?” he asked quietly. Steve and Kaede had seemed oblivious so far. Even though tonight was a weeknight, Bryce felt like the risk was worth taking. If either of the other guys brought it up, they’d just have to deal. Bryce wanted to get on with life now that his anxiety was wearing thin. Dealing with his nagging worries so much had made them less of a problem, as they were never as drastic as he feared once they were exposed. He wanted to be ready to be out *now*, even if he wasn’t quite, even if it wasn’t the best idea.

Zac looked surprised, but he smiled again as he slung his backpack over his shoulder. “Yeah. I’ll bring my DS or something.”

“As long as you’re there.” Bryce got his bag out of the back and, once Zac was out, locked the car up. They didn’t talk much on the way back to the house. There was time for them to do homework and pretend nothing had changed for a little while, until it was time to sleep.

Later that evening, Bryce showered and headed for his bedroom. He didn’t bother to dress; he just pulled his robe on. There were candles in a drawer from back when he’d been dating a girl -- little ones in glass holders. He went ahead and lit them, putting some on the bedside table and a few on the desk. Zac would come when he could. Bryce sat down in bed, laptop in his lap, and read his email while he waited.

Zac came in a while later, still in jeans and a T-shirt. He was carrying a textbook and his DS, excuses to be going to Bryce’s room in the middle of the night. “Hey.” He closed the door behind him and locked it.

“Hi.” Bryce forgot what he was reading and closed his laptop even as he was looking up. He got up and put the laptop on the desk on his way over to Zac. Just the sight of Zac made his heart beat faster.

“Hi.” Zac put his stuff down and pulled Bryce in. “I’ve been waiting *hours* to do this,” he said, leaning up on his toes to kiss Bryce on the mouth.

Bryce wrapped his arms around Zac and yielded to the kiss. He hadn’t bothered to do up his robe particularly well; he loved Zac wanting him and wasn’t going to pass up any chance to let Zac have him. They’d had such an amazing day together.

Zac kissed him fiercely, his hands sliding under Bryce’s robe and around to cup his ass and pull him even closer.

Bryce let Zac have him, let Zac touch and gave him kisses in return while he peeled Zac’s shirt up, pulling back to get the shirt off and then leaning in to kiss Zac all over again while he undid Zac’s jeans. Once they were open, he pushed them down, dropping to his knees to get them, and Zac’s boxers, off all the way. His robe was open, falling off of him, and he was hard already, wanting Zac. He looked up at Zac, overwhelmed by how much he loved doing this.

Zac was barefoot, so once Bryce got the jeans down, he stepped right out of them. “Been waiting hours for this, too,” he said softly, running his fingers through Bryce’s hair.

Bryce kissed his thighs and hips, stroked up the backs of his legs. “Tell me.” He wanted to hear what was on his lover’s mind. He followed up the soft demand with tender kisses and nuzzles at the base of Zac’s cock.

“Touching you.” Zac kept petting his hair. “This afternoon, you were so... I liked being close to you like that. I’ve been waiting to touch you again, for you to touch me.”

“Come to bed?” Bryce laid his cheek against Zac’s hip, his hands cupping Zac’s ass, and looked up at him sweetly. Zac was so good to him.

“Yeah.” Zac held his hand out to help Bryce up. Bryce’s breath was making his dick twitch, and his hazel eyes were already wide and dark. “Let’s go to bed.”

Bryce took Zac’s hand and got up, then led Zac to bed. Zac looked really good in the candlelight. The covers were turned back, and Bryce let Zac get in before he slid the robe off his shoulders and hung it over the end of the bed.

“The guys probably won’t notice if you sleep here again tonight,” he whispered, crawling into bed after Zac. “And if they do, what are they going to say?” He kissed Zac on the mouth. “If they ever ask, you can tell them anything you want.”

“They won’t ask.” Zac was smiling, though, like he understood the significance of what Bryce was saying. He pulled Bryce down for deeper kisses, licking into Bryce’s mouth and running his hands over Bryce’s body, over his chest and his back and his ass, just touching him all over while they kissed.

Bryce rolled over Zac on all fours to let Zac have him. He ducked his head and kissed under Zac’s jaw, making soft, needy noises. Somewhere inside, he was afraid Zac would touch him “there,” that he’d like it, that it would make him gay, and he hated it. The more Zac touched, the colder he felt, because he knew they’d talked about it and it might be coming soon. It was haunting him, and he pulled back, suddenly pale and breathless and not okay.

“I need...” He made himself breathe. “I need to talk to you.” *Stop, Bryce*, he told himself sternly. *Stop, and talk, and Zac will help fix it.*

Zac pulled his hands away and caught his breath. “I. Okay. What’s wrong?” He scooted away, out from under Bryce, so he could sit up. His worry was written all over his face.

Bryce collapsed with his back to the wall, hands on his knees. “I just keep having this stupid, sick feeling, that you’re going to touch me... like you said you wanted to.” His cheeks were on fire, but he felt drained, and his stomach churned with pure shame.

“And my head keeps telling me that I’m gonna like it and it’s gonna make me ‘gay’ like it’s not already a bit too fuckin’ late for that, like it’s some kinda curse if you touch me and it feels good.” He tried to breathe slower and it wasn’t working. “And I’m scared you’re gonna touch me like that and I’m going to freak out or worse. And this is really stupid, and I’m sorry.” He looked at Zac, hoping it wasn’t the wrong thing to do, to say this.

Zac nodded slowly. “I wasn’t gonna, not so soon. But, Bryce...” He pulled his knees up and wrapped his arms around them. “I mean, I’m glad you told me. But I don’t know how to fix that, how to make it better, except to promise I’m not ever gonna touch you like that. I will, if you want. Promise, I mean. It’s just touches, it’s not a big deal. It’s less of a deal than kissing. I’d miss kissing you a lot.”

“No.” Bryce swallowed hard and shook his head. “I want... I want to do it.” He took a breath and met Zac’s eyes. “But I just need you to know that my brain is being a bitch about it, so I don’t end up hurting you again. I want to feel you like that.” Just saying it made him feel better. “Will you? Please? Touch me?”

“Are you sure?” Zac rubbed his leg with one palm. “I mean. I will. But you gotta know you don’t have to.”

“I know you’d never make me do anything.” Bryce was so certain of that, right down to his core. God, he wanted Zac so much. The surge of need startled him. “I know we could go on forever and you’d never, ever do a single thing to make me feel bad, Zac. But I want it.” He ignored his cheeks threatening to catch fire from talking like this. “I want you to touch me. I want your

fingers in me. And I want you to suck me off, make me come. And then I want you to put up with me being a fucking basketcase after, if I am.”

“Yeah.” Zac nodded slowly. “Yeah, okay. I can do that.” He reached out to run his fingers down Bryce’s arm. “I want to make you feel good, make you come like that.”

“If it’s real, it won’t bother me anymore.” Bryce shifted so that he could crawl into Zac’s arms for comfort. “I just want you to make it real. But only if you want to.” He kissed Zac’s neck and nuzzled against his shoulder. “I’m not making you do anything you don’t want to, either.”

“I want to.” Zac pulled Bryce in close, leaning his cheek against the top of Bryce’s head. “I do.”

“I want you so much, Zac.” Bryce cuddled against Zac’s warm body. “God, just talking about it helps. A minute ago, I felt like crap, and now I feel kind of stupid, but I want it. I’m not scared of you, just of me. You know?”

“Yeah, I know,” Zac said, kissing his hair. Bryce kissed Zac’s neck more, knowing how much it turned Zac on. It worked this time, too. Zac tilted his head away to bare his neck. “Yeah. Bryce...”

“I love it when you suck me,” Bryce murmured. He bit and licked under Zac’s ear, letting the taste of Zac’s skin turn him on even more. “I want your mouth, Zac. Your mouth is so sexy, and when it’s on my dick, I feel like it can’t be real, because it’s so damn hot.”

Zac turned, but he wasn’t pulling away. He was pushing Bryce down onto his back and rolling up over him to kiss him, hard, on the mouth. He moaned into the kiss, tempting Bryce’s tongue into his mouth so he could suck at it, licking, just like he sucked Bryce’s cock. “Gimme the lube, Bryce,” he panted, when he finally pulled away from the kisses. “And let me get your dick in my mouth. Fuck, I love... Love the way it feels, sliding over my tongue. Love how you taste.”

The cold in Bryce’s chest was melting already, and his dick was hardening again. He grabbed the lube from the table and offered it up to Zac. He’d said that things were easier in the here and now, and they were. So much better, so much easier, with Zac here to put the lie to all the ugliness he’d been left to imagine. His voice was remarkably steady when he said, “Have me. Zac. Please.”

Zac kissed him again, fiercely. “Yeah,” he breathed, looking down at Bryce as he accepted the lube. “Yeah. I want you.” He kissed his way down Bryce’s chest and sucked Bryce’s dick into his mouth as soon as he was close enough. He moaned around it, letting Bryce hear just how much he loved it.

Christ. Bryce had to bite the back of his hand to keep quiet. “Oh, God, I love you,” he whispered, once he wasn’t going to go shouting Zac’s name. He opened up his legs and, for a moment, he was cold, but then he was hit with a rush of need so fierce it made him gasp.

Zac settled down between Bryce's legs, sucking and licking like he was loving every minute of it. He was running his hands up and down Bryce's thighs, but his hands didn't stray in any further than the crease where Bryce's legs met his body. Eventually, though, he pulled back to lick and kiss Bryce's inner thighs, instead, alternating between them and sounding just as happy as he had with Bryce's cock in his mouth.

"Zac, please..." Bryce was wound up and anxious and needy. "Zac, touch me, please," he whispered. "I need it." He was getting tense again, but Zac's kisses still felt good. He pulled his knees up, opening himself up for Zac, begging with his body.

Zac gave Bryce what he needed, but not with his fingers. He held Bryce open with both hands and licked from Bryce's tailbone to his balls, all in one long swipe, and then he did it again. Bryce almost came up off the bed. "Like this?" Zac asked softly, and then he was licking, over and over again, right where Bryce had been so afraid -- and so wanting -- to be touched.

Zac's tongue was hot and wet and felt like heaven. Bryce was writhing and twitching, his breath coming in tiny whimpers. He was pulling his knees up more and trying to get more of Zac's tongue before he could stop and think about what was happening. "OhGodohGodohGodohGod," he panted. "Zac, Zac. Don't stop. Oh, God. Please, please." He had no idea what he was begging for, just that he suddenly felt like he was going to come, only he didn't know how.

Zac hummed a little, soothingly, and asked, "Do you want to roll over? Just my tongue, I promise." He gave a hot, open, sucking kiss to the smooth skin behind Bryce's balls. "Or like this. Like this is good, too." He licked again, pressing with the flat of his tongue so that Bryce could feel it everywhere.

"Tongue. Fingers. I don't... I just." Bryce writhed away; he couldn't think anymore. He managed not to run into Zac as he twisted out from under him to face the end of the bed, ass in the air, knees apart, so hard that his dick bumped against his belly as he moved. "Don't stop, just don't stop, don't stop, Zac," he begged. If Zac stopped, Bryce was afraid he'd slip up, but if Zac didn't stop, there was nothing Zac couldn't do to him.

The bed shifted as Zac sat up behind him, and then he was licking again, pressing his face between the cheeks of Bryce's ass and dragging his tongue over all that sensitive skin. He was making hungry little noises and gripping Bryce's hips with both hands as he gave Bryce exactly what he was begging for.

Bryce muffled his voice in the blankets as he shook and pushed back against Zac's tongue. Before he knew it, he was reaching down to stroke his own dick, his fingers getting wet with the first touch. "Zac..." He put his forehead on his forearm, looking down his own body. "Zac, in me. Please. I wanna feel it." He couldn't remember feeling pleasure like this, ever. Now, he understood Zac's pleas.

Zac pressed and teased until his tongue was slipping inside, soft and wet. Feeling himself open up for Zac was incredible. Bryce groaned and shook with it. He wanted more.

Bryce's legs framed Zac's dick; Zac was so hard and the head was coated in pre-come already, even though Bryce knew Zac hadn't been touching himself. He didn't start then, either, just focused on licking into Bryce, making him feel so, so good.

Bryce wanted Zac's dick, wanted to lick it and suck it. He couldn't help babbling softly. "Zac, so good. More. Please, Zac. God, please. Fuck, I can see you. Your dick looks so good. I wanna suck it. After I come, I wanna suck you. Wanna taste you come in my mouth. Love your dick, Zac, love your tongue, love you so much."

Zac fucked Bryce with his tongue, and then it was something firmer pushing inside. Zac's finger, and Zac was licking all around it. It went deeper than Zac's tongue had, and it felt different, but Zac was still careful, gentle with him.

Bryce's brain might have struggled with it, but his body responded before any awareness hit him. He was pushing back, whining. God, it felt *amazing*, the slick friction of something pushing into him. He'd had no idea that just one little touch like that could make him crave more. Touching himself was no comparison. Nothing was going to be the same again, ever.

Zac stopped long enough to slick his finger with lube, and then everything was slippery and hot and even better than it had been before. He licked and kissed and bit the curve of Bryce's ass, kissed his way partway up Bryce's spine, and whispered things like, "Fuck, Bryce, you are so fucking hot," and, "I want you so much," and, "You sound so good. So good, Bryce."

Bryce didn't even know why he pulled away, dislodging Zac's fingers, until he'd rolled over onto his back, legs spread. "Zac," he whimpered, reaching for his lover. "More." He wanted to be on his back.

Zac watched Bryce's face for a moment, and then pushed his finger back in and crawled up over Bryce to kiss him fiercely. "Tell me what you want," he whispered against Bryce's lips. "Anything, Bryce. I'll give you anything you want." His finger slid in and out so easily, finding all the right places to touch and press and pet, and his thumb rolled over Bryce's perineum, the two working in time to drive Bryce crazy.

"You, more," Bryce panted. He kissed Zac back, arching and writhing. He'd turned into someone he hardly knew, someone all need. "Touch me more. Need it. Have me. Need you to want me." The more Zac wanted him, the easier it all was.

Carefully, gently, Zac slid another finger in with the first, opening Bryce up. Before Bryce's mind could catch up with things, Zac was sliding down his body and sucking Bryce's dick back into his mouth.

Bryce stuffed the side of his hand in his mouth to stifle his noises. The other hand clenched the blankets up by his head, and he ground down onto Zac's fingers. The things Zac did to him were insane, and all he could do was give himself up to it. He was so close to coming already.

Zac sucked and licked and did all the things Bryce loved so much about Zac sucking him off. And, at the same time, his fingers were pumping in and out of Bryce's body and his thumb was rolling over Bryce's perineum, and he was moaning, sharp and just as needy as Bryce was feeling, around Bryce's cock.

It was the moaning that did Bryce in finally. His back arched, and he came. He wasn't ready for how incredible it would feel to come with Zac's fingers pushing into him. Grabbing at the blankets with both hands, he had no way to stifle himself, but he wasn't making any sound. His voice was caught in his throat, he could hardly breathe, his skin was ridged with chill, his nipples were hard, and he was staring at nothing, totally overwhelmed as he shook with one wave of his orgasm after another.

Zac just swallowed him down, rode it out, and kept giving Bryce everything he needed. Zac sucked Bryce through his orgasm, still moaning, though his moans sounded more satisfied now, like he was getting exactly what he'd wanted.

"Zac." Bryce felt stunned. It still felt good to have Zac's fingers in him, but he didn't want to let his ghosts get hold of him. "Zac, please." He fumbled for Zac's shoulder. "C'mere."

Zac drew his fingers out slowly, gently, and crawled up over Bryce to kiss him on the mouth. "You okay?" he asked, nuzzling at Bryce's mouth.

"Yeah, yeah. I think so." Bryce wrapped his arms around Zac and kissed him back, trying to breathe. "God, Zac. God. I want you. I want your dick in my mouth." He could taste himself on Zac's tongue and it was so hot it made him shudder.

"Please." Zac rubbed his dick against Bryce's hip, leaving a trail of pre-come in his wake. "God, Bryce, please."

Bryce rolled him over in bed, pinning him down and kissing him and surprising himself with a fierce growl. He slid down without hesitation, only stopping to grab the lube. "Oh, God," he moaned, when he saw Zac's dick. At some point, Zac's dick had become irresistible; once Bryce was turned on, it felt like there was nothing he couldn't do, just as long as he didn't stop long enough to think. He licked the head of Zac's dick, whining at the taste, then sucked it into his mouth.

"Oh, fuck." Zac got his hands in Bryce's hair, not pulling, just holding on. "Oh, fuck, yeah. Bryce. God, that's so good. Please."

It was better than good. Bryce got his fingers slick and slid one into Zac while he sucked Zac off, moaning the whole time. It was so different now, knowing exactly what Zac was feeling. He gave Zac another finger, pushing them in deep, over and over again. Zac rocked his hips, grinding down onto Bryce's fingers, writhing. His breath came faster, unsteadier, with every push of Bryce's fingers and every pull of Bryce's mouth.

Bryce slid another finger into Zac, wanting to be filled up, himself. He still felt strangely empty, though having his mouth full of Zac's cock helped. Fuck, he wanted this. He pushed his fingers deep into Zac, curving them the way he knew Zac would love it. He *wanted* Zac's mouth and ass and dick and fingers, and he hated everyone who'd ever made him feel wrong for it. This wasn't for revenge, but that didn't make fucking his mouth on Zac's dick and plunging his fingers into Zac's heat any less sweet.

Zac's moans sounded desperate, needy and low. "Oh, fuck, Bryce. *Bryce.*" Zac's hands tightened in Bryce's hair, and then pulled away to clench in the sheets instead, just before his hips moved. "Oh, God." He fucked himself between Bryce's fingers and his mouth as he came.

Bryce whimpered and swallowed. God, it was as good as coming himself. He knew he was making all kinds of little wet noises as he writhed on his knees, chanting Zac's name in his head, and he didn't care. For the first time, he was hit with that vision of what he was, what he was doing, but all knowing did was turn him on more. He wanted more. He drank Zac's orgasm in, then pulled away to kiss Zac on the mouth. He kept his fingers in, though, stroking them in and out gently, touching Zac inside as the last shivers of orgasm went through him.

Zac kept moving into the push of Bryce's fingers, his moans settling down into low rumbles. He kissed Bryce back, licking into his mouth and groaning softly.

"I love you," Bryce said, twisting his fingers inside Zac. "I can't believe... you are so good to me, Zac. That was so good."

"So good, Bryce," Zac murmured breathlessly. "Fuck. Love you, too."

Bryce was almost hard again, not that he'd ever really gone soft. He let Zac feel it while they kissed, rubbing against Zac's thigh while he fingered him. If Zac wanted it, he'd ask for it; he kissed down Zac's neck, lavishing licks and kisses on it to show Zac his adoration.

"Fuck me?" Zac whispered after another moment or two, reaching down to wrap one hand around Bryce's dick. He stroked slowly, lightly. "Wanna feel you in me."

"Yeah." They still had to use condoms. Tests wouldn't be back for a while, and there was no way Bryce was taking a single, tiny chance with Zac. "Lemme just..." He pulled his fingers out and reached behind him to grab a condom.

Zac hissed when Bryce pulled his fingers out, but held still and waited while Bryce got ready. Turning back, Bryce put it on, getting too lost in looking at Zac all spread out and beautiful to feel ashamed of himself.

"Bryce..."

Bryce looked up from slicking his dick; the latex just took the edge off of how sensitive he was. "Yeah?" He was worried something was wrong, so he leaned over to kiss Zac. "You okay?"

“Want you.” Zac hooked his leg over Bryce’s hip and pulled him in. “I want. I want to feel your dick inside me, Bryce. I want you to fuck me. Hard. Please.”

“Okay.” Bryce had always loved making Zac happy in little, stupid ways, even before they were together. Sex was a whole new world of making Zac happy. He guided his dick into place, pushing into Zac smoothly. “I promise.” He kissed Zac again as he settled in deep.

“So good, Bryce,” Zac whispered against Bryce’s lips. “God, that feels so good.”

Bryce kissed him one more time, then pushed up, bracing himself over Zac. Oh, Zac was so beautiful. Bryce bit back a moan, remembering that they had to be quiet, as he fucked Zac hard, just like Zac had asked. He fucked Zac until he could see the impact of each stroke ripple through Zac’s body, gritting his teeth to try and stay silent. God, it was so good. He had the best sex he’d ever had with Zac.

Zac loved it, too. It showed in his moaning and arching up into every thrust, his whole body flushed with pleasure. That Zac loved it hard was a huge turn-on. Bryce leaned back, but it was only to get Zac’s legs up over his shoulders. He was gasping now as he grabbed Zac’s hips and pulled himself in deep. He’d never handle a girl like this, but Zac...

Zac wanted it, and Bryce felt fearless, fucking him. Zac loved his dick, loved how big it was, and that made sex so much better. Zac shoved his hand into his mouth, muffling what still came out as an unquiet cry. His body was tight around Bryce’s cock and he was moving as much as he could to take Bryce in deep every time.

God, Bryce didn’t care if Steve heard Zac; *he* wanted to hear Zac. And right now, he wanted to tell Zac everything, emphasizing his words with hard, rolling strokes. “I love you,” he whispered. “I love this. I’m so fucking lucky, Zac. I don’t give a damn what anyone wants to call this. I get to love my best friend. I never want to stop.” God, it didn’t matter that he’d already come, his balls were pulling up hard and he could feel his orgasm building. Even talking wasn’t distracting from it.

Zac didn’t answer, probably couldn’t. He was so busy scrambling to hold onto something, anything, and to hold back his low, pleasure-drenched moans that there couldn’t have been any focus left for speaking. He looked lost and debauched and unashamedly sexy.

Bryce loved it. “Fuck, I don’t care if he hears you,” he confessed, following it up by slamming into Zac with a low grunt. “I don’t give a damn. God, I want the world to know I make you fucking crazy.” He might feel differently later, but now he was groaning shamelessly and fucking Zac hard as he fell apart.

Zac came, finally, but he managed to be quiet after all. The few moans that did make it past his bitten lip all sounded like Bryce’s name. Zac’s body clenching around him sent Bryce over the edge, whining and writhing and fucking Zac harder. His hands were going to leave bruises on Zac’s hips, the way he was pulling himself deep into Zac’s body.

When Bryce's thrusts slowed, Zac wriggled to get his legs down from Bryce's shoulders. He pulled Bryce down for hot, slow kisses. "So good, Bryce. Love you."

Bryce let Zac move him, snuggling down. "God. Zac." He couldn't think to say more than that. Zac did crazy things to his head and body. He felt nerveless, like he'd spilled everything in his spine out into the condom when he came.

Zac kept kissing him, holding him close. They were warm and damp with sweat and sticky with Zac's come, but Zac didn't seem to be in any kind of hurry to wriggle away or to get out from under Bryce or to do anything that would put distance between them.

Bryce wasn't in a hurry to move either. When the sweat was cooling on his skin, though, he lifted his head. "Sleep now?" The idea of curling up with a sweetly sleepy Zac and holding him all night was the perfect finish to their day.

Zac smiled and leaned up to nuzzle against Bryce's mouth. "Yes," he whispered against Bryce's lips. "Yeah. I like sleeping here with you."

"I like you here." Bryce kissed Zac one more time as he pulled out. God, he didn't want to. He wanted to stay as close as he could and never let go. "You want me to go get you a cloth?"

"I don't want you to go anywhere." Zac shifted, and then his nose wrinkled up. "But, uh. I'm really sticky. Like, a lot."

Bryce laughed and kissed Zac on the nose. "I'll be right back." He got up and grabbed tissues to get rid of the condom, then he pulled his robe on. Turning back, he looked at Zac one more time, gauging how he felt about himself, about them. *Good*. He felt good. "I'll be right back," he said again, feeling like he was leaving his heart behind with Zac, even though he was just letting himself out to go down the hall.

"I'll be here." Zac stretched out on the bed. Bryce's bed. He looked comfortable there, like it was exactly where he belonged.

The hall was dark; Bryce could hear the television downstairs and then the jingle of Steve's ringtone. There was no light from under Kaede's door, either. All good. Bryce was so over sneaking around. He padded into the bathroom and closed the door, then ran the water. The fear of getting caught was still gnawing at him, but Bryce knew he wasn't afraid of people he didn't know finding out. It was just that he was afraid of losing the people he did know.

When Bryce got back, he crawled up over Zac and cleaned him off with a warm, wet washcloth. Yes, Zac was a mess, and Bryce wanted to fix what he'd done. He watched Zac's face as he cleaned up Zac's thighs, working inward. "This okay?"

Zac shifted his legs further apart. "S good." He smiled and wriggled a little. "You gonna clean up the lube, too?"

Bryce didn't answer, he just washed all the way up between Zac's thighs, over the sweet curves of his asscheeks, between them, and up behind his balls. Then he folded the cloth the other way and cleaned the come off of Zac's cock and belly. He loved doing this, he realized. When he looked up and met Zac's eyes, he was too overwhelmed with emotion for anything in his past to gnaw at him. He felt clean.

"Hey." Zac smiled, sweet and soft. "Feels better now. Thanks."

Bryce pitched the cloth into his laundry bin and shed his robe so he could crawl up to the head of the bed. "Come sleep." He offered Zac a hand to draw him in.

Zac slipped his hand into Bryce's and curled in against Bryce's body. Zac was warm and pliant, still loose-limbed and easy and smiling sweetly. Bryce covered him up reluctantly; looking at Zac by candlelight was like eating candy. Delicious.

"I like this," Bryce whispered. "Just... start staying with me." No one would even notice, he knew it. "Whenever you want," he added, knowing that Zac might like having his own space. "I want you here. Or I'll come to you. I don't care." He had turned the corner, mentally, and he wanted to make sure he didn't backslide.

Zac looked surprised, but happy. "We'll. Yeah, both. I want. I like it when you come to my room, too."

Oh, good. Bryce kissed him. "I'm... I need... I want this to be real," he said, trying to find the right words. He stroked his fingertips delicately over Zac's features. "I don't... it's not smart to just tell people yet, not until I get shit sorted with my family. I don't know what'll happen. But. I want us. I want us to be like if we were anyone else." He hoped that made some sense.

"We'll figure something out." Zac snuggled up close. He didn't sound frustrated or tense or worried about any of it, even though it couldn't have been easy for him -- already out to his family and the whole world -- to be dating someone like Bryce.

"I'm sorry," Bryce said softly. "I wish I could..." He kissed Zac's shaved head and then blew out the candles on the bedside table.

"It's okay." Zac pressed a kiss to Bryce's shoulder. "It's okay."

"I love you so much, Zac." Bryce snuggled down in the pillows and blankets with his boyfriend. "You deserve for me to tell everyone how lucky I am." He sighed heavily and cuddled Zac up against him. At least they were together.

Chapter Nine

Practice had run late. Normally, Zac wouldn't have minded much; more swimming inevitably led to better times later. Tonight, though, he had good reason to want to get out of the natatorium -- the swimming place, as Bryce liked to call it, if only because it made Kaede hiss *Natatorium!* at him every time.

They'd finally gotten their results back from the HIV tests, and Zac wanted to celebrate, to get Bryce in bed and naked, with some lube and no condoms, and just fuck for hours.

Unfortunately, that hadn't happened yet. Still, practice was finally over and the rest of the guys had already filtered out of the locker room by the time Zac finished up his shower.

Bryce was running late; he'd been doing some extra work on his turns and talking to Coach. He wandered in as the last of the swim team was headed out and turned on the shower as Zac was turning off his.

"Hey," he said, not looking at Zac as he hung up the mesh bag with his shampoo and soap and stuff. "Sorry about that. Coach just wanted to go over some stuff before he took off." He ducked his head under the water and spluttered a little as it took a while to warm up.

"S okay." Zac stepped out of the shower trough and dried off, then hung his towel over the door of his locker. He didn't try to hide that he was watching Bryce shower while he did it. "You doing anything after this?"

"Nope, all done." There was a click and half the overhead lights in the locker room went out. "See, even the lights say it's time to go home," Bryce said dryly. Thanks to cost-saving measures, the natatorium and its locker rooms closed far earlier than the rest of the athletics complex some nights. Bryce turned toward Zac as he tilted his head back under the water, washing the chemical-laden pool water out of his hair. "Do you have to go to the library or anything?"

Even if he'd needed to go to the library, Zac would've put it off until tomorrow. Tonight, all he wanted to do was go home and have sex with his boyfriend. Bareback.

God, Bryce was gorgeous, and his big cock was right there in front of Zac like a tease, like an invitation. If he hadn't been so sure it was a bad idea -- BAD, with all capital letters -- Zac would have gotten down on his knees and sucked Bryce off right here in the goddamn locker room, and fuck you to anyone who might walk in and stop them. It *was* a BAD idea, though. So Zac just stood there watching Bryce shower, instead.

Bryce shampooed and rinsed, letting Zac track the suds all over his very fit body. Zac was too busy watching a cluster of lucky white bubbles slide over the curve of Bryce's hip and into the crease between Bryce's thigh and body to notice that Bryce was reaching for him. Bryce's arm slid around his waist, pulling him into the shower, and Bryce's mouth found his in a hot kiss.

Zac instinctively opened up to the kiss before he remembered where they were. Then he pulled back and looked up at Bryce in surprise. “Bryce-- We’re in the locker room. Do you-- Are you sure you wanna do this here?” Kissing in public, where anyone could walk in on them, was a dangerous proposition.

“You’re not so hot that I forgot where we are.” Bryce groped his ass and kissed him again, hard. “Almost, though.”

Truth was, there wasn’t much chance of getting caught. They were in the back of the locker room, the far end of the showers, in the half-dark, after closing. The doors were squeaky from the humidity, and no one else had any reason to be here other than banging about in their locker to grab some forgotten item. Bryce’s kisses were hot and demanding, his hands were all over Zac’s ass, and his erection was sliding against Zac’s hip.

Zac gave up, not that he’d really wanted to stop kissing Bryce anyway. He wrapped his arms around Bryce’s shoulders and kissed him back, hot and deep, his tongue teasing into Bryce’s mouth. Bryce’s hands on his ass were so, so tempting. Zac settled his feet a little further apart and arched, dragging his dick against Bryce’s belly and pushing his ass back into Bryce’s hands.

“God, I love you.” Bryce turned them around and pushed him back against the wall. “I don’t want to wait until we get home.” There was no telling what had come over him, why he was doing this now, but he seemed damned determined about it. “Besides, I promised you...” He trailed off, licking and biting down the side of Zac’s neck.

Promised to fuck him in the locker room. In the showers. *Oh, God.* Zac moaned, tilting his head to bare his neck for Bryce. “Yeah. Yeah, that’s...” Good. It was so good. He didn’t have any lube, but, for once, he just didn’t care. The way Bryce’s mouth felt on his neck, just the *idea* of Bryce fucking him here, was enough that any concerns seemed trivial.

“Now.” Bryce fumbled around in his stuff and came up with a sachet of lube and a condom, clinging together with wetness. He threw the condom back in the bag and then kissed Zac again. They didn’t need that. “Right now. Right here.” He pulled back enough to look at Zac; his eyes were blown with need, his cheeks were flushed, his mouth was full from their kisses.

“Now,” Zac agreed, pulling Bryce in for one more kiss before he turned around to face the wall. “Now is perfect.”

They couldn’t waste time. Bryce’s slick fingers pushed into him without ceremony; a soft whimper suggested that he was watching his fingers, something he seemed to love. A moment later, the hot head of Bryce’s cock was pressing into him, just enough for Zac to push back and take it in his own time. “Oh, God.” Bryce already sounded overwhelmed. He kissed the side of Zac’s neck as his slick hand found Zac’s cock and stroked slowly. “Zac...”

Zac arched his back and let the feel of Bryce’s hand on his dick distract him, open him up, until Bryce’s cock was all the way in. He took a couple deep breaths, just getting used to how big Bryce always felt inside him, and then rolled his hips a little, urging Bryce to move. “Fuck me.”

The sensation of being filled up like that, and with Bryce stroking him, and the water rushing down over them, was so intense, Zac didn't want to wait anymore. "Bryce. Fuck me hard."

Bryce was making soft, desperate noises against Zac's neck as he moved. He fucked Zac with long, hard strokes, holding Zac close with one arm around Zac's waist. "Zac, oh, *fuck*. Fuck, you feel so good." His voice was shaky with emotion. "God. I never..." He trailed off as he got lost in kissing and biting Zac's neck, groaning every time his hips hit Zac's ass with each hard stroke.

It felt amazing. The difference, for Zac, wasn't in the physical absence of the condom, but in the way that absence made Bryce respond and in the forbidden aspect of not using one. And, God, the way Bryce responded was incredible. He was always really into it when they fucked, but tonight he just seemed lost in it, overwhelmed, and that was such a turn-on for Zac. Zac couldn't hold back his moans, couldn't stop himself from begging for it in a whisper.

"Yeah, yeah, fuck me. God, so good. Just like that. Oh. Oh, *fuck*. Don't stop."

Bryce gasped against Zac's skin and then bit down to stifle his noises, sucking and licking at the curve of Zac's neck. Usually, he was gentler, but he took Zac hard and fast, rolling his hips to get everything out of each thrust, pushing Zac's cock through his slick hand over and over again. It didn't take long for him to start to tremble, his rhythm faltering as his control slipped.

Zac was right there with him, shuddering with every thrust. He loved it hard, loved the way it made every thrust feel like it went all the way through him, loved the way he knew he'd be able to feel it tomorrow. When he came, it felt like that went all the way through him, too, tearing away everything but how good he felt as he hissed Bryce's name and fucked into Bryce's hand just as rough and quick as Bryce was fucking into him.

Zac was going to have marks on his neck and shoulder, especially where Bryce bit down as he came. Bryce pulled away before he did any real damage, giving in to gasping Zac's name over and over. He bucked against Zac's ass, burying himself deep as he came, spilling into Zac's body with one rush after another.

That was so intense. God, no wonder everyone talked about barebacking like it was a kink all its own. Zac slumped forward against the wall, trying to catch his breath, his whole body still humming with pleasure.

Bryce wrapped his arms around Zac and held him close, his head on Zac's shoulder. He was shivering still; there was no hiding it. "We should..." he whispered, straightening up.

Zac nodded. They really should clean up and get dressed. They were, technically, in public. He leaned against the wall a few seconds longer, until he was sure his legs would hold him up, and then he turned around and pulled Bryce in for a kiss. Getting dressed could wait just a second longer.

Bryce kissed him tenderly, holding him close. When he pulled back, his expression was wondering. He stroked Zac's cheek with his fingertips. "I want to keep my promises to you," he murmured.

"Oh." Zac couldn't hold back his smile. Bryce was just so damn *sweet*. He turned his head to kiss Bryce's palm, then said, a bit more intelligently, "Let's get cleaned up and you can promise me that you'll come sleep in my room tonight, too, so we can do that again."

"I can promise that." Bryce kissed Zac on the forehead. Leaning past Zac, he got out his soap, and offered it to Zac. "Here. You first."

Zac got cleaned up as thoroughly as he could and then got out of the shower, because he knew damn well if he stayed there, he'd end up with his hands all over Bryce, and then they'd never go home. Once Bryce was cleaned up, and they were both dressed, they headed back to the swim house.

Zac's body was still humming with pleasure by the time they got home from the natatorium. He could feel everywhere Bryce had touched him, kissed him, and it felt incredible. He couldn't believe they'd done that in the *showers*. Sex in public seemed crazy -- especially with Bryce so closeted -- but it had been *so* intense. He could hardly wait to drag Bryce upstairs and do it all again in private, and not nearly so fast this time.

Zac thought maybe Bryce was thinking the same thing, with the way Bryce was smiling at him. Bryce never stopped surprising Zac with how incredibly sexual he could be, under all the struggle to accept himself. Zac loved getting to be the one to unwrap that gift again and again.

Zac pushed the front door open and stopped. He hadn't known they were having a party.

The house smelled of pizza and sneakers and the air was thick with noise. It felt like the entire swim team must be here. Zac caught sight of Steve down the hall; Steve waved vigorously and hollered, "Hey, Zac and Bryce are home." Zac could almost *feel* Bryce, just a step behind him, running into the wall of reality in front of them.

"Zac!" The voice was familiar and so was the person jumping over the arm of the couch and bounding toward him. "Hey, man!" He hardly had time to process before Perry pounced and swept him up into a hug.

"Perry!" It had been months since the last time Zac had seen Perry. They'd talked on the phone after the article had come out, but they hadn't seen each other since Perry's graduation party last spring. "Dude! What the fuck are you doing here?" He slung his arms around Perry's neck and held on as Perry spun them around, laughing.

"I had a job interview north of here." Perry squeezed Zac tight enough to leave him breathless and kissed him on the cheek before setting him down. "On the way home, I saw the exit for the

school and thought, fuck, I can't go by and not see my boys. Bryce!" There wasn't a hope in hell that Perry could get Bryce off his feet, but he let go of Zac and gave it a try before Bryce could get out of the way. "Christ, are you still growing?"

Zac laughed, stumbling a little as he regained his footing. He ended up with his back to the wall, grinning as Perry squeezed Bryce the same way he'd squeezed Zac. It was a little weird, he realized, his ex-lover hugging his new boyfriend. But, well, it wasn't like Perry knew.

Bryce managed to recover and groped Perry around the waist, tickling him until Perry squawked. "Talk about growing. That's where my last twenty pounds went." Laughing, he ducked Perry's swat. "Hey, not my fault you're slacking, dude."

"Worst brother ever." Perry got Bryce in a headlock and scrubbed his knuckles over Bryce's curls. "You're uppity with no one to keep you in line, little man." They really could almost have been brothers. Perry was barely smaller than Bryce, gold instead of bronze and blue-eyed instead of brown, but they had a lot in common.

Their taste for roughhousing was high on the list. Zac got out of the way, heading over to grab a beer off the table. He knew better than to get in the middle of those two. He was small and quick, but that wouldn't help him with *both* of them all riled up.

Perry's yowl said the tables had been turned and a moment later, Bryce forged through the handful of people in the living room to dump Perry on the sofa. Perry was laughing too hard to retaliate beyond smacking at Bryce. "Go get me a beer, little man. To think I missed you!" he yelled after Bryce, who was headed in Zac's direction. Anything else he had to say was lost as Shelly sat on him and offered Kaede a seat beside her on the new sofa cover.

"You want to take that over?" Bryce picked up a beer and handed it to Zac. Like someone had flipped a switch, he was serious. "I'm just gonna take my stuff up. I'll throw yours in your room."

"Yeah, sure." Zac flicked his gaze between Perry and Bryce, trying not to show his worry. He stepped in close to Bryce. "You okay, man?"

"I'm fine. Go have fun." Bryce's hand landed on Zac's wrist and lingered a moment, his thumb stroking the sensitive skin on the underside. "Really." Just for a second, Zac could see how much Bryce loved him written all over Bryce's face, then it was gone and so was Bryce's touch. "I better go study, anyway."

"Okay. Cool." Zac smiled and held up the beer Bryce had handed to him. "I'll see you later, man. Have fun with your books, yeah?"

"I'll try." Bryce rolled his eyes at that and Zac had to agree. There wasn't much that was gonna be more fun than what they'd been up to in the shower. Zac reminded himself not to watch Bryce walk away, no matter how good Bryce's ass looked.

He headed over to give Perry his beer, instead. He flopped down on the floor beside the couch, passing over the beer Bryce had given him. “Hey. Can you breathe under there, dude?”

“Yeah, but it’d be more fun if there weren’t a *girl* on me.” Perry pinched Shelly’s ass and, giggling, she dragged Kaede down to sit on the far end of the couch.

“You got cooties now,” she sing-songed, and then she shrieked as Kaede grabbed her around the waist.

“Mmm, cooties,” Kaede growled, kissing her. “Nomnomnom.”

“Ew, gross. Stop being all straight where people can see you!” Perry pushed himself up to lean on the arm of the couch, then wiped his free hand off on Zac’s head. “There. You like girl cooties. Freak.”

Zac snorted and batted Perry’s hand away. “Fuck you, man,” he said, laughing. “Not my fault you can’t appreciate the whole spectrum of hotness.”

There was a thunk as Steve dropped a box with a fresh pizza on the coffee table and Kaede stopped molesting Shelly in favor of grabbing a slice.

“I’d never get anything done if I did that,” Perry said, laughing at Zac. This time, his touch was a brief caress. “Got my hands full with my half of things. You been doing okay?” He gave Zac a little smile that suggested he was asking about more than just school. All around them, people were chattering and laughing; no one was paying attention to their conversation.

“Yeah.” Zac took a sip of his beer and grinned. “Yeah. I’m doing okay. Doing good.” He tilted his head and raised his eyebrows at Perry. “You?”

“Too busy trying to get a job to get up to much,” Perry said, “but training’s going great. Hey, it’s not like I don’t get offers. I ended up changing my email address after the article. Got tired of people offering to convert me, or offering to show me their ‘support.’” He laughed and shook his head. Adonis probably understood Perry’s problems better than mere mortals.

“Support, huh?” Zac laughed and shook his head. He hadn’t had too much response from anybody about his part in the article, except with how it’d affected Bryce.

“Yeah. ‘Support.’” Perry laughed and then took a drink of beer. “You getting any ‘support’ since I abandoned you?” His grin was purely mischevious, but Zac knew there was actual concern underneath. Perry was fun and popular, but he backed it up by genuinely giving a damn about the people around him.

The question brought Zac up short, and he had to scramble not to let it show. “Yeah. I, uh. You know. I do okay.” He took another sip of his beer and then let the bottle hang between his knees. He didn’t want to lie to Perry. He’d hated lying to Bryce all last year, and lying to Perry felt just as terrible.

“Ouch. Wrong question.” Perry looked chagrined; apparently, it was hard to lie to the guy he’d spent a year spilling his guts to. Perry switched his beer to the other hand and reached down to touch Zac a little with his cold fingers. “Just lemme know if you wanna talk. I’ve missed you, y’know.”

Zac smiled at that. “I’ve missed you, too, man. It’s not the same now that you’re gone, you know?” Perry had been one of his closest friends, and it hadn’t been an easy adjustment, coming back to school this year knowing Perry wouldn’t be there.

“Big world is way less fun without my guys.” Perry took another drink. “I’m moving out of Mom and Dad’s place when I get work. When I get settled, you should come see me. Housewarming and all that.”

“Yeah, that sounds cool.” Zac grinned and leaned up to tap his bottle against Perry’s. “Better get on the stick, man. Get yourself a job so I can come visit.” Past the couch, Zac could just make out Bryce slipping through the back of the living room to grab a beer. He had his cellphone in one hand and a frown on his face. That was never a good sign. When Bryce ducked out the back hall, Zac turned his attention back to Perry. He’d go check on Bryce in a couple minutes, give him a chance to deal with whoever was on the phone.

“Yo.” Kaede jumped up on the coffee table, waving his phone. “Crew house just tapped a keg and we’re all invited, y’all. Let’s pack up shop and go party!” His announcement was met by whoops of enthusiasm and applause.

“Let’s move.” Perry sat up, grinning. “Can’t miss the crew party.” He stood up and offered Zac his hand.

Zac let Perry pull him to his feet. The crew team threw great parties. Insane parties. Somehow, crew parties always had the best beer -- and the worst hangovers. “Hey, man, I’ll catch up in a bit, okay? I gotta see a man about a horse.” He didn’t have to piss at all, but this would give him a chance to check on Bryce.

After he’d dropped Zac’s stuff in his room -- he’d actually hung up Zac’s wet stuff for him so it wouldn’t get musty -- Bryce was lying on his bed, trying to put how he felt together in his head, but it was too loud to think with everyone downstairs. He should have grabbed a beer. It was good to see Perry again; the momentary thrill of seeing his friend again had interrupted any weirdness he might have felt at first.

But now... he’d kind of thought he’d be jealous, seeing Zac with Perry, but he wasn’t. If Zac and Perry were going to have a ‘thing,’ they’d still be seeing each other now. Whatever was between them, it wasn’t serious like it was between Bryce and Zac.

And Perry wasn't *psychic*. It wasn't like Perry was going to go, "Wow, Bryce is queer!" just by looking at him. Perry sure as hell hadn't bothered to find out anything last year. Bryce was going to go and get a beer and enjoy hanging out with his friends, and when it was all over, he was going to bed with his boyfriend.

It was going to have to be just one beer. Bryce pattered down the stairs. He still had every intention of rocking Zac's world again tonight. Fuck, shower sex... so much hotter than he'd dreamed. He made it to the hall before the Imperial March sounded and his phone jittered in his pocket.

Oh. Fuck. Me. He could dodge it again or he could face the music. Bryce dug in his pocket for his phone. It was time to get this over with.

"Hi, Dad." Bryce grabbed a beer and dodged some chick wearing too little. "Can't hear you, just a sec." He shouldered his way out into the backyard and wished he had some cigarettes. Damn, it was cold out. His feet hit the concrete patio and he was freezing right away. "You got my email?" That he'd written a week ago. Dad had the same turn around time as the labs. There was probably some universal symmetry there.

"I did. You say it would be too much of a distraction to move out at this time."

"Yeah. Dad, my grades are great. I... I don't want to do a bad job." It wasn't lying. Bryce sat down in a broken-webbed lawn chair and tried to ignore the fact that he was cold. He took a drink of beer, wishing it was vodka. "It's just a few more months, Dad. Besides, it would look bad."

"How so?" Oh, God, that was better than him laying down the law.

"Well, Zac's really popular, Dad. Coach really likes him; his favorite." Bryce hugged himself and slumped down in the chair. "Look, people will talk if I just up and move out. Steve and Kaede, they're good guys, just ordinary." Also true. "It'll just look shitty. I don't want to alienate people. Just a few more months. Good grades. Coach is writing me a reference."

There was silence for a while. "I see. I had no idea that the school was so liberal."

"It's still a good school, Dad. Everyone's liberal these days." Bryce couldn't help defending it. "Look, if I leave, it's gonna kill my social contacts. I don't wanna have to lie to Coach, I hate that, Dad. I mean, I did better since living in this house, right? I was almost flunking out in the dorms, now I'm doing great." *Please, please buy it.*

"You don't socialize with him."

"Dad, he practically lives with his boyfriend. And you know Perry moved out." Bryce tried to keep his teeth from chattering. He felt sick. *He* was the boyfriend Zac practically lived with. And Perry was right back in the house again.

“Keep your grades up, then, Bryce. And you’ll be joining me in the Thanksgiving charity golf tournament. You need to make some new social contacts. Better ones. I’ll make sure you do.”

Thank you, thank you, thank you. Bryce wanted to cry. “Thanksgiving. Great, Dad. I always wanted to do that one with you.” Sure, when he was ten. But it was a tiny, tiny price to pay for less stress in his life. “Thanks, Dad.”

“You made a good case. I’ll see you at Thanksgiving.”

Bryce was left with a dead line, staring into the dark. He’d won. It was putting off the inevitable, but maybe he could get on his feet before he got himself disowned. He didn’t feel that great about the winning, but he’d won. Bryce sat there as his feet went numb, drinking his beer.

The thud-creak-thud of the back door sounded behind him. “Hey, man.” Zac’s voice got closer as he continued, “You okay?” Zac circled around in front of Bryce, the light from the back door making his dark skin shine. He nudged Bryce’s leg with one bare foot, looking worried.

“I...” Bryce waved the cellphone. “My dad.” The chair creaked dangerously as Bryce leaned back in it to look up at Zac. God, Zac made his chest ache. Especially with that half-scared, all-worried look on his face. “He says I can stay. I made a good argument. People might connect my moving with popular guys like you and Perry coming out, take it wrong, kill my social network.” That’s what mattered. He’d come up with a way to show that it wasn’t economical -- socially and academically -- to move. “And moving could disrupt my studies.”

“Seriously?” Zac’s whole face lit up as he smiled. “Dude. That’s awesome. You get to *stay*.”

“Yeah. I...” Bryce shoved his phone in his pocket. “I told him you practically live with your boyfriend.” He took a drink of his beer, basking in Zac’s smile. God, that just made everything so much better, to see Zac smile.

“Dude.” Zac laughed and kicked lightly at Bryce’s shin. “I totally do.” His laughter trailed off and he bit his lip, eyeing Bryce for a moment. “You gotta get up, man. I can’t kiss you down there. That chair’ll fall apart and I’ll break my arm and Coach’ll kill us both. C’mon.” He held out a hand to Bryce, flapping it impatiently.

Bryce slid his hand into Zac’s and got up cautiously. “I better take care of my guy,” he said quietly. He tugged Zac close and ducked his head to kiss Zac’s sweet mouth. So much sweeter when Zac was happy.

Zac deepened the kisses, licking into Bryce’s mouth and making happy little noises. “Come upstairs with me?” he murmured against Bryce’s lips as his hands crept around to stroke the curve of Bryce’s ass. “Gotta celebrate.”

“Got lots to celebrate.” Bryce kissed Zac one more time, his own hand straying down to fit around the slight curve of Zac’s hip. “Let’s go.” He stepped away, offering Zac his hand to hold.

Zac slipped his hand into Bryce's. He didn't wait any longer, turning and heading for the back door, leading Bryce inside. They had so much to celebrate: their tests coming back negative, Bryce beating his dad at his own game, Bryce getting to stay at the swim house... Zac's room was closest to the stairs and Bryce tugged Zac in as soon as they got there.

"I really thought he was going to make me move," Bryce said, his voice trembling a little. His head was spinning and everything was finally sinking in. *Oh, God.* He felt a little *hopeful*. "But he just... it was like he didn't care enough to be shitty about it once I stood up to him." He cupped Zac's face in his hands and kissed Zac tenderly again and again. "Maybe I can think of a really good argument for us," he whispered. "Maybe... maybe he's changed, I don't know, but... maybe it won't be a disaster. It won't change my mind, but..."

"Maybe." Zac smiled for him, such a beautiful smile. "There's no rush. Whenever you're ready to tell him. I'm okay with the way things are, you know? It's all good."

"It is." It really was all good. And maybe it might stay good, even after Bryce told his parents about him and Zac. He and Zac made so much sense. "God, I love you." Bryce kissed Zac hungrily and nudged him toward the bed at the same time.

"Love you, too." Zac's knees hit the bed and he fell back, pulling Bryce with him. Their clothes were still on, but Zac didn't seem to care; he arched up and Bryce could feel Zac's hardening cock pressing against him through their jeans.

Bryce couldn't help moaning at that; he loved Zac being hot for him. He ducked his head to get his mouth on Zac's throat and slid a hand between them to cup Zac's erection, feeling it swell against his palm. *I am so fucking lucky.* He lavished kisses and bites all over Zac's soft skin, knowing just how hard to nip and suck to drive Zac crazy.

"Like that," Zac groaned. "Fuck, I love your hands. And your mouth." Bryce knew exactly how sensitive Zac's neck was, how much he loved it when Bryce kissed and touched him there, so when Zac tilted his head, arching his neck, Bryce knew it was an invitation for him to do more.

Bryce slid his free hand under Zac's neck, cupping it gently and holding Zac still as he bit down with a moan. They could be fucking bareback right now, but that was so not the point. God, the point was how much they turned each other on, how perfect they were together; too perfect to rush. He sucked hard where his teeth sank into Zac's skin, hard enough to leave a mark that would show even in the soft, brown-black shadows under Zac's jaw.

"Hey, slowpoke!" Zac's door popped open and swung back to bounce off of a pair of Zac's sneakers. Perry caught it on the rebound on the way in. "Came back for my phone and th..." The rest of whatever Perry had to say was lost in a strangled noise.

Bryce jerked back -- his muscles couldn't move fast enough; he felt paralytic -- and tried to disentangle himself from Zac with only minimal success. He was horrified, even terrified; his voice locked up and he couldn't think through the alarms shrieking in his head. As he was

backing away, he was caught on the second wave of impulse: to protect Zac even before he'd worked out exactly what had gone wrong.

"Shit." Zac's gaze flickered from Bryce's face to some spot over Bryce's shoulder -- the doorway. "Shit, Perry. Bryce. Fuck." Zac flailed to sitting up and grabbed at Bryce's shoulder. "Fucking shit." His eyes were wide and worried as he focused on Bryce.

"Oh, shit." Perry suddenly went into reverse. "Oh. Fuck. I am... going." He backed up and grabbed for the door. "No one tells me anything..."

Bryce's body finally achieved a little functionality and he shifted to sit on the bed next to where he and Zac had been making out. "I just..." He had no idea what the rest of that sentence was. "Perry..." Perry could not tell anyone. The first thing Perry would do was blurt something out, thinking that everyone but him knew about Bryce and Zac, and...

"Christ." Bryce finally focused on Zac. "You have to... you have to go..." Zac could talk to Perry; he could fix it.

"Stay." Zac's hands held Bryce's face, keeping him from even thinking of turning away. "Stay here. Just. Fuck. Stay here. I'll go... Shit. I'll fix it. Just stay here." Zac stared at Bryce for a moment like he could force Bryce to obey just with the power of his mind, and then he got up and headed out, moving fast, the door slamming shut behind him.

Fuck. Bryce couldn't even move. His hands were cold and he couldn't breathe. Oh, God. He fell back on Zac's bed and covered his face with his hands. Fucking Perry. God fucking damn it. Him and his stupid, goddamn article, and Bryce just fixed that and then walking in like there was any goddamn reason for him to be in Zac's room.

Oh, God. Bryce couldn't stay here. Flailing a little, he managed to get to his feet. He didn't want to get caught in Zac's room, not by anyone else. Fuck, what the hell was he doing feeling good about things with Zac when he couldn't even deal with fucking *Perry* knowing about them? Bryce bumped into his door, then remembered to turn the handle to get inside. He fell back against the door, closing it tight, and leaned there a minute, feeling beyond sick.

You fucking moron. Pounding his fists against his temples only soothed the roaring in his head a little. Bryce wanted to scream at himself, for all of it. For acting like this. God, Zac deserved a million times better than this. He doubled over, elbows digging into his thighs, hands knotted in his hair. He should have moved out. *Dad was right, Zac should be with people like him, and I'm not one of them. I'm a fucking coward.* Somewhere, Zac was talking to Perry. Bryce had no fucking idea what Zac would say, just that Zac would protect him and that was so not fair. Not fair to Zac.

Bryce breathed through his nose and his clenched teeth, trying to calm down. After a minute, he pushed himself away from the door and collapsed on his bed, back wedged against the wall and the footboard at once. He pulled up his knees and let his forehead fall on them, wrapping his arms around his shins. It didn't matter that Perry knew. It didn't matter because there wasn't

anything to know if Bryce couldn't even deal with this. He'd been so fucking selfish to draw Zac in, let Zac think that someday they'd be like everyone else. He couldn't even make it better. Hell, he couldn't even calm down.

Breathe, Bryce. Getting all fucking wound up wasn't fair to Zac either. Besides, all the other stuff he'd been so scared about hadn't happened, not once he'd actually had a chance to live with it. He had to stop reacting and start thinking for himself. He just needed to calm down and wait. He could do it for Zac, so he wouldn't be a wreck when Zac came back. Zac deserved better than that.

Shit. Shit, shit, shit. Zac raced down the hall and took the stairs two and three at a time, coming to a stop only when he hit the wall at the bottom with his shoulder, full-speed. Perry was getting his shoes on. "Perry. Perry, shit, hang on."

"I'm sorry." Perry straightened up and waved Zac away. "I just... wow, things sure have changed." He didn't just look embarrassed, he looked hurt and pissed.

"It's not... Shit." It was like that, and Zac couldn't lie and say it wasn't. "I wanted to tell you. I just... couldn't."

"You couldn't tell *me*?" Perry's expression was incredulous, and he barely kept his voice down; his hands made up for the lack of volume, fluttering around like frantic birds. "Last year, you couldn't tell *him*. Fuck, Zac, you went on about how weird it was to be around him after I came out, how fucking uncomfortable you were, how you didn't think he was okay with it."

"I didn't get it." Zac only had himself to blame for that. "I could've asked, but I never did. Hell, *you* could've asked, but you didn't either. We just shut him out." He still felt guilty about that. He'd been such a shit.

"*He* was avoiding us," Perry pointed out. "Not the other way around."

"Yeah, and we never said anything. Some friends we were." Zac sighed, rubbing the arm he'd slammed into the wall. "It's not like he wasn't fucking outnumbered, Perry."

"What the hell changed here, Zac? Whence the sudden compassion?" Perry leaned against the door and trapped his hands in his pockets. "Was it just because I wasn't here anymore?"

"Fuck you, man." Zac dropped down the last couple steps from the short landing and stopped in front of Perry. "That article almost got him cut off by his dad."

That took a second to sink in and then Perry shook his head like shaking off water. "What?"

"His dad threatened to cut off his money, to stop paying for his rent and shit, if he didn't move out, man." Zac was still a little stunned that Bryce had managed to win that particular battle.

“And yet he’s still here.” Perry looked caught between being pissed off and being worried for Bryce. He’d always brushed off Bryce’s quirks -- he was always so damn mature about so many things -- and Zac had never really gotten that it’d actually *hurt* him.

“Because he said no, man. He’s a good person.” Zac reached out, put his hand on Perry’s crossed arms. “He was scared, Perry.”

“The big straight guy is afraid of me?” Perry’s expression didn’t soften much.

“No.” Zac frowned. Was Perry being deliberately dense? Damn it. “Of himself. Don’t be a shit, man. And you can’t tell anyone. Really. *Please.*”

“You’re just so quick to defend him.” Perry pushed away from the door and headed for the kitchen. “God, I need a drink. Did you just forget everything we talked about?” He looked over his shoulder at Zac as he pulled the fridge open and fumbled inside for a beer. “Is this some excuse to stay in the closet? Are you guys happy in there together?” He twisted the cap off the beer and leaned against the fridge, frowning down at Zac. “I guess he is, if he’s getting laid.”

“Fuck you.” Zac trailed Perry into the kitchen and shoved at his shoulder. If it had been anyone but Perry, he’d’ve hit them a lot harder. “Fuck you. It’s not like that. We’re just trying to make it through to graduation, and then we can get jobs, get a place together.”

Perry just took a drink of beer, looking angry and miserable. “You’re gonna move in together. Share a closet like good little roommates. Christ, Zac, I don’t want that for you. How can you want it for yourself?”

“I don’t. No.” Zac shook his head, trying to clear it of Perry’s vision of his future. It wasn’t going to be like that. “No. Not like roommates. Like a couple. Like I love him. He loves me. Like that.”

Perry drank half the beer at once, then glared at it as though it were at fault. Finally, he looked over at Zac, softening a little. “You’re serious. A couple. Not in the closet.”

“Yeah. I’m serious.” Zac sighed with relief and rubbed his hands over his shaved head. He didn’t want Perry to be hurt, or mad at them, or anything. Perry was a good friend. “We talked about it already. We... Shit. We just got our tests back, man. We were sort of trying to celebrate when you walked in.”

“Tests?” Perry took another drink of beer, giving Zac a blank, baffled look.

“Tests.” Zac rubbed his toes against the back of his other leg, shoving his hands into his pockets. “Like, so we can ditch the condoms. You know.”

Perry's beer got stuck halfway down and he sputtered, but then managed to swallow. "You guys went and... really." He sagged back against the fridge and sighed. "Oh, Christ, you guys *are* serious. Both of you."

"Both of us." Zac slumped against the counter. Really, really serious. "He's gonna give up his family for me, man. That serious. Could you... Do you think you could just maybe forgive him for hurting your feelings last year? Please?"

Perry let his head fall back on the fridge with a noise of frustration, then he drained the beer and put the bottle on the counter beside him. "Yes." He dragged the word out. "I'm not a hypocrite. With it taking me 'til senior year to come out and all. I just... now I wish I'd said something instead of just writing him off. I mean, he was practically my little brother. I feel like shit now."

"You had your own shit to deal with." They all had. Perry, and Zac, and even Bryce, though Zac and Perry hadn't realized it at the time. Zac knew better now, though.

"Yeah, well..." Perry pushed away from the fridge and came over to take Zac by the shoulders, gently. He bowed his head and nudged at Zac's forehead with his nose. "I just want you to be okay, Zac. I'm sorry for being pissed. Are you okay?"

"Yeah." Zac tipped his head back, grinning up at Perry. "A little cockblocked, thanks, but I'm okay. He loves me, Perry. I'm better than just okay." He was fucking fantastic.

"Okay. Tell me if it changes." Perry stroked his cheek and kissed him on the forehead. "Now, get out of here. I don't want any cockblocking on my conscience; it might come back to haunt me." He stepped away, drawing Zac with him, only to aim Zac down the hall and smack him on the ass. "I'll be here in the morning. On the couch, since it's not like I can share with someone now."

Zac laughed and headed for the stairs. "Hey, man, good luck sleeping. That cushion on the right's a bitch. Somebody must've broke it at the back to school party, or something, 'cause I swear, that spring wasn't there before." His whole body flooded with relief, Zac padded up the stairs. "Have fun at the party!" Now he just had to convince Bryce that everything was okay.

His room was empty. Damn it. He'd known Bryce was freaking out, but he'd needed to stop Perry, to talk to him, so Perry wouldn't go and out them to the rest of the team. The rest of the *school*.

Zac stood there in the doorway to his room and stared at the empty bed. Shit. Couldn't Bryce have just stayed there, just for a little while?

If Bryce had left the house, Zac would've seen him go. Feeling helpless, he headed for Bryce's room. He just hoped Bryce hadn't locked him out. Physically *or* emotionally.

He knocked lightly, and then tried the knob. Relief washed over him as it turned and the door opened, revealing Bryce curled up on his bed, looking miserable.

“Hey.” Zac slipped into the room. He closed and locked the door behind him. No surprises this time.

“Hi.” Bryce bit his lip for a moment, then asked, “Everything okay?” He looked like he was terrified of the answer.

“Yeah.” Zac shuffled a little further into the room, gauging Bryce’s reaction. “Yeah, it’s cool. Perry’s cool. He just, you know, he was confused. But he’s not going to say anything to anybody. He understands.”

Bryce didn’t look much happier. “Okay.” He wasn’t actually *freaking out*, which was good. He wasn’t doing anything else but staring at the crumpled blankets under his feet, which wasn’t nearly as good. Maybe he was thinking. “He can’t be too happy with me right now,” he finally said, quietly.

“He understands,” Zac repeated. He gave in and came over to sit on the bed beside Bryce. “Dude. It took him ‘til senior year to come out. He knows how hard it can be.”

“Yeah. I don’t think he dropped by for the beer, Zac.” Bryce gave Zac a look that might have been exasperated, but it just came off tired. He ran a hand through his hair and let his head fall back against the wall.

“He came to see his friends.” Zac wriggled up onto the bed and sat with his back to the wall. “To see you and me.”

“You’re cute when you’re being dumb,” Bryce said with a sigh. “You know, I was hoping when he showed up that he’d forgiven me for being such a jerk last year. I knew it bugged him. I’m not completely insensitive.” He tugged at a thread fraying at the cuff of his jeans. “As long as he doesn’t say anything, I guess that’s all that matters.”

Christ. “Yes, you were a shit last year, but not the whole time; it wasn’t the end of the world. Yes, it bugged him. But we talked. He gets it.” Zac sighed and leaned over to bump his shoulder against Bryce’s. “C’mon. You think he never freaked out about anybody else coming out? He’s a good guy, but he’s not perfect. He’s done his share of stupid shit. He *gets it*. Really.” He frowned, replaying Bryce’s words. “And I’m not being dumb.”

“Uh-huh.” Bryce gave Zac a weary look, arching his brows. “I know what he’s not getting.” He reached out for Zac to pull Zac into his lap.

Zac let himself be pulled into Bryce’s lap, straddling his boyfriend’s hips. He rested his forehead against Bryce’s. “No, he’s not. I doubt he wants it anyway, man.” Zac laughed and shook his head a little. “I’m not really his type. It was just a... a thing.” He waved one hand dismissively, then dipped his head to press a kiss to Bryce’s lips. “Not like you and me.”

“I know.” Bryce gave Zac hungry little kisses, almost nipping his lips, and Bryce’s hands cupped his ass. “We’re special.” His voice broke. “God, I hate this, Zac.” He pulled back to look Zac in the eye. “I hate hiding. I spent my whole life being so scared, Zac, and now that the thing I was so scared of happened and it turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me, I still hafta be scared. And that’s... I deserve better than that, Zac... I think...” He looked so uncertain.

Oh, Bryce. Zac kissed his forehead, then rested his cheek against it. “Of course you do. You deserve to be happy.”

“Being with you...” Bryce nuzzled into the curve of Zac’s neck. “You got me in a corner, man, ‘cause if I leave you, you’ll be sad, and if I’m having a shitty life and you’re with me, you’ll be sad, so the only thing left is for me to be happy, if I’m gonna be good for you. I wanna be happy, Zac, not scared. I’m sorry for freaking out.”

“It’s okay.” Zac pulled back, getting his hands on Bryce’s face and making Bryce look at him. “It’s *okay*. All of it. You didn’t *choose* to be scared of this stuff. You didn’t ask for people to make you feel like this. I’m not gonna push. There’s no rush, man. You gotta do things when you’re ready.” And Zac, Zac had to restrain himself from going to bitch out every single member of Bryce’s family who’d fucked him up like this. God, he hated them. All of them.

“I know.” Bryce looked like he’d had a day that was way too long; it felt like yesterday that they’d been kissing out in the cold backyard and riding high because Bryce could stay. “I love you so much, Zac. My life is so much better because of you.”

And just like that, all the anger slipped away. There was nothing in the world like hearing Bryce say ‘I love you’ and say it to *him*. Zac smiled. “I love you, too.” He slid his fingers back into Bryce’s hair.

“I don’t care who knows,” Bryce whispered, his eyes fluttering closed with Zac’s touches. “I just want it to be our choice.” He sighed and relaxed visibly, his shoulders slumping. “You wanna have dinner? Maybe grab some pizza they left downstairs, some more beer? They won’t be back for a while. We could just... hang out, you know?”

“Yeah.” It was good to see Bryce starting to relax. “Yeah, that sounds good.” Zac leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to Bryce’s forehead, then his lips. “Let’s go.” He slipped off Bryce’s lap and off the bed, then held out a hand. “C’mon.”

Bryce slipped his hand into Zac’s and wriggled off the bed. Once he was standing, he wrapped his arms around Zac and pulled him close. His breath was warm on Zac’s cheek as he murmured, “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Zac. Ever since we met.”

Zac could’ve been so much better for Bryce if he’d only stopped and *thought* about what he was doing last year, and he knew it. He never forgot. Talking to Perry had just brought it to the forefront of his mind again. He hugged Bryce tightly and said, “Me, too.” Zac kissed Bryce’s cheek and just held on for a moment. “C’mon,” he said finally. “Let’s go eat.”

An hour later, Bryce and Zac were sprawled on the floor of Zac's room with their back to the bed, full of pizza and beer. Zac had his head on Bryce's shoulder and, even though Bryce had to get both arms around Zac to use the controller, Bryce was kicking his ass at Formula One Racing. *Voom*. Bryce blew past Zac and under the checkered flag and cackled victoriously.

"You," he said, punctuating his point with kisses to Zac's neck, "are not a good enough handicap." He'd almost forgotten the awfulness of nearly falling apart when Perry walked in on them. He kept trying to push it away and he was being mostly successful. Kissing Zac's neck and nuzzling behind his ear was helping.

"That's 'cause you keep doing that thing you do to my neck, distracting me," Zac complained. "I can't concentrate when you're doing that." Far from pulling away, though, Zac was tilting his head and baring his neck to Bryce's mouth.

The game went into demo mode while Bryce kept kissing. "Good." One hand slid down to rub over the fly of Zac's jeans and lower, rubbing to feel Zac's balls and cock through the denim. He dropped the controller and slid his hand up under Zac's shirt to rub his fingers over one of Zac's nipples. Then he bit down on Zac's neck with a little growl to get him to move. God, he loved feeling Zac move, all sexy and heated up.

Zac's controller clattered to the floor between his feet and one hand came up to tangle in Bryce's hair, holding Bryce's mouth against his neck. "Yeah. Fuck, yeah. I love it when you do that." His other hand slid down to cover Bryce's hand between his legs as his hips came up, pressing his cock more firmly against Bryce's palm.

"Which?" God, Bryce had been so hot for Zac right before Perry walked in. Not thinking about that. No. Thinking about feeling Zac's cock swell, trapped in his jeans. Fuck, fuck, fuck, that was hot. He slid his hand over it. "That?" He groaned and bit Zac under the ear. "That?"

"*Yeah.*" Zac shuddered, his hips coming up again and his fingers tightening in Bryce's hair.

Okay, nothing was better than this except maybe sex, but sex... well, it was better because it was driving Zac crazy and getting Zac off *and* getting off himself. "Sure..." Bryce rubbed his thumb over Zac's half-hard cock and then fumbled for the button and the zipper of Zac's fly. He couldn't help moaning against Zac's neck as he peeled the jeans open and saw Zac's dick straining against his briefs. "So hot." He hooked his thumb under the waistband and pulled it away slowly, muffling his moans by biting and sucking hard under Zac's ear. His other hand slipped down Zac's belly and dipped under the briefs, teasing at Zac's heated flesh.

"Tease," Zac accused, his laughter coming out like soft moans. "God, your fucking *mouth*, man. Your *hands*."

"You are so fuckin' hot, Zac." Bryce could see it now, could see how he'd been deliberately *not* looking. "Love you." Bryce pushed Zac's pants down as far as he could and let his hand play

over Zac's gorgeous, dark cock. Fuck. He couldn't sit still; his own cock was aching, and he shifted against Zac for a little relief. He could wait, though. He wanted to wait so he could watch Zac.

Zac arched up and shoved his jeans and briefs down around his knees, then settled down with his legs spread as wide as they'd go. His shirt bunched at his waist, pooling over Bryce's hand. Grumbling a little, he sat back up and stripped it off, throwing it toward the hamper in the corner. When he settled back this time, he was mostly bare.

Bryce couldn't stifle the growl that rose up in his throat at the sight of all that dark, warm skin being bared; the sound startled him, how possessive and feral it was. He wrapped his arms around Zac and bit the curve of Zac's neck with another growl. "So hot. Oh, God." He got both hands on Zac's cock and balls, one hand stroking the shaft and the other getting a gentle handful of Zac's balls.

"I want you," Zac whispered, his hands sliding up the outsides of Bryce's thighs, clenching a little with each stroke of Bryce's hand over his dick. "Wanna feel you in me. Like before. Just you."

"I want it." Bryce could hardly breathe. "I want to make you feel good, Zac. Just... tell me how you want me." He slipped two fingers down between Zac's asscheeks to stroke over the soft, crinkled skin he knew was so sensitive.

Zac's head fell back against Bryce's shoulder as he arched, moaning. "Like that." He caught his breath and writhed against Bryce's fingers. "I want. I want your mouth." He growled softly, one hand coming down to wrap around his cock, lacing their fingers together, making Bryce stroke him faster, tighter. "God, Bryce. Ever since you said... I keep thinking about it. I want your mouth on me, your tongue in me, fucking me."

Bryce's breath caught at the thought; he'd been fantasizing about it for so long, more since Zac had done it to him. "Yes," he whispered, nuzzling at Zac's ear. "Yes, yes. Fuck, I just want..." He circled his fingers, thinking about how it would feel to have his tongue in their place, driving Zac crazy, and the image made him moan. "...I want *everything* with you."

"Please," Zac breathed, shivering. "I'm. I want." His hips moved, fucking his cock into the tight circle of their joined hands. His breath came fast and harsh, and the pre-come slicking their hands said he was getting close already. "Please."

"God, fuck, yes." Bryce thought he could come just from getting Zac off. He made himself pull his hands away. "Just... on your knees..." If Zac just got on his knees, Bryce would do it right here, amidst the wreckage of pizza box and beer bottles and video game controllers. He didn't care. If Zac wanted the bed, they could do that, too.

Zac whimpered when Bryce took his hands away, and then he was scrambling up to fall forward onto his hands and knees, shoving the pizza box and game controllers out of the way as he went down. "Fuck. Fuck, c'mon. I need." His voice was half plea, half demand, a growl with an edge

of need. He spread his legs as far as they'd go, trapped by the cotton and denim still twisted around his calves and ankles, and he turned to look at Bryce over his shoulder. "Yeah?"

"Yes, yes." Bryce was already moving, panting, crawling to kiss the backs of Zac's thighs and tongue his balls. God, it was so amazing to know all this was his. Moaning, he nuzzled between Zac's asscheeks, getting a handful of each to spread Zac open for him.

Bryce didn't want to give himself time to think; he'd wanted this so much in his fantasies... he kissed Zac, open-mouthed and hot, shocking himself with a sharp whine as his tongue finally slid over that tight, puckered skin. Zac tasted like *Zac*, warm and clean and good. Bryce didn't know whose crazy noises he was hearing as he let himself have what he'd wanted so long, kissing and licking and finally teasing his tongue inside.

Zac's body opened up for him so easily, and Zac groaned, shuddering all over. "Fuck, fuck, fuck," he chanted, his hands clawing at the carpet without finding purchase. "Oh, God. Bryce. Fuck..."

Oh, fuck. It was as good as Bryce had dreamed... he'd never known it would turn Zac on so much. It was *amazing* to feel Zac like this. Moaning, he fucked Zac with his tongue, getting as deep as he could. He didn't give a damn about anything but how good it was for Zac; it was so easy to push any fears away when he knew Zac wanted it. He got a hand up between Zac's thighs, fondling Zac's tight, smooth balls and sliding his thumb over the sleek, wet skin behind them.

"I'm. I need." Zac broke off with a moan, shuddering hard. His hips shifted, body pressing back toward Bryce's mouth and fingers. "So good." His breath came fast and rough and he reached under himself to get a hand on his dick.

Bryce just moved with him, soaking in how damn good it was to be the one to make Zac feel like this. He loved feeling Zac give it up for him, open up, push back, beg with his body. He kept his hand on Zac's balls, feeling them get tighter, knowing what was coming and begging for it himself with the way he moaned and licked and fucked.

"*Bryce*. Fuck, 'm gonna--"

Bryce couldn't stop; he could *feel* Zac coming and it was so good. He pressed in as far as he could, indulging both of them until Zac's shudders slowed. Panting hard, he pulled away a little, still flicking his tongue against Zac, feeling Zac's orgasm still humming through him.

"Oh. Oh, *fuck*," Zac breathed, stretching his arms out in front of him and resting his forehead on the carpet. "I... Yeah." He lifted his head and looked over his shoulder to ask, "You okay?"

"Yeah." Bryce looked up to meet Zac's eyes. His breath caught and his eyes widened as he had to rein himself away from the idea of just pinning Zac to the floor and riding the perfect curve Zac's ass until he got off. He didn't even need to get out of his clothes. Really. Not nice, Bryce, no, no, no, but so fucking tempting. God, Zac was so hot.

Zac just looked at Bryce for a long moment. The smile that curled his lips was slow and hot. “Yeah,” he murmured. “You gonna fuck me?”

“Yes.” Bryce could make that much sense. He forced himself to move, tearing his eyes away from Zac because if he kept looking, he was going to forget to be good. “Wherever you are by the time I get the lube.” He was so hard he hurt, hurt so much he couldn’t believe he was still hard through it. He pushed himself to his feet, using the bed for support, and made it over to rifle the bedside table.

Bryce had just found the lube when a very naked Zac pushed him down onto the bed, crawling up over him. He was about to complain that he was still dressed when Zac dragged his fly open and got a hand on his dick.

“Fuck, I love you,” he blurted out. God, Zac looked like... better than porn. Like a sex god. All lean and sleek, with his dark cheeks stained reddish with a flush. And his eyes. Bryce suddenly understood what people meant about drowning in someone’s eyes.

Zac shoved Bryce’s jeans down around his hips and then took the lube away from him. “I love you, too,” Zac said, slicking his hand and wrapping it around Bryce’s cock again. “And I want you in me.”

Bryce made himself stop looking at Zac’s eyes and hanging on every word that dripped from Zac’s beautiful mouth long enough peel off his shirt. “You can have me.” It was so hard to think and talk with Zac touching him and saying things like that. Bryce wriggled and with a few shoves and kicks, he got his pants down and off. Being naked only felt right. “I love being yours.”

Zac’s gaze raked over him. “You are so damn hot,” he growled, leaning down over Bryce to kiss him hard on the mouth. He shifted, and then he was sinking down onto Bryce’s cock. Tight, so tight.

“Zac...” Bryce grabbed the covers in both hands so he wouldn’t grab anything else. Oh, fuck, he hadn’t expected *that* just then. He sucked in a breath and then moaned, watching Zac take him in, trying to look at all of Zac at once. He kept coming back to Zac’s face because he could see so much right there.

Taking slow, deep breaths, Zac opened up and took Bryce in. He was incredibly tight, even after his ass was flush with Bryce’s hips. “God, you feel so fucking *big* like this,” he said, but it didn’t sound anything like a complaint. Zac loved that Bryce had a big dick; Bryce knew it.

“You feel so fucking *good*.” Sex with Zac was heaven. Bryce had to breathe short and fast to keep control of himself; he wanted Zac so much, wanted more, wanted to come so badly he could almost taste it. But above and beyond all that, he wanted something even better. He wanted to watch Zac want him, need him, use him, wanted to watch Zac love him and trust him. Letting go of the covers, he stroked Zac’s thighs. “You can have me any time,” he promised.

“All the time.” Zac just rested there for a moment and Bryce waited, letting him get used to it. When he finally moved again, it was slow, rising up until just the head of Bryce’s cock was still inside him and then sinking all the way down again. The noises Zac made as he moved sounded like purring.

“You’re incredible.” Bryce couldn’t resist anymore. He pushed himself up, cradling Zac with his body, wrapping Zac up in his arms, and leaned in for a kiss. He loved to touch Zac; he’d always loved it, loved how willing Zac was to be close. He’d never guessed it would lead here.

Zac slid the fingers of his clean hand into Bryce’s hair, holding on as they kissed. His tongue swept through Bryce’s mouth, teasing, licking at Bryce’s tongue, and finally he really moved, rode Bryce’s cock the way Bryce loved it so much.

Bryce held Zac close and kissed him back hungrily, hands stroking up and down Zac’s back, over his ass and thighs, and back up. He held out as long as he could, kissing and touching, before he was overwhelmed by how good it felt for Zac to ride him. He let go and fell back into the pillows, grabbing at Zac’s hips to move with him. “God, *yes*.” His voice sounded like it was being wrenched out of him. He couldn’t take his eyes off of Zac’s face.

Zac rested his hands on Bryce’s chest and fucked himself on Bryce’s cock, moaning like he just couldn’t hold it in.

Bryce knew how Zac felt; he couldn’t hold himself together either. Every little move Zac made sent rushes of pleasure through him, and he could hardly breathe. “Zac, I...” His back arched, and he whimpered, fucking Zac harder, pulling Zac down to him with every thrust. He’d held back so long, letting go felt overwhelming.

“Yeah. Yeah, like that.” Zac’s voice came out unsteady and rough; he was writhing, driving himself down onto Bryce’s dick. “Wanna feel you come for me. Come in me.”

Coming was intense; Bryce could only gasp Zac’s name before he was left silent and breathless by his orgasm. His back arched, and he shook with one jolt after another. It felt like he couldn’t stop, like he was caught in a loop of pleasure. It was so good, feeling both of them made hotter and slicker with his come.

When he finally came down, he was trembling and dizzy. Everything was dark, and he realized that his eyes were closed. He opened his eyes, trying to focus on Zac’s face.

“So hot,” Zac murmured, leaning down over Bryce to press soft kisses to his lips and jaw. “God, that was so hot.” Zac’s hands traced waves and spirals over Bryce’s chest and sides, stroking him.

Bryce couldn’t make his mouth work at first, so he just nodded. Unlocking his fingers from Zac’s hips was the next task, letting go so he could wrap his arms around Zac and hold on and breathe. “Yeah,” he finally got out.

“Never thought a piece of paper would make sex feel so damn good,” Zac muttered, his kisses finally travelling back toward Bryce’s mouth.

“Not the paper,” Bryce mumbled, turning to get kisses. “S *you*.” Zac was the reason everything was so good. Bryce felt warm and giddy all the way through.

Zac sat up, denying Bryce those kisses. He was shaking his head, grinning. “Nope. It’s *us*.” Zac’s body squeezed tight around Bryce’s so-sensitive dick, and all Bryce could do was moan in agreement.

Once he could breathe again, Bryce leaned up and got his arms around Zac, then rolled them over so that he was on top. Rumbling happily, Bryce ducked his head and kissed Zac’s neck, getting his fix of Zac’s soft skin like that. With Zac trapped under him, he kissed up to Zac’s ear and then nipped it. “Mostly you.”

Zac groaned, neck arching, and Bryce knew he’d won. He sighed happily against Zac’s ear. “Love you,” he whispered. He shifted to push himself up on his elbows and looked down at Zac. “You okay?” He stroked Zac’s cheeks and scalp, admiring Zac’s beauty. It had been a hell of a long day.

“M good.” Zac certainly looked good, flushed with pleasure and shiny with sweat, his eyes still dark and wide. “You?”

“Better than ever.” Forget what anyone beyond them knew or thought. There was only so much energy in the world and Bryce was spending his on his relationship. He kissed Zac on the mouth, savoring the soft fullness of Zac’s lips. “Ready for bed?” He shifted a little over Zac, offering himself up if Zac wanted him again.

“Mmm.” Zac pulled him in for more kisses. “I could sleep. Lemme set my alarm, so I can wake you up with some mind-blowing sex tomorrow, huh?”

“If you *insist*.” Bryce rolled off and flopped on the bed, laughing. Tomorrow. More sex. More Zac. More *them*. Bryce was looking forward to it; he realized now how often he’d dreaded the idea of another day of potential failure yawning in front of him every time he went to bed. Things were different now.

Zac laughed, rolling away to fiddle with his alarm clock. “I insist. I think I’m gonna insist on it a lot.” He snuggled up next to Bryce again and grinned wickedly. “Like, really a lot.”

“I think I can deal with that.” Bryce got his arms around Zac and pulled him close, then tucked the blankets up around them. At some point, the TV had turned itself off and the console was idling. The lights were out on the scattered controllers. “As much as you like. No one’s going to notice us sleeping together.” He was realizing that people didn’t notice much that didn’t affect them.

“Awesome.” Zac rewarded him with a kiss, then broke away to yawn widely. He blinked, looking surprised, and smiled sheepishly. “Long day.”

Bryce couldn't help laughing. He pressed a kiss to Zac's forehead. “Go to sleep, baby. Try and get to dreamland before people come lurching back in from the crew house.” He sighed happily and snuggled up.

Zac tucked his head down against Bryce's shoulder, nodding sleepily. “Mmkay. G'night.”

Bryce pressed his cheek to Zac's warm head, feeling the slight stubble of Zac's hair growing in. Maybe he'd help Zac shave it next time they showered together. This felt as good as it had in first year, being close to Zac, as good and so much more; it surprised him now to realize what he'd felt then, how close it had been to love. He stayed awake as long as he could manage, feeling Zac relax into sleep in his arms, before he fell asleep in turn.

Chapter Ten

The alarm went off, soft beeps that dragged Bryce out of sleep. Zac was a warm, heavy weight against him, still sound asleep. Bryce reached over, way over, and tapped the alarm to turn it off. As he moved, his morning erection rubbed against Zac's hip. *Oh. Nice.*

Bryce looked down at Zac again, remembering how many mornings he'd lain in bed and fantasized about this, how much the thought had turned Zac on. He reached for the lube and flipped it open as he ducked his head to press a tender kiss to Zac's beautiful mouth.

Zac made a little mumbling sound and shifted back against Bryce, but didn't open his eyes.

Bryce kissed him again and slid a slick hand between them, sliding his palm against Zac's dick. "I love you," he whispered against Zac's lips.

Zac's hips came up, pushing his cock into Bryce's hand, as his eyes slowly blinked open. He focused on Bryce and smiled. "Mmm. Hey."

"Hi." Bryce loved that sleepy smile. He kissed Zac again and slid his fingers down between Zac's thighs, nudging them into the warmth there so he could touch and tease. "Good morning."

"Oh." Zac parted his legs and got a hand in Bryce's hair. "Very good. Yes. Love you." He was never very coherent in the mornings, but apparently he could manage enough to lick into Bryce's mouth and kiss him slow and hot.

Bryce kissed him back, pouring everything he felt into their kisses. Zac was so warm and willing, opening up for his gentle touches so easily. When he pulled his hand away, he slicked his hard cock, getting it ready for his lover. He didn't have to stop kissing to shift to kneeling between Zac's thighs, braced on one elbow, that arm cradling Zac's shoulders.

Zac's sleepy mumbling turned into soft moans. His free hand found Bryce's hip and he drew his knees up, arching. "Want you."

"Yeah." Bryce wiped his hand on the sheets so that he could cup Zac's hip, lifting Zac to meet him. As sleepy as they both were, they found each other easily and Bryce moaned against Zac's lips as his cock pressed in slowly.

Fingers tightening in Bryce's hair, Zac nipped at Bryce's lips and then kissed him deeply. They fit together perfectly and once Bryce was deep inside Zac, nestled right against him, he nuzzled against Zac's cheek and just breathed in how close they were in every way. Zac was so soft and warm; he smelled musky and sweet.

Zac untangled one hand from Bryce's hair and stroked his back, fingers tracing the curves of rib. His touches were gentle, almost delicate.

Bryce sighed, letting his forehead rest on Zac's shoulder. He moved without knowing it at first, rocking slowly and arching into Zac's touches. Everything was so good; better than he'd imagined. The warmth of their bed, the softness of Zac's breath, the barely-there daylight making everything glow; it was all *right*.

Bryce knew Zac liked it hard, but the little noises he was making didn't sound like complaints. They sounded like purring, soft and pleased.

Bryce loved sex with Zac more than with anyone he'd been with before. It wasn't that it had been a chore, but it had felt more like he had a job to do than anything else. Step by step, get it done. Like writing a paper. With Zac, it was like base jumping or surfing or... anything real and just because it felt so good and even scary sometimes. Bryce moved a little faster, moaning with pleasure, and kissed Zac's neck over and over.

Zac's noises got deeper, rougher. His fingers in Bryce's hair clenched tight and he growled Bryce's name, sounding so incredibly turned on. Bryce had done that to him, made him feel that good.

"Oh, God," Bryce breathed. "I love that." He moved to kiss Zac on the mouth, hard, until he couldn't breathe, and then he pulled back to look at Zac lying under him. He was fucking Zac with long, steady strokes that rippled through Zac's body. "I love turning you on. I love making you come. I can't... God, Zac, I still can't believe it sometimes, that you want me that much."

Zac opened his mouth to answer, but Bryce's cock hit him just right inside and all that came out was a moan. After a moment, he caught his breath and said, "So much, Bryce." He writhed, his body tightening around Bryce's dick. "Want you so much."

"I love giving you what you want." It was especially good because Zac was so damn self-sufficient. Hell, Zac held Bryce together most of the time. "I loved doing that last night," Bryce whispered, feeling his cheeks heat. "You were so, so hot, Zac."

Zac's gaze dropped to Bryce's mouth and he nodded a little. "Yeah. I never... It felt so good." He bit his lip and dragged his gaze back up to meet Bryce's eyes with visible effort. "I liked it. Your mouth. It was incredible."

Bryce shifted his hand from Zac's hip, sliding it under him so that his fingers were stroking where his cock was pushing in, feeling that skin taut and slick now. Thinking about it was making him all hot and breathless. "Yeah." Bryce closed his eyes a moment, remembering how good it had felt, remembering the feeling of Zac opening up for him. "The way you just..." he panted. "God, just opened up for me." He opened his eyes again and looked down at Zac, fucking him harder now and groaning with it.

Eyes widening, breath catching in his throat, Zac gave a choked-off moan. "Yeah. I want. Again." He groaned, his body clenching around Bryce's cock. "Love it when you touch me. So good."

“Love touching you,” Bryce said breathlessly. It was getting harder to talk, especially with the way Zac’s body answered his. “I... this. Better than I imagined.” They were so close, close at the heart and the head and not just the body.

Zac’s back arched and his hand slipped down to grip Bryce’s ass. “Yes. You. Please.”

“Anything.” Bryce held Zac close, feeling every thrust echoed in the ripple of pleasure that went through his lithe body. Bryce’s breath came with little moans and gasps now; in the back of his head he knew they were still being so quiet, but the noises filled what little space there was between them completely. Bryce bit his lip to keep himself focused on Zac, moving hard to give what Zac was pleading for.

“Yeah.” Zac pulled Bryce down, closing the distance between them, angling his mouth over Bryce’s for a deep, slow kiss. Zac’s moans got sharper, muffled by the kisses as Bryce moved inside him.

Bryce gave Zac one slow, intense kiss after another without hesitation, opening up to him completely, still moving hard and steady. Bryce might have been the one on top, but he was Zac’s, without reservations. All he wanted was this: to give himself up, to be taken in and held and loved, and to be able to believe it fully. That was the heart of the fantasy; the reality was all that and more.

And then he wasn’t the one on top anymore. “Over,” Zac whispered against Bryce’s lips, clenching around Bryce’s dick in a way that did little to help Bryce focus on what Zac was saying. “Roll over. I wanna make you come.”

Once the words sank in, Bryce tumbled them over so that Zac could have him, eager for it. “Yes,” he panted, once he was on his back. He let his hands fall to the pillow, above his head, palms up, but he planted his feet firmly so that he could keep moving, pushing up to meet Zac’s body.

Zac smiled. “You look so good like that.” He leaned over Bryce, lacing their fingers together and pinning Bryce to the bed, and then he moved. Zac rode Bryce’s cock deep and fast, pressing his mouth to Bryce’s neck to muffle the noises he made with each thrust.

Bryce swallowed a cry and clenched Zac’s hands, back arching. He wanted to scream Zac’s name until his voice gave out, but instinct kept him quiet at the last moment. It took all of what little control he had left not to wake the whole house, leaving him at the mercy of Zac’s demands. Whining through clenched teeth, he came in a rush of pleasure that made him buck and shake as he surrendered to it.

Something about Bryce coming seemed to turn Zac on even more. He moved faster, writhing, almost grinding himself down onto Bryce’s cock, and he was shivering all over as his breathing grew more and more uneven.

When Bryce could speak without wailing profanity and Zac's name, his words spilled out in whispers as the last of his orgasm rippled through him. At first, Bryce wasn't even sure who was speaking; he didn't know he could think the things he was saying, "Fuck me, fuck me, Zac... want you so much, want you to have me again, want you over me, hold me down, let me lick you, kiss you, fuck you... want to make you come like that again, want you to ride me, please, Zac... God, please, please come, let me see you come... on me, Zac, wanna be yours, please..." He couldn't stop babbling, but hearing his inner thoughts rush out didn't scare him; Zac could know it all.

Bryce could feel Zac's teeth dig into the side of his neck as Zac growled, body clenching tight on Bryce's sensitive cock. Zac kept grinding down on him, wringing pleasure from Bryce's body, and Bryce hadn't managed more than a breath or two before heat spattered his chest and belly, Zac coming all over him.

Bryce's breath caught and he arched into the bite and the heat, catching his lower lip between his teeth in a last-moment attempt to stifle a fresh cry that rose in his throat. His next breath was heavy with blood and sex; he shivered, still moving under Zac.

"Like that," Zac whispered, his tongue washing over the sting of his bite. "I like that." He pressed fast kisses to the line of Bryce's jaw, kisses that were sharp with just a hint of Zac's teeth brushing skin. "Love how you're so... so open." Zac sat up, smiling down at Bryce. "Love you."

"Good," Bryce breathed, not understanding why he said it. He licked blood off of his own lip, looking up at Zac. As his head cleared a little and he realized he was still shivering, he knew why. If Zac didn't love him, he couldn't be here; he needed to know it. And he needed Zac to know *him*. "Can't be anything else," he confessed. "I need it. Need you."

The kisses Zac pressed to Bryce's lips were gentle, so light and delicate. "I love you so much, Bryce," Zac murmured, finally loosening his grip on Bryce's hands.

Bryce reached up to stroke Zac's face and the smooth curve of his head, soothing himself with the touches as he returned the sweet kisses. "Love you, too," he said. His nerves were still singing with how intense the sex had been. They were so right together.

Zac arched into the touches. He didn't say anything else, just made his way from Bryce's mouth all along his jaw with sweet, nuzzling kisses.

Bryce rolled them over again and curled himself around Zac as best he could. Nuzzling against Zac's cheek, he luxuriated in the intimacy of the moment. Waking up in bed with Zac, waking up without any stress or distress, knowing this was exactly where he belonged, made morning a whole new experience.

Maybe Zac was thinking the same thing. He turned his head, kissing Bryce on the mouth again, and then murmured, "I like waking up with you like this." Zac butted his nose against Bryce's cheek. "Uh. Not just the sex. All of it."

Bryce laughed at him, trying to be quiet. "Yeah, we should do it more. Like, all the time." Then his laughter faded. How the hell were they going to get through the rest of the year? Maybe they could just tell Steve and Kaede.

Zac sighed and shook his head, stroking his hands over Bryce's face. "Stop it, man. We'll figure it out. It'll be fine. Even if we can't sleep together every night, it's not like we don't live together, you know? We'll be okay."

Will we? Bryce couldn't stop thinking about what Zac had said about coming out. Even at home, they'd be lying about who they were, for the rest of the year. What did that do to a person? "Yeah, we'll figure it out," Bryce said, but he knew the ache in his chest was written all over him. It wasn't just that Zac deserved better. Bryce still had a weird certainty that he did, too.

"C'mere." Zac pulled Bryce down to him, snuggling him up.

Bryce loved to snuggle. Zac knew it, too. Bryce could tell Zac was distracting him deliberately and gave into it. He nestled down with his head on Zac's shoulder, right where he could nuzzle Zac's neck, and sighed heavily. "We have to get up soon," he murmured.

"Yeah." Zac played with the curls at the nape of Bryce's neck. "Not like we're gonna have sex again this morning, and if I go back to sleep, I'm probably not getting up 'til, like, noon. So." He pressed a kiss to the side of Bryce's head. "But maybe just another minute. I like this, you know?"

"Me, too." Bryce stroked Zac's chest, watching his hand glide over the subtle swells and dips of Zac's muscles. He loved how Zac was so strong and smooth at once, not bulky or heavy. God, Zac turned him on; Bryce couldn't imagine not getting turned on by him now.

Now that Bryce could cope with the realization, he knew he'd always been able to look at men that way, that it had dawned on him that men could be sexy at the same time he'd worked that out about women. It was just that he'd been inundated with opportunities to look at women that way and he'd been terrified to look at men at all. He'd had good reasons to live a half-life, until now.

Now he had more reasons not to, every day. Bryce watched Zac's chest rise and fall, listened to the steady beat of his heart. Not just every day. Every breath. He pressed a kiss to Zac's skin.

Bryce had fallen asleep while Zac grabbed a shower -- it was just as well, since a sleek, wet Zac was high on Bryce's list of things to pounce -- but the kiss Zac stole before dashing off to class had been enough to wake him again. Bryce lay in Zac's bed for a long time, staring at the ceiling and trying to decide if he was going to avoid Perry this morning. The thing was, he didn't want to.

Groaning, Bryce pushed himself up to sitting and looked around at the mess. Pizza, video games, beer, clothes... and the room smelled of sex. Yeah. He and Zac were going to have to do a lot more work if they were going to hide the fact that they were lovers. Bryce flopped back down on his belly and hugged the Zac-scented pillows. He didn't want to hide.

Part of it was laziness. No, tiredness. Exhaustion. Bryce was so fucking tired. Tired of being scared, tired of fighting himself, tired of watching his step. It felt absurd that he could get himself into a situation like this: backed into a corner and trapped between doing right by his best friend and... and what? Doing right by his family?

Bryce got all the way up this time and grabbed Zac's robe so he could trudge off to shower. Maybe there'd be a little hot water left. Zac's robe was too small, but it covered enough, and it smelled like Zac, just like the bed.

I am so fucked, Bryce thought, dropping the robe over the towel rack and taking a moment to look at himself in the mirror. He had a big damn hickey on the side of his neck, and it wasn't like anyone was going to know it was from Zac, but *damn*. They had to be careful. Bryce ran his thumb over it and shivered with pleasure. Sex with Zac was so hot.

Shower, Bryce. He got under the water and soaped up absent-mindedly while he worried about his present situation. Liking boys, check. Liking girls... he'd thought about it, also a check. Caring what other people thought, not so much of a checkmark anymore. Yes, he'd freaked out about Perry finding out, but that was like a physical reaction, not what he really believed anymore.

Reasons for letting people know he was with Zac? Top of the list was that Zac deserved it. Second, Bryce was surprised to find out, was that he wanted people to stay the hell away from his boyfriend. Not really noble, but the idea of someone else thinking Zac was available got him in the gut. *Mine*.

You are such a dork, Bryce said to himself. He grabbed the shampoo and washed his hair. *Seriously. Zac wouldn't do that to you*. Maybe he'd work on that later, when the urge to go out and hit someone on the off-chance they might look at Zac wrong seemed like less of a brilliant idea. Bryce knew that insecurity was not one of his more pleasant qualities, and he knew it was insecurity and nothing more than that.

The third reason for letting people know was that, really, Bryce was kind of... happy. Hiding things harshed the happy and, on a purely selfish level, Bryce wanted his happy.

He also didn't want anyone to know. He never had; it wasn't just about Zac. He'd dated girls, even seriously, and he'd always kept it quiet. Even with girls, he was afraid of his family judging him or trying to ruin it for him. He hadn't told them about anyone he'd dated, no matter how much trouble it had caused between him and whoever that was.

Maybe it wasn't just about 'the gay.' Maybe it was just about the fact that his family sucked. Why couldn't they be less 'survival of the fittest' and more... just human?

Ugh. Bryce got out of the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist while he scrubbed a night's worth of fuzz off of his teeth with a lot of toothpaste and then followed it by a few rounds of mouthwash. Zac must love him to be making out with him before he'd brushed his teeth. Hell, for that matter, he must love Zac a good bit, since it wasn't something that he'd ever thought about until just now.

Zac was so ridiculously hot in the morning. All sleepy and sexy and... Bryce's brain rambled off down that path while his body went through the motions of getting him into his room and dressed and then over to Zac's room to clean up some of the mess. He was still musing about how Zac had gone from being all warm and pliable to riding him like the rodeo was in town as he wandered downstairs with his arms full of trash and recycling.

"There's some coffee left in the pot." Perry's voice drifted out from the living room, and Bryce nearly dropped everything on the hall floor. He'd been so lost in thought that he hadn't seen Perry on his way past.

"Uh, thanks." His manners kicked in before anything else. "Did you get breakfast?"

"My stomach's still arguing with the coffee," Perry said.

Bryce sorted the bottles into the case of empties and shoved the pizza boxes into the recycling. "Did you want some Tums or Pepto?" They were in the cupboard with the vitamins, over the sink. "I could get you some. They're right here." Bryce grabbed his coffee mug and made his hands stop shaking.

"Ugh. Um, Tums, sure. And if there's any coffee left after you get yours..."

"You don't want coffee." Bryce poured the last of it into his mug. It looked like tar, anyway. Classic Perry-coffee. "Especially not the shit you make. I'll get you some water."

"Thanks, Mommy."

"Jackass." Okay, so it wasn't so bad with Perry knowing. What was Perry going to do, anyway? Call Bryce's dad? Run around yelling, "Queer!?" Bryce felt really stupid. He poured Perry a glass of water and shook four white antacid tablets into his hand.

"You doing okay?" Perry asked as Bryce came in with the water and tablets and his own coffee. He pushed himself up on the couch and tugged the blankets around him. Hell, he looked rough. Bryce wasn't sure he'd ever seen Perry actually look bad until right now.

"You're asking me?" Bryce handed him the water and the Tums. "You look like shit."

"Yeah, well." Perry dropped all four tablets into his mouth, chewed, and washed them down with half the glass of water. "I didn't accidentally get outed last night or anything. So, not really worried about me."

Oh. "I'm okay." Mostly. Kind of. Sort of. Bryce kicked the listing recliner to make sure it wasn't going to dump him off the moment he sat down and, once he heard it click into place inside, he sat down carefully.

"Uh-huh." Perry slouched on the couch, limp curls hanging in his eyes, stubbled chin resting on his chest, and gave Bryce a bloodshot glare from under his golden lashes. "You weren't last year."

"No." Bryce wasn't sure when he'd been okay. He put his elbows on his knees and stared into his coffee, trying to pretend Perry wasn't staring at him. "Not really."

"You didn't say anything."

Bryce shrugged. "What was I going to say? 'The world sucks, get a helmet? My dad's a big ol' 'phobe? Hey, me, too, how about that?'"

"Bryce..."

"It was my problem." Bryce took a sip of coffee and nearly choked on it. Battery acid and twigs: Perry made the worst coffee ever. "Christ, Perry. Aren't you supposed to be some kind of magical barista or something?" He pushed himself up to go dump it out, avoiding Perry's stare.

In the kitchen, Bryce pulled apart the coffee maker and cleaned it out to make a new pot. He didn't want to talk to Perry. He wanted to pretend last year hadn't happened. Hell, aside from Zac, he wanted to pretend that this year hadn't happened.

"Will you stop being weird for five seconds so I can actually talk to you?" Perry shuffled into the kitchen, and Bryce heard him sit down at the table with a grunt of discomfort.

"What if this isn't weird, what if it's me?" Bryce pawed a coffee filter out of the box and stuffed it into the machine's basket, smoothing it down so that it wouldn't collapse and get grinds everywhere.

"Okay, so it's you. Can I talk?"

"Talk. You want some coffee?" Bryce filled the carafe and poured it into the reservoir.

"Bryce, I am so sorry."

Bryce nearly dropped the carafe, but recovered enough to put it down on the heating plate with a clatter. "You're what?" He didn't look over his shoulder at Perry, didn't want to see what was on Perry's face.

"Sorry. I'm sorry. About last year." Perry's voice sounded thick, and then he coughed to clear his throat.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.” Bryce dug behind the can of lousy coffee for the can of worse coffee. He popped it open and got out the bag of decent coffee that he kept inside.

“I did. I... you think I couldn’t see someone else having a hard time from a mile away?” Perry’s chair squeaked back. “You think I couldn’t see my inside all over someone else’s face?”

“You were dealing with your own shit, Perry. It’s okay.” Bryce measured the coffee out, enough for him and Perry to have a couple cups. “I’m the one who backed off.”

“I let you.” Perry put his hand on Bryce’s shoulder. “Zac was right. We could have talked to you. Are you okay, now?”

“I’m... yeah.” Bryce put the coffee maker together and hit the switch to start it. Perry’s hand on his shoulder felt like it weighed a ton, but he didn’t want to pull away. “No. I keep looking around for guys who are in my brothers’ frat, anyone who might be able to rat me out to my family. It’s paranoid, but I can’t help it. I keep waiting for the phone to ring.”

“You know that’s not going to happen,” Perry said. He slid his arm around Bryce’s shoulders and leaned against the counter. Slowly, Bryce leaned into him. It felt awkward for a moment, and then Perry wrapped his other arm around Bryce, and it wasn’t awkward anymore.

“My brain calls bullshit. My dad already tried to get me out of here.” Bryce let his head rest on Perry’s shoulder.

“He didn’t.” Perry gave him a little squeeze. “You talked him out of it.”

“What if I can’t next time?” The scenarios kept flashing through his head. They kept him up at night. Being laughed at by his parents. Being turned away at the door of his own damn home. The phone calls. His brothers laughing at him.

“Then you don’t. You just don’t. You think you can’t come live with me if you have to?” Perry hugged him tighter. “Both of you? God knows, I could use the company. And some help on the rent. I want a nice place.”

Bryce laughed and shook his head. “Perry, you don’t have to...”

“I don’t. I want to. It’s kinda lonely out here.” Perry shifted back a little and let go so he could look at Bryce. “You’re not the only one with a family that’s not ‘cool’ with it. I mean, they have nothing on yours, but they’re big fans of ‘don’t ask, don’t tell.’ I need to get out if I’m going to stay sane.”

“I’m sorry, man.” There was enough coffee in the pot for Bryce to grab his mug and steal the carafe. God, he needed coffee. The amazing sex was taking its toll on him. *Mmmsex.*

“Bryce?”

“Huhwhat?” Bryce realized that Perry had been talking.

“It’s not good for you to be living like this, looking over your shoulder.” Perry gave him an exasperated look. “When you’re not thinking about sex, that is.”

Busted. Bryce shoved the carafe back into the coffee maker; the build-up of coffee burbled into it with a splash. “Um...”

Perry laughed at him. “Glad to know you’re doing okay, at least. But about the looking over the shoulder...” He got himself a mug and peered into it long enough to determine nothing was growing in it.

“I know. It’s like living in a spy movie. A bad one.” Bryce sighed and took a drink of coffee. Thank God it was good. “It’s not normal. I mean, I’m starting to think it’s not me that’s fucked up here.” He wandered over and slumped down at the table, letting his head fall onto one arm.

Behind him, Perry started clapping, slowly.

“Uh...” Bryce lifted his head and looked over his shoulder. Perry kept applauding, looking as beamish as anyone that hungover could manage. “What?”

“You’re starting to think it’s not you.” Perry stopped clapping and picked up his cup of coffee. After a sip, he gave Bryce a grin. “And you make awesome coffee. But the first is most important.”

“It’s not me?” Bryce hadn’t really been convinced of that until right this second. “It’s not me.” He turned around completely to look at Perry, feeling slightly light-headed. “It’s not me. I mean. I could be green. I could be the Queen of Sheba. It wouldn’t change anything. I mean, they’d find something... there’d be something, wouldn’t there?”

“Bingo.” Perry came over and ran a hand over Bryce’s hair, looking down at him. With the sun coming through the kitchen window, he didn’t look so hungover anymore. He just looked beautiful, like he had the first day Bryce had seen him. “It’s not you. You being gay, bi, whatever, that’s not what’s wrong with your family.”

“Something is,” Bryce said, leaning into the petting. It felt so good to be touched. Just touched. No meaning behind it but kindness and empathy.

“I know, babe. Something really is. But who you love? That’s so not the problem.”

“So what do I do?”

“What do you do?” Perry tugged Bryce’s hair to get him to look up. “What do you feel like doing?”

“Like...” Bryce thought about it a moment. It only took a moment. “I want to go meet him after class. I want to carry his books. I want to hold his hand. I want to kiss him. I want to... to just...” He ran out of words for it.

“Be like everyone else?” Perry grinned at him.

“Yeah. That.” That was it. Totally it. “Without being scared out of my mind.”

“I can’t promise that last bit. I still get that.” Perry sat down across from him, still grinning like a goof. “But you can have the rest. Some places.” He shrugged. “We’re working on that part, though. Need all the help we can get. Are you in?” He held out his coffee mug.

“I’m in.” Bryce leaned over and knocked his mug lightly against Perry’s. “What do I have to do?”

“Go meet your boyfriend after class, young grasshopper.” Perry leaned back in his seat and took a drink of coffee, then sighed happily. “Carry his books. Hold his hand. And leave me the rest of the coffee.”

“I can do that.” Bryce took a deep breath. He could do that.

It hadn’t been easy to focus on the lecture. Zac’s mind kept wandering back to the way it had felt to wake up with Bryce beside him, wrapped around him. Warm and solid and right. As hard as he’d been working to convince Bryce that it was okay for them to hide their relationship, that he didn’t mind, looking forward into the long months of their final year of school stretching out in front of them, Zac could feel the weight of the lie pressing down on him. Waking up with Bryce like that, knowing what it could have been like if only they were honest, just made it worse.

He kept shaking off the thoughts and trying to pay attention to the professor’s long-winded rambling about muscle groups and proper nutrition, but by the time class was over, he only had half a page of notes, and a good chunk of them made no sense at all when he looked down at them before putting his notebook into his backpack.

Oh, well. He’d talk to one of the guys later, see if they’d gotten better notes.

Slinging his backpack over his shoulder, Zac waved at the guy sitting next to him -- someone on the football team; Zac couldn’t remember his name -- and headed out of the lecture hall. The plaza was packed with students waiting to get in for the next session. Zac weaved his way through the crowd and out the doors, into the bright sunlight.

“Hey.” The voice was familiar, but unexpected; when Zac turned around, Bryce was getting up off of a bench near the doors, swinging his backpack over his shoulder and heading for Zac. Smiling. “There you are.”

“Hey.” Zac wasn’t sure what to do, so he just stood there. Bryce’s smile was contagious, though; Zac couldn’t help smiling back at him. “What’s up?”

“Nothing much. How long before your next class?” Bryce reached for Zac’s backpack and, after a moment’s confusion, Zac handed it over. Bryce slung it over his shoulder with his own like it weighed nothing.

“Uh.” Zac looked at his backpack on Bryce’s shoulder and tried to figure out what it was doing there. Something was up. “I dunno.” He checked his cell phone for the time, then tried to make his brain work enough to do the math. “An hour. I think.”

“Okay.” Bryce held his hand out again, like he was reaching for Zac’s hand. “We could grab a coffee or something if you want. C’mon.” They were standing in the path of students still flowing in and out of the building.

There were people all over. Zac just couldn’t wrap his head around the idea that Bryce wanted to hold his hand. He had to be misunderstanding the gesture. “Um. What do you want?”

“To go and get a coffee and talk to my boyfriend,” Bryce said patiently. His smile was hopeful and endearing. “I’d kiss you right now, but I don’t want to break your brain. It goes with the rest of you, and I was hoping for the matched set.”

Zac’s fingers twitched, and somehow his hand landed in Bryce’s without Zac intending to move at all. “I. What’s going on? Are you... is everything okay?”

“Everything’s fine.” Bryce stepped closer and bowed his head until his forehead touched Zac’s, so Zac could hear him perfectly even though he was speaking quietly. “That’s just it. Everything is fine. I’ve never been happier. Nothing in my life has ever been this good. I don’t want to live like anything is wrong.”

Zac couldn’t stop the smile spreading over his face or the warmth in his chest, but he had to ask: “Are you sure? I mean, I don’t want to fuck things up for you, you know?”

“*We* aren’t going to fuck anything up.” Bryce pressed a gentle kiss to Zac’s nose. “*We* aren’t doing a damn thing wrong. No matter what happens between me and my family, I’m not going to hurt you anymore. You said you were ready for this. Just tell me how ready you are.”

Oh, Bryce. There were people all around them, brushing against Zac as they moved to and from their classes. All those people, and Bryce was standing there holding his hand, kissing his nose, not freaking out and hiding in his room. If Bryce wanted this, Zac was the last person in the world who’d want to stop him.

Zac brought his free hand up to cup Bryce’s cheek. He stroked his thumb over Bryce’s cheekbone and met Bryce’s eyes so he could gauge the reactions. “I’m ready,” he murmured, tipping his head up to press a very soft kiss to Bryce’s lips.

There was a little tension around Bryce's eyes and he squeezed Zac's hand, but then he kissed Zac back just as softly. "Okay, then. C'mon." He tugged Zac's hand a little to get him moving.

Right. Coffee. Zac let Bryce draw him along. He was silent while he processed what had just happened. If anyone had told him, when he'd woken up this morning, that he'd kiss Bryce in public and Bryce wouldn't freak out, he wouldn't have believed them. And yet it had happened, and the world hadn't ended. Far from it -- here he was, walking across campus, holding Bryce's hand.

"What happened?" Zac asked quietly. Something had definitely changed between this morning and now, for Bryce to be acting like this.

"I just... I was talking to Perry," Bryce said quietly. "And the more I talked, the more fucked up it all sounded." Bryce sucked in a deep breath like he was trying to calm himself, and he held on to Zac's hand almost tight enough to hurt. "Talking about not wanting someone to see us and tell my dad. Keeping quiet. Telling a few people. Shit, Zac, it sounded like a bad fucking spy movie." He loosened his grip, looking down at their hands. "Sorry. Just. If that's how I'm living, there is way more wrong with my family than me being queer. The problem isn't me."

"The problem was never you." Zac gave Bryce's hand a squeeze, gentler than the way Bryce had been squeezing his. "I just want you to be happy."

"I want to be happy. And I want you to be happy." Bryce let go of Zac's hand, but it was only to slide his arm around Zac's shoulders. "I don't want to go giving any interviews." He gave Zac a sideways look. "But I can't live with not being who I am. I always tried to be such an honest person, Zac."

No interviews. Yeah, that was what had started all of the problems with Bryce's family. Zac and Perry and that damn article in *Game On*. "No interviews," Zac agreed. "One was enough for me." Not that Zac would have taken it back; the article had gotten him together with Bryce, too.

"Not until after we graduate, at least." Bryce stopped and looked down at Zac. "It's not that I'm not scared as hell. It's just... I don't think we have a chance if we don't just live our lives." He took a breath and kept going. "And... and when I was talking to Perry, I realized that I *really* want us to have a chance. And I don't want us hurting ourselves every day on the bars of some cage that's got an open door. We're really lucky that the door is open, Zac."

Bryce's arm slipped off Zac's shoulder as Zac stopped and turned to face Bryce. He caught up Bryce's hand in his, squeezing gently. "I want us to have a chance, too."

"That's why I'm here." Bryce took a deep breath. "Just... you know. Haul me back if I make a run for it, right?" He looked a little worried about that.

"Every time." Zac was worried about it, too, but he wouldn't let that stop him.

“I think I get it now, though.” Bryce brought Zac’s hand up and kissed Zac’s fingers. “I do. When I think of you and me, *us*, the rest melts away. The more I focus on us, the more right it is. So, let me take you for coffee and walk you to class and then tonight, I want to sleep in the same bed with you. Because I’m not waking up without you anymore just because of what someone might think.”

Bryce was so open, too open and honest and *good* to have to lie about anything important to him. “You want to tell Steve and Kaede tonight? Or just let ‘em figure it out?”

Bryce took a breath and squared his shoulders. “I think we should tell them. I mean, the whole thing. They’re our friends and we all have to live together. I don’t want them to feel uncomfortable because they can’t figure out what’s up.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right. And, you know, they’re gonna be cool with it. They know about me, you know? They’ve never been weird about it or anything.” Zac squeezed Bryce’s hand. “It’s gonna be good.”

“I get to kiss you while watching TV.” Bryce looked like he could hardly wait. Just to be able to lean over and kiss Zac, sitting on that treacherous couch, watching the TV that was way too big for the little living room, and Bryce looked like someone had told him he was going to get *everything* he’d ever wanted.

Zac grinned. “You sure do.” God, who would’ve thought something like that would make either of them so happy? It did, though. It made Zac feel like everything was finally falling into place, and his whole world was made better just by being able to hold Bryce’s hand and kiss him when he wanted to.

“Awesome.” Bryce bounced on his toes a little and then tugged on Zac’s hand. “Come on. I want to buy you a coffee and carry your bag and walk you to class and...” All the stuff that everyone else did. Zac’s boyfriend. His big, goofy boyfriend was going to meet him after classes and carry his books and hold his hand and... that grin was the same as the same old Bryce that Zac remembered.

Zac couldn’t help but laugh. Everything just felt so good, so perfect. “You’re the perfect boyfriend, Bryce. Come on. Let’s go.” He tugged at Bryce’s hand and off they went to the coffee shop across the quad. Hand in hand.