

Sleeping Stone

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Chapter 1

Chris comes to see Jazz every day—twice, most days. It's like he's become yet another fixture here, like the fluorescent lighting and the shiny chrome in the bathroom where he never looks in the mirror. Another fixture in this place he never wanted to be.

They all know when to expect him. On the few occasions that one of the nurses has overheard Chris talking to Jazz she has invariably left immediately, blushing. And not only because of the tone of Chris' voice, which ranges from deeply bitter to scaldingly angry to heartbroken to joyous.

The day Chris met Jazz was the worst one he could remember having in a long, long time. At least, it started out that way. His boss had yelled at him in front of the other employees in a meeting for being three minutes late, when Chris had never been late before that, as far as he could recall. And his recollection was pretty damned good.

Chris didn't know what Barry, his boss, had shoved up his ass, but it clearly wasn't agreeing with him. Then Barry had insulted Chris' taste in ties—which Chris thought was out of line—and told him that he'd better shape up. Chris didn't figure Barry was talking about hitting the gym more, either, although he managed to keep his big mouth shut long enough to keep from sharing that thought with the man.

It wasn't a bad job—web design was the kind of thing Chris had picked up over years of geekdom in college, when his computer was the first thing he checked after he woke up in the morning and the last thing he checked before climbing

into bed. You got interested in email; next thing you knew you were making your own web site just because it was fun to play with html. And, of course, the job let Chris keep to himself as much as possible—not too many opportunities to play with others, let alone play well—and the pay was enough to keep him in Dockers and allow for a decent apartment that he probably didn't deserve, considering how infrequently he cleaned it.

One of the reasons Barry's remark about shaping up was so irritating was because Chris worked out five times a week. He didn't have anything better to do, other than cruise the bars or the 'net, and he worried about ending up looking like his dad—forty pounds overweight and insisting that Chris' time would come after he hit thirty. The gym was his insurance, and he resented the monthly payments on that a lot less than he did the health insurance he paid huge amounts toward and barely used. He was disgustingly healthy—couldn't remember the last time he'd been sick—and he hated doctors. Hated hospitals even more.

Chris had gone out for lunch that day, ordered a salad and a black coffee, and gotten back to his desk only to discover that the coffee had cream in it. He wavered back and forth on whether it was worth going back to the little cafe to complain, decided it wasn't worth his time or his money, and threw the coffee cup, lidded, into his trash barrel with a look of complete disgust.

At four-thirty, Chris' computer locked up after he'd spent the previous two hours getting the web site he was working on just right. He hadn't saved his work in that entire space of

time, and nothing he could do would get the computer back to rights. Two hours worth of work down the drain. What a pain in the ass, even if it was partially his fault.

At five-thirty, having given up on the project for the day, Chris went out to his car, only to discover that he'd left the lights on that morning and the battery was dead. Totally, completely dead. Not even a click when he tried to get it to turn over. "Fuck," he said, and his voice sounded despairing even to himself. What a day.

Chris climbed out of the car and thanked the universe that at least it wasn't raining. As soon as the thought had crossed his mind he glanced up at the sky, wondering if he'd cursed himself, but it was relatively cloud-free. Scowling despite the one break he'd had all day, Chris kicked the front tire of the car and said it again. "Fuck."

"Are you okay?"

Chris looked up and saw a young guy juggling a plastic bookstore bag, a cup of what had to be espresso based on how small it was, and a funny-looking cactus-type plant. The guy's hair was long and dark and held back with what looked like a woman's hair scrunchy. He was trying to hold all of his stuff and open his car door at the same time.

Moving forward automatically, Chris took the bag and the plant from the guy's hands so that he could open his car door. Somehow, that seemed to make more sense than just opening the door for him, and okay, obviously this guy was the trusting sort to just let a complete stranger, who'd been swearing in public seconds before, take his belongings out of his hands. For all he knew, maybe Chris was gonna run off

with the book bag and the valuable ... cactus ... okay, well, maybe not.

The smaller guy grinned at him and took the stuff back, throwing the bag over into the back seat of the car and placing the plant gently on the passenger seat. "Car won't start?" he asked.

Chris nodded. "Yeah, I must have left the lights on this morning. Battery's dead."

"There's a pay phone in the lobby right in there," the guy pointed. "But then, it must be after five, so you probably work around here. I guess you can call from your office, huh?"

"I've got Triple A. Fuck." Chris heard what he'd said and felt himself flush, even though he didn't know this guy from Adam and he'd already heard Chris swear. "Sorry ... it's just been one of those days, you know?"

"S'okay. I won't take it as an invitation, considering we just met." The guy's eyebrows wiggled up and down independently of each other.

Chris knew he'd missed something, but he wasn't sure what.

"You want a lift?" the guy asked.

Chris thought about it. If he called AAA now, he'd be waiting for at least an hour before they came out to jump the car. If he got a ride home now, he could call AAA in the morning and the time he'd kill waiting would be work's, not his own. And Barry had pissed him off just enough that he didn't think he cared. "Are you sure?"

"I don't offer unless I mean it. As long as you don't mind riding in what my mom generously refers to as the 'coffin on wheels'."

Chris really looked at the guy's car for the first time. The paint was flaking off in several places, he could see spots where rust had eaten totally through the body, and the side he was standing on had no hubcaps. The back seat was crammed with so much junk that no one could have sat in it.

"Don't worry, it runs. Better than you'd expect. It's just not pretty to look at."

"You sure?" Chris asked again. "I live twenty minutes away."

"S'okay by me. I don't have anywhere special to be."

Nowhere special to be; that pretty much reflected Chris' evening, as well. His whole life, in fact, but he didn't want to think about that now. "Thanks," he said, rather awkwardly.

"No problem. You mind holding the aloe on your lap? I'd like to see if I can keep it alive at least long enough to get it home."

Chris looked at his rescuer blankly.

The guy gestured to the plant sitting on the seat. "Aloe. Plant."

"Oh. Sure."

It only took the guy a few seconds to find the right key, even though his key chain was more like six key chains, all attached together, that dangled down onto his knee when he sat behind the wheel.

"Oh, yeah," the guy said, turning to Chris and crinkling up his nose. "I'm Jazz."

* * * *

Each time, the ritual is the same—a gentle smoothing of the dark hair from the brow, followed by a chaste kiss. The bandages came off two months ago, and Jazz has been breathing on his own for weeks. He looks the way Chris remembers him in his dreams. So first the smooth, then the kiss, and then Chris sits in the chair and holds Jazz's hand between his own.

Sometimes he cries, but most often not. He holds Jazz's hand and talks to him.

Chris would always remember that car ride, the first one he ever took with Jazz behind the wheel. He remembered the way that Jazz's torn denim jeans shifted, exposed bits of his leg. He remembered the way Jazz drove, with one hand on the wheel and the other constantly on the move: adjusting the rear view mirror, brushing a stray lock of hair back behind his ear, fiddling with the radio station. At the time Chris had thought the guy was nervous, but he later learned that that was just Jazz. Calm wasn't a word with a definition, not in Jazz's life.

The steering wheel was wrapped with sheepskin. The rear view mirror had fuzzy dice, a crucifix, and an air freshener dangling from it. The dashboard was strewn with CDs, loose change, and grotty looking Kleenex. It was like riding inside a tornado. Chris kept his eyes on the road ahead, afraid to even contemplate what might be in the disaster zone that was the back seat.

"So, what's your name?" asked Jazz.

"Oh, right, sorry. Chris."

"Christopher?"

"No." Chris was ready for the line of questioning that usually followed this, and was surprised when it didn't come.

"Okay. You'll need to tell me where to go."

"Take the next right and get onto 93 North," he directed. He shifted the aloe plant in his lap and touched one of its funny leaves curiously. "What's with the plant?"

"Aloe's good for burns," Jazz explained. "It's also really hard to kill, so it gets two thumbs up in my book. Not green thumbs though—I bring plants home all the time, and they always die." Jazz didn't seem disturbed by this.

"Better not get a dog," Chris said.

"Yeah, I've killed a couple of them, too," Jazz said.

Chris didn't think he was kidding. "So ... do you work near here?"

"Not anymore," said Jazz. "Used to, though. I still have some friends that work in the area, and I really like that bookstore." He gestured over his shoulder toward the bag he'd thrown into the back seat. He was definitely wearing a woman's hair scrunchy.

"What do you like to read?" Chris asked.

Jazz shrugged. "Anything. Everything. I go through phases. Just got finished reading a whole mess of porn."

Chris pictured this for a moment. Longer than a moment, apparently, because the next thing he knew Jazz had finished asking him a question, and he hadn't heard a word. "I'm sorry—what?"

"I asked what you do in your spare time," Jazz repeated, looking at him strangely.

"Oh, you know, the usual," said Chris. "Go the gym, watch TV, hang out with friends."

"I just took up cooking," Jazz said. "I'm really bad at it. Last night I threw away two meals before I gave up and had ice cream instead."

Chris chuckled. He could just picture this guy, with his long dark hair and his cheeky grin, wearing an apron and trying to cook. "What were you trying to make?"

"Oh, some kind of risotto—but I didn't have the right kind of rice—and then I tried to make waffles, but the waffle maker didn't get hot. Then I realized I'd plugged the blender in by mistake. And I was too hungry to start again, so—ice cream."

"I've had ice cream occasionally myself," Chris admitted. "But I like to cook. Just nothing fancy."

"At this point, anything more complicated than boxed macaroni and cheese is too complicated for me," said Jazz cheerfully. "I guess I'll have to focus on my other talents."

Looking at Jazz's long, slender fingers on the steering wheel, Chris wondered what those talents might be. "So ... you're not married, I take it? Since you're spending all this time trying to cook?"

"Nope. My mom says no one but her would ever be able to put up with me for more than a month or two, and so far she's mostly been right. Not in a weird way or anything. I mean ... did that sound weird?"

Chris thought that pretty much everything this guy said sounded weird. "Weird how?"

"Oh, you know—single guy mentioning his mom too much kind of weird."

"Oh! No," Chris said.

"I take it you're not married either? No ring."

Chris held his hand up and waggled his fingers. "Nope. No ring, no ... spouse."

"But you're seeing someone?"

"No, again. My last relationship ended kind of badly. I haven't had the guts to get into anything since then."

Jazz glanced over his shoulder and changed lanes. "What do you do?"

"Web design. You?"

"Right now I'm doing some landscaping for a friend. Ironical, isn't it—guy with a black thumb doing landscaping? I try to touch the plants as little as possible—focus on the machinery, spreading mulch, that kind of thing."

Chris could see that this was probably where Jazz had gotten his muscular upper arms—he was well-muscled, though in a wiry kind of way—and tan. "And before that?"

"Commune. Central Pennsylvania," Jazz said.

"You worked at a commune?"

"Well, sort of. I mean, yeah, everyone worked—that's kind of what the whole thing's about, you know? But not worked in the sense of got paid. We did some mining—quartz crystals, mostly—and some of the folks grew vegetables. It was enough to scrape by. Nice bunch of people, relaxed atmosphere..."

"Sounds like you miss it," said Chris.

"Sometimes I do. But my house was still here, and I never intended to leave forever, you know? It was just a thing."

"You'll want to take the next exit."

"Okay." Jazz moved the car back over into the right hand lane.

Chris tried to think of something else to say. "So what else do you do, in your free time? Other than try to cook?"

"Read. I take my neighbor's kid to the park sometimes. She's a single mom—the neighbor, not the kid—and she can use a break once in a while. Hang out with friends. I paint, sometimes. Go to the movies."

Chris smiled. "I used to go to the movies a lot, but I don't any more. I started to think that they were just recycling the same couple of plots over and over again, you know?"

"You're one of those art snobs, aren't you?" Jazz asked.

"No. I just got more selective," Chris said, amused.

"What's your favorite movie of all time?"

"I only get to pick one? Star Wars, Return of the Jedi, Blade Runner, Raiders of the Lost Ark ... umm..."

"You have a thing for Harrison Ford, hmm?"

"Maybe." Jazz flashed him a grin. "How about you? What's your favorite movie?"

"The Third Man."

"Ugh, Orson Welles? Not that it's a bad movie, but jeez—it's kind of bleak, isn't it?" Jazz asked.

"And Blade Runner's not?"

"Point. But in a different way, don't you think?"

"Yeah." Chris gestured to the right. "Get off the rotary over there, and turn right at the lights. And hey—thanks for the ride. You didn't have to."

"I don't mind. I'm a big believer in karma. You know—I do something nice for you, someone else does something nice for me. It all evens out in the end."

"Left here after the Dunkin Donuts. And still, thanks. I appreciate it. Otherwise I would have been stuck at the office for hours waiting for the Triple A guy to show up." Chris really was grateful, although he hated that he always sounded like such an idiot expressing it.

"No problem."

"It's this building over here. Number twenty-six."

"Nice place."

"Yeah, it's okay." Chris climbed out of the car, realized he was still holding the plant, and leaned over to hand it back to Jazz. "So—thanks."

"Welcome. Maybe I'll see you around some time."

"Yeah." Chris went into the lobby of his building and then looked out the window, watching as Jazz turned the car around rather inexpertly. The front wheel went up and over the opposite curb and the car came back down onto the street with a scraping sound that made Chris wince even from the other side of the window. The little blue car drove off, taking Jazz with it.

Chapter 2

Sometimes Chris just talks—says whatever comes to mind. Tells Jazz what his day's been like, what new regulation Barry's come up with, what he had for breakfast. Gives Jazz the plot of some television show he knows Jazz likes, even though when he watches, Chris doesn't know the characters very well and figures he must be doing a bad job of relaying the story line. He hopes it won't matter too much.

Other times Chris talks about their past—how they met, and what came after that. The doctors say that Jazz can probably hear him, and that it can be helpful to 'offer information that will ground the patient in reality.' Chris tries not to let his disgust at the doctors show.

He talks because it's supposed to help. He talks because he doesn't know what else to do.

Nearly two weeks later, Chris had pretty much forgotten about Jazz. At least, that was what he told himself. Therefore, the day that he left work to discover the unmistakable blue death trap of a car parked in front of his was a surprise (but not really).

Chris glanced around. No sign of Jazz. He looked at the book store, which he'd only been in a couple of times, and then, taking a deep breath, went in. He checked each aisle twice before deciding that the guy just wasn't there. He went back out onto the sidewalk and almost smashed into Jazz, who was once again juggling an armful of stuff—two coffee cups this time, another bag from the bookstore, a pillow, and a rolled-up mat of some kind.

"Let me help," said Chris, taking the mat and the pillow.

"Hey, how's it going? Thanks." Jazz followed Chris to the little blue car and opened the door. "Just chuck those into the back seat. Great."

"What's all this stuff?" Chris shoved the pillow in between the two front seats until it fell into the back.

"Yoga," said Jazz, rolling his eyes heavenward. "My friend Sunny made me sign up for this class. It's supposed to make you all, I don't know, relaxed or something. But it just freaked me out. I can't sit still for that long." He quickly swallowed one shot of espresso and threw the empty cup neatly into a nearby trash can. "You want one?" he asked, gesturing with the other cup.

"No, I'll pass. I can't have caffeine after five—it gives me the jitters."

"Isn't that the point?" Jazz drank the other shot and ricocheted the cup off the wall behind the trash can and in. "Yes! So, how's it going? You got your car fixed, I take it?"

"Yeah, no problem. I was kind of thinking ... maybe I could cook you dinner? You know, to say, thanks for the lift?"

Jazz smiled, a wide grin that took up the lower half of his slender face and made his eyes, which were astonishingly blue for someone with such dark hair, sparkle. "That'd be great."

"When would be good for you?"

"Well, I've got this yoga thing on Thursdays—but I don't know if I'm gonna keep going—and Saturday nights we hang out at Sunny and Greg's. But other than that I'm pretty flexible. When's good for you?"

Chris shrugged. "Doesn't matter. I go to the gym most nights after work, but I can do it whenever works for you."

"Ugh, the gym," said Jazz. "Isn't that boring?"

"No, I like it. My job's pretty sedentary—I need to do something to stay fit."

"I'd think you could come up with something a little more fun than the treadmill," Jazz said, doing that funny eyebrow-wiggling thing again.

"Like the Nordic track?" asked Chris, grinning.

"No, like—I dunno, rock climbing or rollerblading or something that includes fresh air and doesn't include running on a wheel like a hamster in a cage."

"I like it," Chris said again. "Gives me time to think."

Jazz put the bag from the bookstore in on his passenger seat, then immediately took it back out, rooted around in it, and came up with a paperback book. "Here," he said, thrusting the book into Chris' hands. "A friend of mine recommended this. I've got a whole pile here—why don't you read this one and tell me how it is?"

Chris turned the book over. "*Metes and Bounds*," he read. The cover photo was of a young man wearing jeans, facing the ocean. "Looks okay."

"My friend said it's really good."

"Okay ... thanks." It seemed like a small enough thing to do, even if Chris wasn't sure why Jazz wanted him to.

"So how about tomorrow night? For dinner? Or is that too soon?" Jazz asked.

Chris flipped the pages of the book with his thumb. "No, tomorrow's good, actually. You need directions? Or do you remember?"

"I remember," said Jazz, looking directly into Chris' eyes for the first time. "Be pretty hard to forget you." He threw the bag of books back into the car. "What are we gonna have?"

"For dinner? I don't know—I hadn't given it much thought. What do you like?"

"Anything I don't have to cook myself," said Jazz. "Anything that's not mostly raw when it's supposed to be well-done, anything with sauce that doesn't curdle into weird lumps, anything."

"Sounds like you've been doing some experimenting," Chris said.

"Unsuccessful experimenting would be the correct term," Jazz said. "Can I bring something?"

"No, just yourself." Chris thought about how that sounded and tried to prevent himself from blushing, as if that had ever worked in his thirty-one years. "Six-thirty?"

"I can do that." Jazz dug his ridiculously bulky keychain out of his jeans pocket—different jeans, similar rips, Chris noted—and swung it casually between his fingers. "Read the book?"

"I will. I'll let you know how it is."

"Okay, then. See you tomorrow."

"Yeah." Chris grinned and, before he knew it, Jazz had stepped forward, planted a quick but gentle kiss on his cheek, and moved back. Chris watched, stunned, as Jazz backed

away from him, and then went around and got into his car. The car started with a loud, uneven rumble.

It seemed to Chris that he was always watching Jazz leave.

* * * *

Chris brings flowers once a week, on Mondays. Monday is Jazz's favorite day of the week—endless possibilities on a Monday, he likes to say.

Chris would like to bring more flowers on Fridays, because by Thursday afternoon (or Friday morning at the latest), the flowers start to look more than a bit wilted. But he knows that no matter how much Jazz would like the flowers—especially the ones that Chris brings, all multicolored and wild-looking with crazy rakish branches—he'd also be sad that cutting them makes them die sooner.

The flowers are wilting more quickly than Jazz is, and that's a relief.

Chris was nervous. He didn't want to be, he tried to will himself not to be, but he couldn't help it. He'd changed his shirt three times and he still thought he looked like what he was—a dork—and even worse, he felt like a girl. All this primping wasn't him. He didn't like caring about what he looked like, or worrying what kind of impression he was going to make.

It didn't help that he'd been up until two a.m. reading the book Jazz had loaned him. It was the story of a young gay man who spent the summer with his slightly older uncle in North Carolina. It wasn't the most brilliant book Chris had

ever read. But damned if the sex scenes weren't enough to have sent him to the shower twice after midnight. The first time for a cold one to douse the fire, and the second time, in defeat, to beat off until he came, spilling himself against the tile wall.

Jazz had made it clear he hadn't read the book himself, but Chris suspected he'd known about the eroticism in addition to the basic plot. Chris had to hand it to the guy, he had a way of being subtle that let you protect yourself if you had to—if Chris hadn't been gay, hadn't been interested, it would have been easy enough to shrug it off. Didn't like the book? Oh, well.

Chris was gay. And he was interested. It had been a while since he'd been with anyone—and the break up with Drake had been so messy that he'd pretty much cut himself off from all possibilities since then. There was always the fear of approaching someone who seemed—well, *approachable*—only to discover that he wasn't approachable, or gay. Chris hadn't had any bad experiences with coming out to people, but he figured that was because he played it close to the belt, not really letting anyone in. He still hadn't told his parents, for Christ's sake, though he thought they must suspect by now. He'd given up on the "pretending to have a girlfriend" thing a long time ago.

But Jazz was different from anyone Chris had ever met. He just seemed so—vital. He was brimming with energy and enthusiasm. He couldn't have been more different from Drake's suave smooth ways and velvet voice. Jazz was a breath of fresh air, like the breeze across his face that had

just now reminded Chris that he was breathing. He couldn't help but be intrigued.

Chris was tempted to change his shirt again, but he didn't. Instead, he settled for washing the lettuce a second time to remove any stray bits of sand, and then tossed it with the other vegetables he'd cut up earlier. He'd decided to go with fresh salmon on the grill, since it was hot today, even for early June. It wouldn't do to heat up the house too much.

He went into the living room and looked it over with a critical eye. He'd spent most of yesterday evening trying to get it into decent shape. He never let it go too long between cleanings, and he had a service come once a month for the heavy stuff, but things did pile up. There was always a stack of papers on top of the TV, mostly junk mail and catalogues, and his CDs were usually everywhere. He hadn't even realized until last night that they didn't all fit in his wall holder anymore.

Metes and Bounds was on the coffee table. Chris wished there had been more time between when he got off of work and when Jazz was arriving, enough time in which to go to the gym. He rarely skipped two nights in a row, and despite last night's cleaning frenzy, he was keyed up and twitchy.

He went into the dining area, which was directly off the kitchen, and obsessively straightened the silverware. Because, yeah, that's what would impress Jazz, a perfectly laid table.

Chris twitched again when there was a knock on the door. He checked his watch—Jazz was five minutes early. He smiled.

When he opened the door, Jazz was leaning against the frame and looking eminently kissable. The funny half-grin on his face was begging to be licked. His long hair was tousled as though he'd just finished a round in the sack. Chris wanted to throw him down on the floor and fuck him. Vigorously. Well, at least that would have put his energy to good use.

"Hi," said Jazz. He was wearing yet another pair of torn jeans, and a purple and blue tie-dyed T-shirt.

"Hi. Come on in." Chris stood back to let Jazz in and closed the door behind him.

"Nice place," Jazz said. "I've gotta say, I didn't figure you for a white-on-white kind of guy, though."

Chris nodded. "Yeah, I'm not. It was like this when I moved in—furnished place, easier than getting your own stuff. I'm hoping I don't lose too much of my security deposit when I leave, since I can pretty much guarantee that the couch is gonna be permanently curry-stained." He gestured to the all-too-noticeable yellowish-orange stain on one of the cushions.

Jazz eyed it curiously. "Curry? Well, at least it's got that orange tinge—no one will think you took a piss on the couch." He noticed the book on the table. "Did you get a chance to look at that book?"

"Are you kidding? I was up half the night finishing it. It was ... good." Was that enough to convey his feelings?

"Yeah?" Jazz tilted his head and studied Chris' face. "What did you like about it?"

"Everything. It was ... you know ... good." Brilliant. You'd think that someone with a college degree could come up with

more than one adjective to describe a book he hadn't been able to put down. He felt his cock harden as he remembered some of the more erotic scenes.

"Think I'll like it?" Jazz asked.

Only if you're gay, Chris thought, trying not to smile too widely. "Yeah. It's..." Good? "Erotic."

"Then I bet I will like it. Unless all that porn I've been reading lately has spoiled me for the more intellectual stuff."

"What's with the porn? And hey, do you want some wine?"

Jazz shrugged. "Yes to the wine, please. And I dunno. I was lonely, it was something to do to pass the time. Pass the time pleasantly," he amended. He followed Chris into the kitchen and watched as Chris poured them some wine—the bottle had been breathing for half an hour, and Chris thought it would be just about perfect.

"Hungry?" Chris asked.

Jazz glanced down at his body and back up at Chris. "Are you kidding? Look at me. I can't keep any weight on me, especially with the landscaping these days. I think I burn twice as many calories in my sleep as most people do running a marathon."

"Must be nice," said Chris, picturing his many hours at the gym and trying to will away his erection, which was pressing insistently against the front of his slacks.

"I guess it has its benefits." Jazz was staring at the front of Chris' slacks. He took a long swallow of wine from his glass, set the glass down on the counter near Chris, and took a step closer. "Look, Chris ... I don't want to play games. I like you," he said, in a low voice.

Chris' heart thumped in his chest, and his cock throbbed in response. "I ... I, um, I like you, too."

"I'm not gonna be able to think about eating dinner if I have to watch you squirming like that." Jazz shifted his leg forward, just enough so that his thigh lightly brushed against Chris', but not enough so that it brushed his cock.

Chris sucked in a lungful of air. All of his blood cells seemed to have abandoned his brain in favor of mass migration toward his cock. "I ... um..."

"You can say no any time," Jazz continued, leaning in to speak directly and very softly into Chris' ear. "And I'll stop." His tongue slipped wetly up the curve of Chris' ear, and then his lips fastened onto the soft spot just behind Chris' ear lobe and suckled softly for a moment. "Do you wanna say no?"

Chris shook his head mutely. It had been much too long since he'd been touched in any way other than friendship. His skin was tingling in a way that he'd thought he'd forgotten.

Jazz shifted so that he could apply his tongue to Chris' throat. "I'll stop any time you say," he repeated, as his palm pressed against Chris' erection with a firm, knowing touch.

Chris groaned loudly before he could stop himself. It had been too long; in a minute, he was going to shoot into his pants like a seventeen-year-old. Jazz's hand moved like it knew him intimately, touching each spot just the way Chris liked it and staying just long enough to tease before moving on to the next spot.

"Just say stop," said Jazz, right before he undid Chris' slacks and slid his hand inside to tease Chris further. With

only the thin layer of cotton between them, Jazz's fingers were warm and probing and masterful.

"Do you want me to stop?" Jazz's hand slid down inside of Chris' boxers and wrapped around his cock, just holding him there firmly, not moving.

"No," Chris whispered hoarsely. "Don't stop."

Jazz plunged his other hand down inside Chris' underwear to join the first, one hand cupping his balls and the other stroking up and down his cock with a sweet rhythm that made Chris' knees weak.

Chris groaned again and leaned his forehead down onto Jazz's shoulder, biting his lip. He didn't want this to be over too quickly, but Jazz's touch was so knowing that he didn't think he'd be able to hold off.

"C'mon, Chris," urged Jazz. "I wanna feel you come."

That was all it took to send Chris over the edge, and he went with it gladly. He could feel his warm come shooting onto his belly as his cock pulsated in Jazz's hands, and somehow Jazz knew just the right point to stop pumping him, that tiny instant between "perfect" and "too much."

When Chris stopped panting, Jazz withdrew his hands gently, wiping them casually on his jeans. He fastened Chris' pants back up. His lips traced Chris' jaw up to his ear. "Better?" he asked.

"Yeah, that was ... wow. Thanks. Can I...?"

Jazz shook his head. "I'm good. I just thought we'd have a better time at dinner if you'd, you know, had the edge taken off."

Chris looked at Jazz, stunned. This was the last thing he'd expected—he wasn't the type for casual sex. When he'd jumped into bed and then a relationship with Drake, it had been the biggest mistake of his life. He'd promised himself it would never happen again.

He hadn't counted on meeting someone like Jazz.

Chris smiled and did his best to shove aside the fear that was squeezing his heart like a vise. "You ready for some dinner?"

* * * *

Twice a week Chris brings something for the nurses on Jazz's floor. It doesn't take him long to fall into the routine—three identical gifts, one for the nurses on each shift. Wednesdays and Saturdays. Sometimes it's chocolates or fruit baskets. Other times it's baked goods: muffins, banana bread, cinnamon rolls, chocolate chip cookies. At the beginning Chris baked the snacks himself, but the initial burst of energy has long faded, and now he buys them from a local bakery with a reputation for quality.

The nurses are so used to his presence now that they've given up on trying to tell him only to come during visiting hours. Stacey, the little redhead, never walks past Chris without patting his shoulder.

The nurses never talk enough to suit Chris. The room is too silent.

Jazz loitered in the kitchen, watching, while Chris cooked the salmon on his George Foreman grill. Chris had the distinct impression that Jazz was studying his ass.

"So what's with George Foreman, anyway?" Jazz asked. "Doesn't he have like a dozen sons that are all named George, too?"

"Um ... I don't know."

"Is that the sign of someone who's disgustingly self-confident, or pitifully under-confident? Because either way, there's something seriously wrong with that guy."

"The grill works okay," Chris offered, still feeling dazed following the quick hand job and rather unable to follow this conversation with any degree of clarity.

Jazz regarded him thoughtfully. "You don't have any idea what to make of me, do you?"

"No. I mean—no, I like you, but you're kind of ... overwhelming? I sort of feel like I'm plugged directly into your stream of thought."

"Yeah, my mom always says I can talk anyone else under the table. Sometimes I think I was in the wrong room when they were handing out those little buttons that tell your mouth when to stop moving." Jazz smiled coyly. "Of course, some people think that's one of my best traits."

Chris suspected it was more likely that no one ever had a chance to choose not to like this man. He was so open and guileless. "Okay, then ... tell me about yourself."

"What else do you want to know? I already told you about the commune—that's probably the most exciting part of my recent history."

Chris grasped for anything. "Tell me what your place is like."

"My house? Okay. It's real old—built in the late 1800s—and my grandparents lived in it. My mom was born there, and her sister—my aunt Jacqueline—and my grandmother left the house to my mom when she died. But mom already had her own house, and we didn't want to sell Gram's, so I moved in. It was bigger than my apartment, and it's old; it needs someone to take care of it, you know? You can't just leave an old house alone."

"What does it look like?" Chris asked.

"It's a Colonial, with one of those dormers that bumps the front room up. Hardwood floors, which really need refinishing some time soon, and all of these crazy wildflowers around the house. Which grow all by themselves, luckily, because I'd kill them in three days if they were depending on me. The kitchen is kind of old-fashioned, but the bathroom is modern."

"Sounds nice."

"It is. You'll have to come over and see it some time," Jazz said. It sounded like the offer was genuine.

Chris slid the salmon off the grill. He put it onto two plates, carried them into the dining area, and gestured at a chair.

"Sit down."

Jazz sat and picked up a fork, stabbing at the salad. "This looks great," he said.

"Any more adventures in cooking?"

"I'm thinking it's better not to press my luck. Last night I had takeout. Again." Jazz's eyes widened as he ate a bite of salmon. "Wow—this is great."

Chris shrugged. "Makes a difference when it's fresh."

"So what about you and this place? I mean, why not move somewhere you can decorate yourself?"

Chris ate some salad, chewing thoughtfully. He didn't want to get too deep into all the reasons he was here in this lifeless apartment. "It's easier," he said. "And I'm at work a lot, and the gym most nights. I'm not here enough to care."

"But wouldn't you like to, you know, add some more personal touches? Have a place with a little more color, pizzazz?"

"I never really thought about it." Which had been very, very difficult. But if he did think about it, it would just be too damned depressing. It was easier to let it go. Chris tried to change the subject. "Your mom sounds nice. From the way you talk about her, I mean."

"Oh, yeah, she's the greatest. She raised me all by herself—my dad died when I was nine—and she's so cool. She's great with her hands—and, oh, that sounds bad again, doesn't it. She bakes this amazing homemade bread, and she does stained glass, and grows herbs—she uses part of my backyard for some of them, because hers gets too much sun or something."

"Must be nice. Does she know ... about you? I mean..."

"Does she know I'm gay?" Jazz smiled. "It's not a dirty word, Chris. Yeah, she knows. She fought it for a while—she thought maybe I was just looking for a father figure, trying to use another guy to fill my dad's place, you know? She didn't think I could possibly know at the tender age of sixteen that I was attracted to men. What about your folks?"

Chris played with his fork. "No, they don't know. They might suspect, but I've never come right out and said it, and they've never asked."

"But when you were seeing someone? How did you keep that quiet?"

"They live in Connecticut—I don't see them that often anymore. When I was living with this guy, I just said he was my roommate," Chris said.

Jazz frowned. "Doesn't sound like a fun way to live."

"No, it wasn't. But it seemed easier than telling them, somehow. And it didn't last, and since then I've been—well, I haven't been involved."

"How long?"

"Oh, gosh ... four years? A little more," Chris said.

"Four years?" Jazz screeched. "Holy shit. That's a long time. You haven't been involved with anyone for four years?"

"No, not involved."

"Which means what? Not in a relationship, but casually fucking a variety of people?"

"And again, no, not that, either. But I've ... had a few brief ... encounters."

"One-night stands."

"Basically. Not recently, though. But what about you? When was the last time you were involved with someone?" Chris, feeling a bit under the microscope, went into the kitchen and brought back the bottle of wine, dividing the contents between their two glasses.

"Oh, you know ... I've had lots of little relationships. A few months here or there, a good time, but nothing serious."

"You've never had a serious relationship?" This spelled trouble in Chris' book. He was interested in Jazz, more than interested, but he didn't want to get involved with someone who had a track record of relationships no longer than a few months. That would be like asking to get kicked in the balls, especially after the way things had gone down with Drake.

"Once," said Jazz shortly. "But I don't really like to talk about it."

"Sorry," Chris said. "That's fine, I understand."

"It's complicated," said Jazz, and Chris could tell that he was trying. "We were together a long time—years—and when I left, it was ... messy."

Chris remembered his long last look at the apartment he and Drake had shared, the one that Chris had decorated with loving care in bright colors and soft fabrics. "I understand messy."

"Your break up was bad, too?"

"Bad for me. He just moved on like nothing had happened."

"Ouch. I'm sure that must have hurt." Jazz's eyes were on his face, studying him. "I'm sorry."

"I was, too, but I'm over the sorry part now," Chris said. "I'm still mad at him, though."

"That's a long time to hold a grudge."

"Big grudge." Chris smiled, and meant it.

"So ... I like you, Chris. I'd like to get to know you better. I know it's early on, but do you think ... do you think you might like to try?"

"I'd like to see what happens," Chris admitted. "I like you, too."

Jazz pushed his chair back and stood up, moved over, and slid Chris' chair out from the table. "Of course, maybe before we get any more involved we should see how we work out in the bedroom. Or the living room ... or the couch..." His eyes were doing that shining, sparkling thing again, that thing that shot straight to the pit of Chris' stomach and made him feel slightly, pleasantly ill with anticipation.

"Bedroom. Definitely bedroom," said Chris, and stood up, taking Jazz's hand.

Chapter 3

Chris is surprised to learn that, when you're in a coma, your fingernails and toenails and hair all continue to grow. He doesn't know why this surprises him;, after all, it's only Jazz's brain that's not functioning, not his body. But somehow, the act of trimming his lover's nails each week gives the illusion that time is continuing to move forward, when for Chris it had actually frozen the moment the phone rang.

They bathe him and wash his hair and change his sheets, and time creeps slowly by and rushes past and Chris is lost, hovering next to Jazz, who is the eye of the storm that rages around him.

Chris led Jazz into the bedroom, turned on a light, and stood there anxiously. Was Jazz expecting him to make the next move? He took a step closer and ran one hand back into Jazz's dark hair, pulling him closer for a kiss.

"I don't kiss," Jazz said, drawing away.

"What?" Chris pulled back, ashamed, embarrassed. How could the guy not kiss? Wasn't kissing a necessity? It wasn't like they were in the back room of some sleazy club.

"I don't..." Jazz glanced down, and it was the first time Chris had seen him look insecure. "I don't kiss unless I'm ... you know ... in love."

"Okay," Chris responded. Something about seeing Jazz uncomfortable, unsure, brought out his protective side. He wanted to protect Jazz from whatever it was that had hurt him, wanted to coddle him and make him happy. And, of

course, wanted to fuck him into oblivion, although it was possible that might have to wait.

Chris leaned forward and licked along Jazz's jaw line instead, feeling the sandpapery rasp of stubble on his tongue. Like a cat's tongue, but in reverse, he thought, and nearly giggled. Jazz hummed in appreciation and arched his neck to give Chris better access, so Chris applied himself more fully to the job at hand.

Chris licked Jazz's jaw, down to his throat, and then back up to his ear, tracing it with his tongue. Jazz's hair was tied back with a leather thong this time, and Chris grabbed the ponytail in one fist to hold Jazz still while he stuck his tongue directly into Jazz's ear.

Jazz whimpered and moved his lower body so that he could press up against Chris.

"That's so good," Jazz whispered.

Chris licked every bit of skin he could reach above the neck of Jazz's T-shirt, and then shoved his hands up underneath the shirt. Jazz's skin was warm, even a bit sweaty, and his body was hard from hours of landscaping work. Chris could trace at least half of Jazz's ribs with his fingers, though—the guy obviously hadn't been exaggerating when he'd said he found it hard to maintain his weight. Emboldened by the feel of Jazz's pecs, Chris pulled the T-shirt up and over Jazz's head.

Jazz had a small blue and purple tattoo on his right pec, above his nipple. It matched his T-shirt, Chris thought lightly. The tattoo was a small dragon, curled in on itself,

little wings outstretched. It looked cartoony and artsy at the same time—like a tiny Jazz in animal form.

"Why a dragon?" Chris asked, just before applying the flat of his tongue to the tattoo.

"I like them," Jazz said. "They're kind of ... magical ... and, oh, do that again."

Chris did, then slid his tongue down to wetly circle Jazz's nipple, leaving a trail of saliva on his nearly hairless skin. He circled round and round, slowly, lazily, as if he had all the time in the world, when in reality his cock was hard and throbbing again.

Jazz made a little sound of protest in the back of his throat and tangled one hand in Chris' hair, trying to urge him to stop teasing. Chris ignored him and circled round and round again, Jazz's skin slippery now and his nipple a tiny hard nub that begged for his attention in almost audible tones.

"Please," Jazz whispered. He thrust his denim-covered front against Chris' hip, groaned. "Please, Chris, please."

Chris circled Jazz's nipple twice more and then pressed his lips around it and suckled firmly, making sure there was plenty of moisture in his mouth.

Jazz threw his head back and pressed himself harder against Chris. "Oh, God, yes. Just like that. Oh..."

Chris ran his tongue across Jazz's chest to the other nipple and suckled it in turn, shifting his lower body so that their pants-covered cocks could rub together. They moaned together, and then Jazz pulled him up, licking fiercely at Chris' neck while trembling fingers tried to undo the buttons on Chris' shirt.

"God, Chris, I need to touch you..." Jazz's slender fingers slipped inside Chris' shirt and rubbed his chest, trailed down to trace his lower belly and around his belly button. Chris shivered.

Jazz finished unbuttoning the shirt with his free hand and pulled it aside roughly, shoving it down Chris' arms so that it slid to the floor in a flurry of soft cotton. He wrapped both arms around Chris and pressed his mouth to Chris' shoulder, sucking and licking and kissing from shoulder to collarbone and then down to Chris' nipple.

"My turn," Jazz said, twinkling, and then sucked on Chris' nipple, hard. Chris managed to stay quiet until Jazz applied his teeth, and then he couldn't help but moan softly.

"Jazz, your mouth is just ... amazing..." Jazz's teeth were nibbling at him, not so softly that it tickled, but not too hard, either. Chris couldn't remember anyone he'd ever been with being able to read him so well.

Chris was starting to think he might come again, just from Jazz's teeth against his nipple. Wanting to stave off the inevitable for as long as possible, he pushed Jazz gently away and toward the bed. "Lie down," he said.

Jazz obeyed immediately, lying back on the comforter and looking at Chris with eyes that shone with trust and desire. Chris leaned over him and undid his sneakers and socks, throwing them on to the floor, and then unfastened Jazz's jeans. "Lift your hips up," Chris ordered, and again Jazz obeyed, lifting enough so that Chris could work the tight denim down past his hips and then off.

Chris paused, eyes feasting on Jazz lying naked on the bed. Chris was attracted to everything about the man, from his hair down to his feet. Jazz's upper body was well-muscled and firm, tapering to a slim waist and equally slender hips. His cock was hard and proud, jutting up over his belly, begging to be touched.

Chris quickly removed his own shoes and socks, and then wrapped his hand around Jazz's cock, smiling as Jazz moaned and thrust his hips upward instantly, asking for more. "Suck it, Chris. Please?"

Leaning over Jazz with one hand pressing down into the mattress next to his thigh, Chris licked his own palm and then squeezed it gently around the head of Jazz's cock, feeling the slickness against the sensitive skin. Jazz whimpered and thrust into his hand again, clearly unable to stop himself from squirming desperately, moving as much as possible so that Chris touched every inch of his cock.

"Please, Chris. Please? I can't ... I need..." Jazz whimpered again. "I need you to suck me."

Chris stroked Jazz's cock once, from tip to base, firmly, and as Jazz cried out he leaned over further and took Jazz into his mouth, sliding the cock head past his lips and into the wet warmth there. Jazz shuddered and thrust and moaned. Chris shuddered in sympathy, his own slacks feeling far too tight and constraining. He got up and shucked them off as quickly as he could, staring at Jazz the whole time. Chris returned to his previous position, and ran his hand down to fondle Jazz's balls as he took Jazz's cock into his mouth again.

Then he pulled away abruptly as his fingers encountered something totally unexpected. "What the hell is that?"

Jazz brought his hand down below his scrotum and flicked the little piece of jewelry there. "It's a guiche."

"A what?" Chris asked.

"It's a kind of genital piercing." Jazz took Chris' hand and guided it back down to the metal ring, which was smaller around than a dime.

"God," said Chris, fascinated. He leaned over for a closer look. The ring was made with a bead on it, and both were silver in color. "Did it hurt?"

"Yeah. It took a really long time to heal, too. It was supposed to take six months, but it was closer to nine."

"Why did you get it?"

Jazz shrugged. "I thought it would be interesting. I was curious to see what it would feel like."

"You got a ring shoved through your ... because you were curious?"

"My perineum? Yeah. And it doesn't hurt now..." Jazz tightened his thigh muscles, which caused his entire lower body to move slightly, brushing his balls against Chris' hand.

Still fascinated, Chris leaned down and took Jazz into his mouth again, while one hand toyed gently with the ring. Each time he touched it, Jazz would twitch the tiniest bit. Within a minute he had Jazz gasping again, squirming against him and reaching for Chris' cock with his nearest hand.

Chris closed his eyes as Jazz grasped him. He was so hot, and it had been a long time. "Oh, God," Chris moaned. "I want to be inside you, Jazz." He reached for the drawer in his

bedside table where he kept the lube, and squeezed a large amount over his fingers and palm. He teased around Jazz's opening with his wet fingers, spreading the lube generously.

Jazz gasped at the slippery sensation, and when Chris ran his fingers across the piercing, his cock twitched violently, leaking pre-come down onto his belly. "Put your fingers in," Jazz encouraged breathlessly.

Chris pressed just the tip of one finger in gently. Jazz lifted his hips, begging, so Chris put his index and middle fingers together and slid the two slowly into Jazz. The warm channel clenched down tightly on Chris' fingers, and Jazz groaned and thrust himself further against him.

Chris wrapped his other hand around Jazz's leaking cock and stroked, thrusting in and out with his fingers at the same time, and Jazz just about came up off the bed. "Please, Chris ... fuck me. I don't wanna wait ... do you have a condom?"

Releasing Jazz, Chris grabbed a condom from the drawer, trying to put it on with shaking hands. He couldn't seem to unroll it, and it felt like it was taking forever.

Jazz sat up beside him and put his own hands over Chris'. "Shh," he said. "It's okay, let me do it."

Chris moved his hands away and let Jazz roll the condom down over his aching length, trembling at the feel of another man's hands on him. Jazz bent over and rolled his tongue around the head of Chris' cock, and the feel of it even through the condom was almost enough to make Chris come. God, this was going to be brief.

Jazz ran his tongue up Chris' belly and chest to his neck, which he licked avidly, and then turned around onto his hands

and knees. "C'mon, Chris," he said, and his voice was unexpectedly rough. "Fuck me."

Chris didn't need another invitation. He grasped Jazz by the hips, running his hands down and over Jazz's ass. Pulling Jazz's ass cheeks gently apart, he ran his finger between them to check that there was enough lubrication. Jazz moved backward against his hand, and it was then that Chris saw the tattoo that was inked into the space on Jazz's upper thigh where his leg and his ass joined.

This tattoo was also small, and was a very dark blue that was almost black. It was some sort of symbol. Unthinkingly, Chris pressed his tongue to it, tasting it. Jazz's skin was slightly lubricant-flavored now, and he whimpered so loudly that Chris felt himself surge in anticipation.

Quickly, Chris squeezed the base of his own cock hard, determined to make this last as long as he could. He used that hand to guide the head of his cock to Jazz's opening, and the other to steady Jazz. Slowly, very slowly, he pressed forward, allowing Jazz time to adjust. Sliding in gradually, inch by inch, into the tight passage that clenched around him and made him want to scream.

"Chris, Chris..." Jazz was murmuring his name, and that got him even hotter.

Finally fully inside, Chris paused. He reached around to grab Jazz's cock in his hand, the other still on Jazz's hip to steady him. And there was just no way he could wait any longer. He pulled out slowly, paused, and then thrust in more quickly.

Jazz made a high-pitched squeak and thrust backward to meet him. Jazz's cock was dripping all over Chris' hand, the excess running down onto the bed beneath them. Jazz squeaked and thrust and bucked and all of it was driving Chris rapidly toward the edge of insanity.

It had been more than six months since Chris had fucked someone, and Jazz was so deliciously tight that Chris had to concentrate on html coding in order to avoid coming immediately. Chris tried to focus on what his hand was doing to Jazz's cock, which was now so slippery that he could barely keep a grip on it, as Jazz made a little high-pitched whimpering sound that echoed out like a sound wave right into Chris' balls.

Jazz was whimpering in words now. "Yes, oh, fuck, that's so good, yeah, Chris, fuck me harder, oh..."

Chris picked up the pace, still focusing on the feeling of Jazz's cock in his fist. Jazz was tightening up even further, and Chris could tell Jazz was getting close. He let his hand slip off Jazz's hip and dropped it down below his own balls, sliding his finger over the little ring that pierced Jazz's perineum. When Jazz's breathing hitched and his panting increased, Chris took the ring between the tips of two fingers and tugged on it, just lightly.

Jazz gave a long, low moan and came, his warmth spilling out over Chris' fingers, and his whole body locking up. Chris pumped into him frantically, knowing it would only be a matter of seconds now.

"Oh, Jazz—you're so hot, you feel so amazing—oh, God, I'm gonna come..." And it rippled through Chris like a shock

wave, starting in the small of his back and rolling forward through his gut and out his cock. The orgasm shook him the way a dog shakes a small animal, leaving him dazed and trembling and draped over Jazz's back.

When Chris managed to return to himself enough to pull out of Jazz's body without leaving the condom there, Jazz sighed a little sigh that sounded like pleasure, and collapsed sideways onto the bed. Chris fell down into the space beside him and slowly pulled off the condom, tying a knot in the end and throwing it toward the trash barrel several feet away. He missed, and it landed with an unattractive little splat.

Jazz chuckled and traced Chris' cheekbone with one finger. "I knew you'd be great in the sack."

Chris could feel himself blushing. "Umm ... thanks. You, too. I mean—you were great."

"So I guess that answers the first question—we seem to be compatible enough in bed. The second question remains to be answered..."

"What's the second question?"

Jazz rolled over onto his belly and licked Chris' upper arm. "Whether we're compatible in the shower. Wanna find out?"

* * * *

Chris goes to the gym only three times a week now. After he started seeing Jazz and got involved in all of Jazz's crazy schemes for staying in shape, he eventually cut down to going to the gym twice a week. If he didn't go at least that often, he felt that it wasn't worth the membership fee. And if the weather was bad, or Jazz went through a phase where he

wasn't interested in rollerblading or rock-climbing or hiking, Chris had somewhere to go to work off his tension. Hiking was all well and good, but it didn't target specific muscle groups the way the Nautilus machines did.

Now, Chris goes three times a week. It's a compromise he's made with himself. He has to go some nights or he ends up too jittery to sleep, but he feels guilty if he goes too often. So it's three. He goes straight from work, showers at the gym, and then goes back in to visit Jazz.

He tells Jazz all the little stories about the gym that he used to like to hear—about the guys who pretend they know how to work the equipment but don't, about the man who wears mismatched socks and always spills his water on the Stair-Master, about the women who try to hit on him and often don't take the hint when Chris mentions his boyfriend.

Those are the times when Jazz would have drawn him close and whispered, "None of those girls can have you. You're mine."

Chris let Jazz lead him into the bathroom, but once there Jazz didn't do anything but stand there and kiss his neck. Jazz moved around behind him and kissed his shoulder blades, his back, down his spine, all while resting his hands on Chris' waist. His hands stroked and squeezed, and Chris couldn't believe that he was starting to become aroused again so quickly.

"You should get a tattoo," Jazz said. "Right here." He kissed the spot just below Chris' right shoulder blade. "Or ... maybe here." This time, Jazz kissed the small of his back.

Chris shivered. "I don't think I'm the type," he said, not protesting, just making a statement.

"You can be if you want to be," Jazz said, seriously. He moved back around to face Chris, running his hand down the side of Chris' face and then letting it slide lower, across his chest and down his belly and then down to cup his balls. Chris groaned softly as his cock responded by growing heavier, a pooling warmth filling him with desire once again.

Jazz let his tongue travel the path his hand had just taken, finally licking the underside of Chris' balls and leaving a warm wetness there.

Chris squirmed. "I thought this was about finding out how compatible we are in the shower," he said. "This still looks like the bathroom to me."

Jazz flashed him a grin. "Turn the shower on, then." He licked Chris again. "Go on." Another lick.

"If you can stop that for more than a few seconds, I might be able to," Chris said gruffly.

"You love it," Jazz said.

"Yeah," said Chris. "Okay. Turning on the shower now." He forced himself to move away from Jazz the required distance to turn the water on, and then stepped behind the curtain. He beckoned to Jazz with one finger. "Coming?"

In a flash he had an armful of rapidly dampening Jazz licking his shoulder and his neck and his arms and then sucking his fingers into that warm mouth one by one. Chris desperately wanted to kiss Jazz, and had to restrain himself from trying again.

Jazz moved around behind him, grabbing the soap from the soap dish and using it to wash Chris' front, both arms wrapped around him. Chris looked down and watched Jazz's hands on his body, caressing him, making him ache. The soapy hands slipped lower and one wrapped around his cock while the other dipped down to cup his balls, sliding slickly over the tightening skin with ease.

Jazz was the one who moaned. "I wanna fuck you, Chris. God, I want to so much. You're so pretty and you feel so good, I wanna be inside you..."

Chris gasped, feeling lightheaded as more blood pooled in his groin. "Condoms in the cabinet," he managed to say, and gripped onto the towel rod with one hand to steady himself as Jazz disappeared briefly. He heard the tearing of a foil packet and within seconds Jazz was back, standing behind him again.

Jazz put a hand on the back of Chris' thigh, encouraging him to lift his leg. Chris propped that foot up on the edge of the tub, shifting his weight to allow Jazz better access. Then he felt Jazz's soapy fingers slipping over his opening—not trying to get in, just brushing, sliding across, again and again, while Chris moaned and gyrated his hips.

"Do you want me?" Jazz whispered, close to his ear. "Do you?"

Chris groaned again. "Yes..."

"You want to feel me inside you?" The tip of one finger eased in half an inch or so, teasing. "Do you?"

"Yes," Chris said again, not understanding how he was failing to make that clear.

"You've gotta say it," Jazz said. "Tell me that you want me inside you." His finger dipped inside again, the soap suds making everything so slippery that there was no resistance.

"Oh," said Chris. "Yes ... please, Jazz. I want you inside me ... please..."

Jazz grasped his cock in one hand to guide it, distributing the soap over the surface of the condom, and then Chris felt the head brush against him. The water was pounding against his shoulders and his blood was pounding in his ears.

"Say it again," said Jazz, rubbing his cock head over Chris' opening, pressing forward just enough to make Chris whimper.

"Inside me," Chris gasped. "Please..."

Jazz slid in, one long thrust until he was buried inside Chris. Chris cried out and arched against Jazz, unable to recall the last moment he'd felt pleasure as pure as this. And the next second it got even better as Jazz reached around to take Chris' painfully hard erection in his soap-slick hand. Jazz pulled out most of the way and ran his hand up to the head of Chris' cock at the same time, and then simultaneously thrust and fisted. Chris wailed. Under other circumstances he would have been desperately embarrassed by the noises he was making, but at this moment he couldn't have cared less. This unbelievably hot, sexy man was fucking him and touching him and his orgasm was so close that Chris could almost taste it.

Jazz must have felt it, as well, because in the next instant he squeezed the base of Chris' cock firmly. "Oh, no, not yet," he said. "I'm not finished with you."

Keeping a tight grip with his fist, Jazz began to fuck Chris vigorously, the wet sound of his thighs slapping against Chris' audible over the sound of the water and Chris' small grunts. Chris could feel his cock throb, and Jazz's hand tightened even more around him, preventing him from coming. Chris tried to move, tried to get Jazz to stroke him, but Jazz was relentless, thrusting in and out, angling his cock so that it bumped inside Chris in a spot that made him see stars in his peripheral vision.

Chris realized that he was speaking aloud now, begging. "Jazz, please, please, oh, God I can't, please ... oh, it's..."

Jazz murmured, "S'okay, just another minute now, baby, not much longer. Oh, you're so hot, Chris." He thrust a little harder, a little faster.

Chris felt Jazz's movement falter for just an instant, and sobbed in relief when he realized that Jazz was on the brink of coming.

"Oh, yeah, baby," said Jazz. "Oh, that's so good. You're so hot and tight and I'm gonna come so hard. That's it, now, now..." Jazz's grip on Chris' cock loosened and his hand began to pump at Chris frantically. Chris cried out as he came, eyes closed as he shot against the tile wall. He could feel Jazz's cock pulsing inside him as Jazz came, too.

Jazz was slowing down now, still moving but much more slowly. "Oh, Chris, you're so good. That was incredible. I could do you all night."

"I'm not sure either of us would survive that," Chris managed to say finally.

Jazz laughed. "You're right."

They shut off the water and made it back to bed, where Jazz proceeded to lick Chris from head to toe. Chris propped himself up on his elbows and looked down at Jazz, who was licking Chris' right knee. "You're really into licking, aren't you?"

Jazz grinned up at him. "My mom says I'm orally fixated. Oh, God, that sounded bad again, didn't it? I mean because I sucked my thumb until I was eight—but I only started doing that after I weaned at age three—and then I started smoking when I was thirteen. My mom just about had a heart attack."

"I can see why. But you don't smoke now?"

"No, I quit when ... it was years ago." Jazz blushed. "Actually, I still have a cigarette every now and then—but I don't buy any. I just bum them off of friends, mostly when we're out drinking or whatever." Jazz licked Chris' cock a few times, experimentally, and when there was no response he shimmied back up toward the pillows and snuggled close. "Sleep?" he asked. "Or would you rather I went home?" His voice made it clear which his preference would be.

"No, stay," said Chris, yawning.

Jazz wriggled closer and closed his eyes, his breath warm against Chris' shoulder.

They slept.

* * * *

Chris worries about Jazz, all alone in the hospital at night. Oh, he knows Jazz isn't really alone—the nurses are always around, and there are always people in the rooms on either side of him. But Jazz is alone in the bed, and Chris worries.

What if, all this time, Jazz is trapped in a dream that he can't wake up from? What if he's afraid and wishing for comfort that doesn't come?

On two occasions Chris spends the night with Jazz, carefully wrapped around him in the bed that's too small and uncomfortable. Chris doesn't sleep at all those nights, and almost falls asleep driving to work the day after the second time.

And after the second night he sleeps with Jazz, one of the doctors approaches him. Although he doesn't explicitly say that Chris isn't allowed to spend the night with his lover, he gently leads Chris around the subject, dancing in circles but never coming right out and saying what he means. The gist is that Chris shouldn't bother—Jazz may, on some level, know he's there, but he's not unhappy where he is. It's like sleeping.

That's what Chris is worried about.

Chris was dreaming the blissful dreams of the sexually replete when he was suddenly awakened into a world of confusion. The room was dark and there was a warm body in the bed with him, and that body was kicking him and hitting him and making noises, and the room was too dark to see anything. Chris reached for the bedside lamp, got kicked in the thigh for his trouble, and managed to shed some light on the situation.

Jazz was wrapped up in the sheet, fighting it. His eyes were closed, but his face was still drawn and afraid. Unsure of what to do, Chris reached out tentatively and shook Jazz's shoulder.

Jazz's eyes snapped open, and he backed away from Chris so fast that he teetered on the edge of the mattress. Chris quickly grabbed the edge of the blanket that was still wrapped around Jazz and pulled, providing enough traction that Jazz didn't fall out of bed. Jazz hovered at the edge, gasping.

"Are ... are you okay?" Chris asked finally.

Jazz gulped. Nodded. Hitched his body in closer to the middle of the bed, creating slack in the blanket that Chris still had clutched in his hand.

"Sorry," Jazz said after a while.

"It's okay. Did you have a nightmare or something?"

"Yeah." Jazz smiled tremulously. "Something." He rolled around on the bed a little bit, obviously trying to get comfortable again.

Chris moved closer, straightening the bedclothes as best he could, and let his hand caress the air just over Jazz's upper arm. "Do you want to...?"

"Yes, please," said Jazz, in a tiny voice, and sighed as Chris wrapped his arm around Jazz and pulled him close. He snuggled in.

They were both quiet for a while.

"Thanks," Jazz said. "I'm sorry I woke you up. I probably should have warned you."

"Do you do this often?"

"It depends. But sometimes, yeah, especially when I'm in a strange place."

"Do you know why?" Chris asked.

"Yes."

Chris squeezed his arm around Jazz. "It's okay," he said. "You don't have to tell me."

"I should, probably. My therapist used to say—after, see, I was in therapy for a while—that it was good to talk about it. Cathartic. Get all those feelings out there in the open, let the wounds heal, you know?"

"I guess that makes sense."

Jazz brought his hand up and laid it on Chris' chest, lightly tracing the fine hair there. "I had—there was this—" He was trembling, and Chris hugged him harder.

"My ex," Jazz said after a while. "He had this cousin, and we went over to his house for dinner. And then my ex, he had to go out for a while, and I stayed at his cousin's house, and, well, it turned out the cousin didn't think I should be dating him. Didn't think he was really gay—thought that I was influencing him somehow."

"How nice. Did he give you a hard time?"

"That's one way of putting it," Jazz said flatly. "He freaked out. Started telling me I was going to hell for tempting other men into putting their cocks in me. Said I was evil, I was luring Rich—my ex. He only got in one punch before my ex came back and interrupted the whole thing. But he ... the cousin, I mean—he made it pretty clear he was gonna fix things so that I wouldn't be able to be with his cousin anymore."

"Holy shit," Chris said. This confirmed every fear he'd ever had about approaching anyone in a bar or club. You never knew when you were going to meet some sicko who thought

you were going to burn in hell for being gay, and who was more than willing to help you get there.

"I had nightmares for a long time afterward, and even now, if I'm somewhere unfamiliar—it seems to bring them back, you know?" Jazz didn't sound too upset, at least.

"I'm not surprised. Is there ... is there anything I can do?"

"This is good," said Jazz. "It's nice to be with you." He pushed closer into Chris, like he was trying to get somewhere safe.

"Shh," Chris said, awkwardly. "It's okay. I ... I won't let anything happen to you."

Jazz shoved his thigh between Chris', dug his chin into Chris' collarbone. "I'm okay," he said. He pressed his pelvis forward, and Chris felt Jazz's swelling erection against his hip. "As long as we're awake, can we?"

"Can we what?" Chris asked, sliding a hand down to cup Jazz's behind and pull him even closer.

"You know," said Jazz. He thrust against Chris, leaving a slick trail along the path the head of his cock traveled. "I want to be inside of you, where no one can get me. Can we?"

Chris' protective side was back in full force, and damned if he could say no to someone who needed him. He let Jazz call the shots. Remained silent except for when he couldn't help but moan softly. Gave Jazz what he could, which admittedly wasn't much, until they were both limp and wrung out, panting in each other's arms.

"I don't wanna go back to sleep," Jazz said softly, just as Chris was starting to drift off.

"Hmm? Oh. Okay." Chris forced himself to sit up and check the time. "It's four," he said. "We could get up and have some coffee."

"Really?" Jazz sat up hopefully. "You don't mind?"

"I don't mind. As long as this isn't a regular thing—the getting up at four, I mean—" Chris didn't want Jazz to think he didn't want them being together to be a regular thing—"because I don't think I can survive on this little sleep on a regular basis."

"I could just get up by myself," Jazz said. "You can go back to sleep."

"No, it's okay, really. I don't mind." Chris swung his legs over the side of the bed and looked around for his pants. He couldn't see them anywhere.

Jazz pulled his jeans on and watched Chris as he got a fresh pair from his dresser. Chris felt Jazz's warm hands dance around his waist as Jazz's arms wrapped around him. "Thanks," Jazz said, pressing a soft kiss to his shoulder blade.

"No problem," said Chris, and reminded himself not to turn around and kiss Jazz on the lips, something he desperately wanted to do.

They went into the kitchen and Chris started some coffee. "You hungry?"

Jazz smiled sheepishly. "Always."

Chris dug around in the fridge to see what he had on hand. He had deliberately avoided buying any breakfast things, because he didn't want to admit to himself that he'd hoped Jazz might spend the night. As a result, he had only two eggs and no bacon. "Pancakes?"

"As long as you don't expect me to make them." Jazz yawned.

"I'm sure you can learn to cook," Chris said. "I ... I could teach you, if you wanted."

Jazz cocked an eyebrow at him sleepily. "I'm not sure you know what you're saying. I'm a disaster in the kitchen. Really."

"Hasn't your mom ever tried to teach you? I mean, she's such a great cook and everything..." Chris broke one of the eggs into a bowl and started to whisk it.

"She gave up after I set her kitchen on fire. The second time."

"Yeah, well—maybe I should give you lessons at your place." He added flour, salt, baking powder, sugar, and milk. "Here—you can stir, right?"

Jazz reluctantly took the bowl from him and began to move the whisk in gentle circles. "Stirring isn't cooking," he pointed out. "Unless you want to eat raw pancake batter."

Chris poured them each a cup of coffee. "Black?"

"Yeah, thanks." Jazz nodded at the table next to him, and Chris set the cup down there. He looked into the bowl and then held it out to Chris. "Is this good?"

"Yeah, it's fine." Chris put the frying pan on the stove to heat up and found a spatula. "So—is that why you and your ex broke up? Over the cousin thing?"

Jazz looked startled.

"I'm sorry—we don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," Chris said. "I just—I want to understand."

Jazz sighed. "It wasn't ... well, no, it *was* about the thing with his cousin, yeah. But not in the way you're probably thinking. Rich—My ex, he couldn't get past it, you know. And it was really hard for me to get past it, but I went into therapy, and things were getting better. But my ex couldn't let it go. He wanted me to call and check in every half hour when I was out, and if I forgot or didn't have my phone with me he'd call, freaking out, thinking I was dead in a ditch somewhere."

Chris poured some batter into the pan. "Uh-huh."

"It was nice at first—really nice, that he wanted to protect me, that he was so worried. It made me feel safe. But then, after a while—I don't know, it stopped making me feel safe and started making me feel ... hunted. Not just by him, but by the world. Because if he was so convinced that the world was that dangerous, then maybe it really was. You know?" Jazz looked at Chris hopefully.

"Yeah, I can see that."

"He was treating me like a little kid, and with the age difference between us—he was a lot older than me—it just got to the point where I couldn't take it anymore. I left."

"How did he take it?" Chris asked.

"Badly, I guess. I haven't seen him since. Well, once I saw him downtown, a couple months after, but he didn't see me—we didn't talk or anything. I had friends at the time that would call me, let me know how he was, but we've fallen out of touch. Last I heard, he'd moved out of state."

Chris flipped the pancake. "You still think about him."

"Sure. Don't you think about your ex?"

"Only with a seething hatred," Chris said, and he smiled ruefully.

Jazz laughed. "I hope you're joking. But then maybe you're not—you said before that you haven't forgiven him ending things."

"It wasn't that he ended things—it was ... I don't know, the way he let things start when maybe he really wasn't that interested in a serious relationship? And I was so..." Chris let his voice trail off as he thought about it. God, this was so embarrassing. It was bad enough to have to remember it himself, and even worse to tell someone else about it. He'd never had to, before.

Jazz must have sensed his distress, because he came over and wrapped his arms around Chris' waist, snuggling up against his back, warmth and comfort in a lithe package. "It's okay," he said softly.

And it was easier knowing that Jazz couldn't see his face, somehow. "I just fell head over heels for him from the first minute I saw him, you know? I saw Drake, I wanted him. I guess he was flattered that I pursued him, because he let me. Even though he didn't really want me back."

"That must have been awful," Jazz said.

"I just wish he hadn't let it drag out so long. We moved in together—no, I moved in with him, gave up my own place, stopped seeing my friends—it was like Drake was the center of the universe. I was so caught up in having what I wanted that I never even saw how one-sided the relationship was."

"But he let you move in with him!" Jazz said indignantly. "If he didn't want you, he shouldn't have done that ... and I'm

not helping, am I? I should be letting you vent, not getting all pissed off on your behalf."

Chris smiled. "It's okay." He flipped the second pancake and rubbed Jazz's arm where it was resting against his stomach. "I've probably vented about Drake enough for one lifetime. It was kind of a shock, you know? To realize that I wasn't going to get something that I wanted that much."

"Mmm-hmm." Jazz sounded sympathetic. "I know the feeling."

"So ... do you have plans for today?"

Jazz released him and moved around to take the spatula out of Chris' hand. "Want to teach me how to flip pancakes?"

"Okay. That won't take all day, though."

"You never know," said Jazz. "Hope you have enough batter for a couple dozen pancakes, because chances are good most of them are gonna end up on the floor. And then..." His eyebrows did their little wiggle.

"Yes?" Chris was tempted to imitate the eyebrow thing but figured he'd just end up looking like a jerk.

Jazz slid the spatula down against the front of Chris' pants. "Then maybe we can see about that compatibility thing some more. Couch? Dining room table?"

That was when Chris knew he was in big trouble. He couldn't help but grin.

Chapter 4

Jazz's mom comes three times a week. She and Chris never made any kind of formal arrangement about meeting, but after the third week or so they started to get into a pattern. Judy arrives half an hour before Chris, stays for ten minutes after he arrives so that they can talk about whatever is pertinent, and then leaves so that Chris can have some time alone with Jazz.

It makes Chris feel better to see her. Jazz doesn't look like her—he must have gotten his dark hair and slight build from his father—but his attitude is clearly an offshoot of hers, whether by nature or nurture. Judy is wide in the hip and has long red hair that she wears back in a braid most of the time. The first time Chris saw her with her hair down, he almost didn't recognize her. She is graying at the temples and Chris thinks that the number of grey hairs has doubled since Jazz's accident.

Judy brings home-baked bread for the nurses, and occasionally small packets of fresh herbs for them to take home. She brings cards from friends to prop up on the windowsill in Jazz's room. She hugs Chris and, for the short time she is there, he is almost able to pretend that everything is okay.

Chris drove up the street toward Jazz's house, slowing to check numbers on mailboxes. Most of the houses seemed to be set back from the road, some so far back that their mailboxes were the only proof of their existence. Jazz's was

one of these—the number 84 on the mailbox, and a right hand turn down a long, windy driveway.

The street was an anomaly in this area—most everything was well built-up, lots of big houses set close together, entire neighborhoods that had been bulldozed clear of trees before dozens of identical houses went up. Perfect green lawns and small picturesque trees around very, very expensive houses.

Jazz's street had come as rather a shock in comparison—older houses, lots of big trees looming overhead, bushes and plants and flowers and old-fashioned porch swings. It was like an oasis in the desert.

Chris parked the car next to Jazz's in the driveway and shut it off. Next to him on the seat was a paper grocery bag, which he grabbed before climbing out of the car and going over to the house. Front door? Or through the side porch?

Deciding on the porch route because it seemed more casual and therefore more Jazz-like, Chris opened the door and went in. The porch was crowded with objects—a gigantic glass bottle full of seashells, three or four wooden chairs, two tables, magazines, winter boots. Chris knocked on the door that led into the house.

Within seconds Jazz was opening the door, grinning from ear to ear. "You made it! Were my directions okay?"

"Yeah, fine. I really like the neighborhood."

"It really seems out of place, doesn't it? My mom says it's like stepping back in time. In a good way."

Chris held out the grocery bag. "Fridge?" he asked. "A couple of these things ought to go in there until we decide to cook."

Jazz led him over to the refrigerator. "Are you sure you know what you're in for?"

"It's your kitchen. If you set it on fire, it's not a problem for me." Chris looked around. "You do have a fire extinguisher, right?"

"Yes." Jazz laughed. "It's under the sink. Do you want the tour?"

"Sure."

The kitchen was older, with a deep enameled sink and a gas stove and range. The floors, as Jazz had said, had the aged look that hardwood gets after decades of wear. The first floor had a half bath, dining room, and a spacious living room. The stairs were at the back of the house, and led up to a long hallway. Off of the hallway were two bedrooms, an office, and a full bath.

"This is great," Chris said sincerely. "You have so much space! And it has so much personality ... the woodwork, the leaded glass windows. Your bedroom's got to be twice the size of mine."

"More room for a big bed," Jazz said, drawing Chris through the doorway toward it. He yanked Chris' collar down and attached his mouth to the little hollow at the base of his throat, sucking and licking, his tongue hot against Chris' skin.

Chris grabbed onto Jazz's ass with both hands, pulling him closer. He was losing his ability to think rationally when a woman's voice floated up from downstairs.

"Jazz? Honey?"

"What the—?" Chris pulled back.

Jazz laughed. "It's my mom. I forgot she was gonna swing by and take care of the garden today. Oh! I wonder if she brought food."

Chris followed Jazz back downstairs, hanging behind him, wondering what this woman was going to be like. It was clear that Jazz adored her.

Jazz's mom was putting a few things away in cabinets. "Hi, honey," she said, smiling at her son. "I brought you some cookies, and a few fresh tomatoes. Lucy's garden is out of control—she doesn't know what to do with all the vegetables she's getting. They're ripening faster than she can use them, and..." She caught sight of Chris, half-hidden behind the door frame.

"Hello," she said, holding her hand out to him. "I'm Jazz's mom, Judy."

Chris shook her hand. "I'm Chris Turner, Jazz's ... friend."

"Friend?" said Jazz, and Chris felt himself flush.

"Jason Zephyr Stone," Judy admonished, turning on her son. "You stop that. You're embarrassing Chris. Not everyone's comfortable with the way you speak your mind."

Jazz exchanged a look with Chris.

"No, it's okay, really," said Chris. "He's right. I just wasn't expecting ... but it's nice to meet you. Jazz talks about you all the time."

Judy smiled at Jazz fondly. "This boy, he never stops talking." She turned to put the tomatoes on the windowsill.

"Jason Zephyr?" Chris asked Jazz.

Jazz wrinkled his nose. "Yeah. Dad wanted a normal name, and Mom wanted to do the hippie thing, so they compromised. Guess who picked Zephyr."

Judy wrinkled up her nose, too, their expressions mirroring each other in a way that made Chris smile. "I like Zephyr," she said. "You should be grateful your Dad didn't put up a fuss when you started insisting we call you 'Jazz'." She looked at Chris, speaking to him directly. "Don't let this boy walk all over you," she said seriously. "He has a good heart, and he knows what he wants, but he's pretty set on getting his own way. You'll stick up for yourself, won't you? You look like the type."

Chris stammered. "Um ... yes. I mean ... I won't—I will."

"That's all right then." Judy kissed Jazz on the cheek and went back out the door onto the porch. "I'm just going to give my plants some love," she called over her shoulder. "You boys go back to whatever you were doing before I interrupted." She disappeared out the screen door with a clatter.

Chris looked at Jazz, mortified. "She wasn't ... did she...?"

"Maybe," said Jazz, shrugging. "Doesn't matter. Does it?"

"No. No, I guess not. It's just ... she's ... wow."

Jazz came over to him and stroked his chest, soothingly. "Yeah, people usually react that way. She doesn't pull any punches." His hand wrapped around the back of Chris' neck and pulled him down so that Jazz could lick his ear teasingly.

Chris stiffened and moved away. "Jazz ... your mother is right outside."

"She's seen me kiss men before, Chris," Jazz said patiently. "She's not going to sound the alarm or call the papers or anything."

"But she hasn't seen you kiss me. I mean ... I'm just ... I can't."

Jazz sighed. The sound went straight to Chris' stomach, which was tight with a familiar nervousness that he'd hoped never to feel again. "Okay," Jazz said. "Do you want to go back upstairs?"

"No," Chris said stiffly. He couldn't have been more turned off. Maybe all of this had been a mistake. Not a huge one, because he wasn't in too deep, not yet, but a mistake all the same. "I think I'd better go."

"What?" The expression on Jazz's face was difficult to interpret. "No ... Chris, come on." He took Chris' hand and led him into the dining room, pulled out a chair, and sat him down. Jazz pulled a second chair out and over near Chris', sitting down so that they were facing each other. "What's wrong? What did I do?"

Chris couldn't look Jazz in the eye. He obviously wasn't with the program, because it was clear to Chris that this was the time when he left before things had a chance to get any messier. "I don't want to do this."

"Do what? Fool around in the kitchen? Fool around upstairs?"

"I can't..." Chris' voice cracked, and his hands were shaking, and all he wanted to do was get out of there, far away from Jazz who already had the power to make him care.

Jazz touched the back of Chris' hand where it rested on the table, and when Chris tensed he stopped and leaned back into his chair. "It's okay," Jazz said. "Whatever it is, it's okay. We can talk about it."

"I'm not ready," Chris said.

"Ready for what?"

"This. You."

"Not ready for me, as in, you don't like me?" Jazz cocked his head to one side, seemingly confident that this wasn't the answer.

"No." Chris gestured helplessly.

"Not ready for a relationship?"

Chris nodded.

Jazz leaned forward again, but didn't touch Chris. He waited until Chris glanced up at him, and then he smiled.

"Don't you think you've put this off long enough?"

"What?"

"Having a relationship? After four years? It's been long enough, Chris. It's time to take a chance. If not with me, okay, but with someone. You're too ... you're great, Chris. I really, really like you. You're smart, and sexy, and you deserve to be happy."

Chris stared at Jazz.

"Anyway," Jazz continued awkwardly, "Like I said, if you don't like me enough, that's one thing..."

"No!" Chris managed. "I ... I do like you."

Jazz smiled, his confidence returned. "Then ... come on. You know? You can't keep running away like this."

Chris turned his hand over on the table, not being able to ask but hoping that Jazz would get the hint and take it. He did, squeezing Chris' hand reassuringly. "I ... maybe you're right."

Jazz slid forward a few inches in his chair, so that his right knee came up against Chris'. "So what was it that set you off? What did I say?"

Chris thought back for a minute. Shook his head.

"You don't remember?" For someone who normally seemed unable to sit still, Jazz was being endlessly patient.

"It wasn't ... you didn't say anything. You just..."

Jazz nodded encouragingly.

"It was..." Chris shook his head again. "God, this sounds so stupid."

"Tell me."

"It was ... you ... you sighed."

Jazz looked confused. "I sighed, and that made you want to take off?"

"Yeah." Chris bit his lower lip.

"Why?"

"It reminded me of Drake," Chris said, quickly, before he could lose his nerve. Otherwise they'd be here all day, nodding at each other.

Jazz sat back. "Okay. How?"

"I don't know." Chris shrugged. Jazz continued to look at him. Right, talk fast. "Because he was always sighing like I was disappointing him and like I could never do anything right. If you're already frustrated with me, then it's just going

to get worse and end badly. So I think we ought to save ourselves the trouble."

"Okay, first off, I wasn't disappointed in you. I was frustrated because I wanted you, and I'm greedy and I don't like to wait for what I want, but that's my problem, not yours. It doesn't mean I was frustrated with you. And..." Jazz squeezed Chris' hand again to emphasize his point. "And can we please try not to write this off before it's even begun? There's no reason this has to end badly. No reason it has to end at all, if we like each other."

"Yeah." Chris had never felt so unsure, but it had to say something good about Jazz that he was willing to talk about all of this. If he hadn't been, Chris would have been halfway home by now, cursing his own stupidity but feeling safe. Instead of still being here, stupid and terrified.

"So ... you gonna stick around?" Jazz asked.

Chris nodded slowly. "Yeah. Yeah, I guess I am." He stood up without letting go of Jazz's hand. "Besides, I'm supposed to show you how to make pizza."

"You might not want to stick around after you see how this goes," Jazz said darkly, and then laughed. He followed Chris into the kitchen where the warm tomatoes waited in the sunshine on the window sill.

* * * *

Chris eats dinner with Jazz on the nights he visits him after work. He often brings pizza, which was one of Jazz's favorite foods. It's convenient because he can eat half of it the next day for lunch; he just doesn't have the time or energy to

really cook anymore. At first he's torn—what if Jazz knows he's there and can see him eating? Is he jealous that Chris is eating pizza when all he's got is a feeding tube down his throat? Finally, Chris manages to convince himself that Jazz would be happy that at least someone is eating the good stuff.

"So that's dough," said Jazz. His face and hands were heavily coated with flour, his blue T-shirt white with it; even the ends of his hair were white.

"*That's* dough," Chris said, pointing to the covered bowl on the counter. "That," and he pointed to the lump of wet flour on the floor, "is a mess." He'd thought kneading pizza dough to be a relatively simple, beginner-friendly cooking task, but had discovered to his dismay that Jazz's declarations of kitchen incompetence were only too accurate.

The first measure of flour had been stirred vigorously out of the bowl before it even had a chance to incorporate with the liquid. The second had ended up on the floor, where they'd left it until now while they'd tried, a third time, to make dough that would be useable.

Jazz sank down onto his knees and scraped the lump of wet goo off the floor with his hands. He got up, threw it into the trash barrel, and regarded the sticky residue on the floor with dismay. "Maybe a Brillo pad," he said thoughtfully, retrieved one, and scraped the floor until it looked relatively clean. "So now what?" he asked, throwing the Brillo pad into the sink and washing his hands.

"Now we wait for the dough to rise. At least an hour, preferably closer to two." Chris checked his watch. "Well, maybe more like one, if we want to eat at a reasonable time."

"Hmm," said Jazz, eyes dancing. "What can we think of to do while we wait?" He edged casually over to Chris, looking in the other direction, and then glancing up as if surprised to discover the two of them face to face. His tongue darted out and licked Chris' lower lip. "C'mon, Chris," he said huskily. "My mom left over an hour ago. There's no one here. We can go upstairs if you want to..."

"Okay..." Chris said. Despite their earlier conversation, he was reluctant. Worried. He knew on one level that Jazz was right—he couldn't keep avoiding relationships just because things had gone so wrong with Drake. But even so...

Jazz brushed the flat of his hand against Chris' cheek, running it through his hair to cup the back of his head gently. "Okay?"

"Yeah."

In the bedroom, Jazz slowly undressed both of them. Chris stood there and let him, moving cooperatively, but not really making an effort to help. When they were both naked, Jazz wrapped his hand around Chris' cock and whispered against his neck, "I really like you, Chris. I'm not gonna hurt you." He then propelled Chris two steps backward and into a sitting position on the edge of the bed. Jazz sank down onto the floor between Chris' legs.

Chris let his head drop back as he felt Jazz's tongue exploring him. This could be more than just desire, couldn't

it? The way Jazz touched him ... it could be more than fleeting.

Jazz licked Chris' erection from base to tip, and then concentrated on the ring of skin around the head, tracing it with his tongue. Chris couldn't prevent himself from moving just slightly, trying to get Jazz to touch him everywhere at once, chasing Jazz's tongue.

Jazz looked up at him. "You taste amazing, Chris. I love to do this. Is it good?"

Chris nodded, wishing he were as free with words as Jazz. "It's good," he managed, though his voice was hoarse with need.

Smiling, Jazz licked the tip of Chris' cock again. "You only talk during sex when you're totally losing it, don't you."

"Please tell me you're not ... not reading my mind," Chris gasped as Jazz licked him again. "I was just ... oh, God ... thinking that."

"I'll just have to work harder," Jazz paused for another lick, "at making you lose it." And he applied his mouth with a will, sucking Chris down deep into his throat, his nose brushing against Chris' belly, one hand busy fondling Chris' balls.

Chris groaned and thrust slowly into Jazz's mouth, wanting to lie down or stand up or pass out or die. It was so good. There was something about the way Jazz was during sex—the fact that he was completely there, body and mind and soul. Every part of him was concentrated on Chris, on pleasure. It made Chris feel wanted in a way that was unprecedented.

Jazz's left hand reached up, and he ran a finger across Chris' lips, encouraging him to lick it. Chris did, and then took it into his mouth and sucked on it, letting his tongue swirl around each joint. Jazz made a little noise of delight that Chris could feel in his cock, and then pulled away.

"You make me so hot," Jazz gasped. "God, I want you to fuck me. Please?"

"You don't have to twist my arm," said Chris, and was rewarded with a smile.

Jazz climbed up onto the bed, leaning across to grab a condom and some lube, his ass in the air, tattoo blazing like dark fire against his pale skin. He handed the lube to Chris and tore the condom wrapper open, rolling it deftly down over Chris' erection.

"My turn," said Chris with satisfaction, and pushed Jazz onto his back, pinning him down. Chris proceeded to lick Jazz, starting at his throat, which was warm and soft, and moving down his chest to swipe at each nipple.

Jazz squirmed under his hands. "Chris, don't tease me," Jazz said softly. His eyes were dark with longing.

Chris let his tongue trail lower, dancing across Jazz's belly to dip into his navel, skirting around the soft black hairs that spread out further down. He moved lower still, applying his tongue to Jazz's inner thighs while Jazz twitched and gasped, hands clenched at his sides. Chris sucked Jazz's rock-hard erection into his mouth, his pinky finger hooking through the little piece of jewelry beneath Jazz's scrotum, tickling it with gentle tugs.

Jazz squeaked and shifted his hips, thrusting up into Chris' willing mouth. "I thought you were ... supposed to ... be ... inside me."

Chris pulled away. "Oh. Did you want me to stop?"

"No, don't stop. I mean ... please."

"Please what?" Chris took Jazz back into his mouth, twirling his tongue in circles around the head of Jazz' cock.

"Please—I need you to fuck me, Chris."

God, the way Jazz said his name made Chris feel ... special, important. Jazz's whole body was hard and sculpted, like marble under Chris' hands, and so sexy that Chris almost couldn't believe it. He felt powerful, as if this man was something precious and unattainable that he'd somehow managed to grasp.

Jazz slid back along the bed and spread his legs wide, reaching for the lube. Without taking his eyes off Chris, he flipped the lid and squeezed some out onto his fingers, generously lubricating his own opening, sliding the tip of one finger in.

Chris couldn't have taken his eyes off Jazz if he'd wanted to. The sight of Jazz preparing himself, panting with desire as he looked at Chris, waited for Chris to enter him, was devastatingly hot. Chris was frozen in place, staring, every muscle in his thighs quivering in anticipation.

"Come on," Jazz said, flinging the bottle of lube away.

Chris wanted to be gentle, to take his time, but his body had other ideas. He moved forward, hands on either side of Jazz's waist, and pushed roughly into Jazz with one quick movement. Jazz was slick with lube and so warm, and his

legs came up as he latched onto Chris' arms with his hands, gripping fiercely.

"Oh, yeah," Jazz murmured. "Just like that."

Chris pulled most of the way out and thrust back in again, harder than before. Jazz moaned and thrust up to meet him, heels against Chris' sides. It was ... amazing, euphoric, illuminating. Chris was being rough, was taking what he needed, and Jazz was actually encouraging him.

Jazz pushed himself crookedly up onto one elbow, to lick and suck at whatever parts of Chris' chest he could reach. His free arm, the one that wasn't trying to support his weight, grabbed Chris' hip and pulled him even closer, even more roughly.

"Harder," Jazz gasped.

Chris hesitated, his intellect briefly managing to suppress his raw desire.

"You won't hurt me," said Jazz. "I want you to." He ground himself up onto Chris' cock in illustration.

Chris groaned. Jazz was so hot and tight, and God, the way he moved was like liquid mercury on silk, sliding and dancing with the barest touch, as if there was no such thing as friction. And there wasn't any time for second thoughts—or maybe even first ones—because Chris' hips started to pump his cock into Jazz.

Jazz shoved himself up to meet Chris, moaning. "Yeah, like that, harder, harder."

Chris wasn't capable of being gentler—everything was running on instinct now, Jazz's words and noises urging him on, his body overjoyed to thrust faster, harder. He was

slamming into Jazz so hard now that his teeth were rattling, so hard that it was right on the line of being painful. But Jazz was squealing and arching his back and his hair had come loose from its tie and was fanned out around him, and God, he was fucking gorgeous. Chris was right ... on ... the ... edge...

And then Jazz bucked up against him with a strangled sound, and his hot come was splashing between them, and his body was spasming around Chris' cock, and it was all over. There was no way he would have been able to avoid his own orgasm when the velvet softness around him was clenching into the tightest fist imaginable.

Chris moaned, loudly, as his legs locked up, all of his attention focused on his cock as it twitched and pulsed inside of Jazz. All of his oxygen must have been spent as well, because by the time it was over he was panting and light-headed. He pulled out and collapsed beside Jazz, concentrating on breathing.

After a moment or two, he turned his head to look at Jazz, who was on his side now, dark eyes watching Chris.

"Are you okay?" Chris asked.

Jazz smiled. "Sure. You?"

"Oh, yeah. Just about gave myself a heart attack, but ... not in a bad way." Chris peeled off the condom and got up to dispose of it, then came back to the bed and flopped bonelessly back down.

Jazz rolled over onto his belly, fingers playing with Chris' hair gently. "I really like you," he said dreamily.

Chris smiled. "You keep saying that. I like you, too."

"No, I mean ... I *really* like you." Jazz pushed up onto his elbows so that he could look Chris in the eyes.

"Okay." Chris was confused. What was Jazz saying, exactly?

"I like you so much that I don't like the thought of you being with anyone else," Jazz explained.

"I'm not seeing anyone else," Chris pointed out. "You know that."

"Yeah, but ... what if you meet someone?"

"Someone I like as much as you? I don't think that's likely," Chris said.

Jazz grinned. "Thanks. That's sweet. But what I mean is ... I want to know that I've got you all to myself."

"You do."

"But what if..." Jazz harrumphed in frustration. "I want to know that you're only seeing me."

"I am. I just told you that."

"I mean ... I want us to see each other, exclusively."

"Aren't we?" Chris wasn't getting any less confused.

"Yeah, *now* we are. And I'd like to keep it that way. I'd like us to have ... you know, some sort of agreement. I don't want you kissing anyone else..."

Chris frowned. "But I'm not kissing *you*. Not that I wouldn't like to..."

Jazz sat up. "You're right. I'm being unreasonable."

"No," said Chris. He put out a hand to grab Jazz's arm. "I didn't say that. And I don't want to kiss anyone else, anyway. If you want us to be exclusive, that's okay with me."

"Really?" Jazz's smile was spread across his whole face.

"Yeah." Chris could feel his own answering smile, a pale mirror image of the breathtaking man sitting across from him. He felt his smile fade as he thought of something. "Do you think ... it might be a good idea for us both to get tested? I mean, if we're thinking this might work out long term..."

Jazz nodded. "That's a good idea. Might as well do it sooner, rather than later. I've been getting tested once a year anyway and I've always come up clean, but yeah. Let's do it."

"I haven't been checked for ... gosh, at least a couple of years, I think. But I haven't taken any chances, at all. No unprotected anything. I never ... I didn't like anyone well enough, you know?"

"But you've ... I mean, we've had unprotected oral." Jazz looked at him carefully, as if he were trying to see inside Chris' mind.

"I know." Chris glanced down at his hands. "But I swear, if I had any reason to think that I could have given you anything, I wouldn't have—"

Jazz waved a hand at him. "I know. I just meant ... why with me, if you've been so careful with everyone else?"

"You say 'everyone else' like it's been this whole parade of people," Chris said, with only a hint of bitterness. "It's only been a couple, since Drake, and they've all been—none of them were people I could see myself getting involved with, you know? They were just ... I don't want to say 'warm bodies' because that sounds awful, and it wasn't like that."

"I think I understand," Jazz said. He reached out and took Chris' hand, turning it over and tracing the lines on his palm. "Do you believe in fate?"

"What?" Chris was mesmerized by the gentle touch, feather-light across his skin.

"Do you think some people are meant to be together? Or meant to meet, at a certain time or place?"

"I don't know. I never really thought about it." Chris closed his eyes as Jazz's fingers on his hand sent a message to his groin, causing the flesh there to stir and grow heavier between his legs. He tried not to think about the time and how long the pizza dough had been rising.

"I think we might be really good for each other," said Jazz, bringing Chris' hand up to his lips and pressing a wet kiss to his palm.

"I hope so," Chris said rather breathlessly.

"I can be really good to you," Jazz continued, sliding down. "Here ... let me show you."

The pizza dough forgotten, Chris let Jazz do whatever he wanted to.

Chapter 5

One of the first things Chris is grateful for immediately afterward is that, in addition to an unreasonable love for popular music and an overanalyzed lust for Harrison Ford, he and Jazz share a blood type. Giving blood gives him something to do during those hours—twice, because he manages to convince a second nurse that no, that was Jazz's other friend who gave blood previously—and even though it makes him feel like shit, he figures he would have felt that way regardless.

Knowing that those are his blood cells running around inside of Jazz's veins, his little reds and whites like microscopic fine wines, is comforting in ways he can't even begin to understand. He thinks the blood cells must die eventually, and be replaced, or else why would your body need to keep making new ones? But some of his must still be living inside of Jazz, even now.

Chris is inside of Jazz, even now.

Chris put on his turn signal and moved over to get off the highway, thinking about how crappy his afternoon had been and how all he wanted to do was get home and have dinner and wrap his arms around Jazz and forget. Stupid job, stupid job, echoed in his brain, pretty much the same thought he'd been having since he'd left the office.

Sometimes it seemed like everything went wrong. But then, having a total crap day like this reminded him of the day he'd met Jazz, and so far that had turned out pretty well. He'd put up with the bad days if it meant he got to keep Jazz.

He pulled the car into his parking lot and turned it off, dragged himself up to the front door, and unlocked his apartment. He was in the kitchen when he realized he hadn't gotten the mail. He sighed and trudged back to the mailbox. He flipped through the envelopes as he went back up the hallway for what would hopefully be the last time that day.

When he was standing at his front door, he discovered the letter from the lab at the bottom of the pile.

His test results.

Jazz's had come back two days ago, all clean. They'd just been waiting for this.

Chris went into his apartment, closed the door behind him, and sat down at the dining room table, the envelope in front of him. He wasn't really nervous, he told himself. He hadn't taken any chances since the last time he'd been tested, so there wasn't any real reason to be concerned. But his heart was beating just a little too fast, and his hands were shaking. Maybe not enough to be noticeable on the outside, but inside, he could feel it.

Chris could have called—or gone in to the office, as they really preferred to give people their results in person. In fact, he was being completely stupid. They wouldn't have mailed him his results if he'd tested positive for anything serious. The results had to be good.

He picked up the envelope. Put it down again. Took a deep breath.

He'd been very, very stupid when he'd met Drake. He hadn't known anything about the man, and yet he'd jumped into bed with him almost immediately, with no protection. He

hadn't worried about it at the time, although after they'd split up he'd spent a nervous nine months waiting for his second test to come back clean. Now, looking back, Chris could see not only how stupid he'd been, but also how lucky, to come away from that relationship without a vicious disease lurking inside of him. He hoped.

Chris picked up the envelope again, and opened it with his eyes closed. He unfolded the paper. Opened his eyes, and scanned the sheet anxiously. When he saw that the news was all good, he let his breath out in a rush and dropped his head down onto his arms, letting himself shake all he wanted to. He was clean. Safe.

After a few minutes, Chris got up and went into the kitchen, tucking the piece of paper in next to the microwave. He checked the clock—almost six, and Jazz would be arriving any time now for dinner.

In the past five weeks, he and Jazz had fallen into a routine. Twice a week, after work, Chris still went to the gym. Otherwise, he devoted his time to Jazz, with the agreement that they would get some form of physical exercise (other than sex) at least twice a week. Jazz didn't understand Chris' passion for fitness, and somehow Chris hadn't been able to explain it to Jazz to his satisfaction, but he seemed willing to do what it took to keep Chris happy.

The other nights, they spent the evening together, having dinner at one place or another. More often at Chris', because his kitchen was better-stocked and he found it more difficult to cook at Jazz's house. He preferred to eat something homemade and healthy, rather than the burgers and pizza

and greasy Chinese food that they often ended up ordering when they ate at Jazz's.

Chris started some rice cooking and pulled out some vegetables and chicken from the fridge. He'd been chopping and slicing for nearly fifteen minutes when there was a knock at the door.

When he opened it, Jazz was leaning against the door frame. "You could give me a key, you know."

Chris stepped out of the way so that Jazz could come in. "I guess," he said, awkwardly. It wasn't that he didn't trust Jazz...

"Don't you trust me?"

Chris glanced up into Jazz's eyes. His ability to seemingly read Chris' thoughts was uncanny, and sometimes kind of disturbing. "It's not that," he said, earnestly. "It's just that I don't want to rush things, you know?"

"Yeah," said Jazz, reaching out to caress Chris' cheek. "I know. It's fine."

"How hungry are you? I have some crackers..." Chris went back into the kitchen with Jazz following close behind. He handed the box of crackers to Jazz and then went back to his preparations.

Jazz sat down in one of the wooden kitchen chairs and hooked his feet around the backs of the legs. "So how was your day?"

Chris groaned and started to cut up the chicken.

"That bad, huh?" Jazz said.

"Worse. Awful. Let's not talk about it, okay?"

Jazz stuck another cracker into his mouth and tried to talk around it. "Okay. But you know if you repress all this stuff you're gonna end up with high blood pressure."

"It's not repressing. It's just ... denial." Chris smiled.

"And that's so much better." Jazz ate another cracker.

"You want one?" he asked, gesturing with the box.

"No, I'm good. I only bought them for you—those things are loaded with fat."

Jazz got up and came over, slipping an arm around Chris' waist. "And that's such a big issue for you? Because you're so unfit and overweight?"

Chris glanced down at his admittedly perfectly flat stomach, relieved at the thought that underneath his shirt his washboard abs were tight and sculpted. "Not the point. The point is, I have to work to keep myself fit. I don't have a metabolism like yours."

"You say that like it's a bad thing." Jazz went back for the cracker box. "You have no idea how frustrating it is to be hungry half an hour after you eat. I thought I was gonna die from lack of nourishment this morning, and it was still more than an hour until lunchtime. My stomach was growling louder than the lawnmowers. I started to worry it was gonna eat the rest of me."

Chris looked at Jazz fondly. "Well, this'll be ready in ten more minutes. Can you wait that long, or should I be telling you that there's some ice cream in the freezer?"

"Oh!" Jazz squealed. "Real ice cream, made with cream? That has *fat* in it and everything?"

"Yes," Chris said patiently. "I wouldn't bother to tell you about it if it wasn't real ice cream. What was it that you called mine?"

Jazz peered into the freezer. "Chocolate. You know me too well. Oh, you mean sugar-free shaving cream?"

"That was it." Chris checked the rice, then threw the sliced chicken into the heated wok and gave it a quick toss. "How was your day?"

Jazz threw himself back down into the chair dramatically. "Tiring. No, not really. It was fine. They tried to get me to do some weeding, but analysis of my performance quickly showed them that there lay the way to the devil. I pulled up four plants that I genuinely thought were weeds—I mean, they didn't have any flowers and they didn't look pretty—before they stopped me and let me go back to spreading mulch."

Jazz hopped back to his feet and took some plates out of the cabinet, laying them on the counter beside Chris. He took some utensils out and found the cloth napkins that Chris collected, and set the table.

"There's some beer on the bottom shelf of the fridge," Chris said over his shoulder, and turned his head to see Jazz standing there with two beers in his hands. "Oh. Guess you found it."

"If it has calories, I can find it," said Jazz, tapping his nose. "Bloodhound."

Chris tossed the vegetables into the wok and added half a bottle of sauce, mixing everything around. He divided the rice

between the two plates and dished out the stir-fry, handing one plate to Jazz.

They ate in companionable silence for a few minutes, and drank the beer. Chris wondered when he should say something about having gotten his test results. He was nervous and excited and wound up.

Jazz finally put down his fork and looked steadily at Chris. "What's up with you?"

"Huh? Nothing."

"Yeah, right. Something's going on." Jazz poked a bit of broccoli with one finger, then picked it up and popped it into his mouth. "C'mon, give."

"No, really." Chris was trying not to smile.

Jazz sat up straighter in his chair, as if he'd just thought of something. "You met someone else. You met someone else at work and blew him in a bathroom stall." He was grinning widely, obviously confident that he was being ridiculous.

"You're so stupid," Chris said, meaning it. "Okay, okay ... hang on a second."

He went back into the kitchen, got out a dessert plate, and put the piece of paper, still folded into thirds, on it. He carried it into the dining room and said, "Dessert."

Jazz looked confused. "Dessert? But what about the ice cream? And we never have dessert. What the..." he trailed off as Chris set the plate down next to his hand and he saw the piece of paper. "What...?" Jazz picked up the piece of paper without unfolding it, and then looked up at Chris. "Is this...?"

Chris nodded.

"And ... you're okay, right?"

"One hundred percent, doctor-certified..." But Chris was cut off as Jazz flew up into his arms.

"Oh, my God, oh, my God," Jazz repeated as he rubbed himself against Chris. "God, I want you so much." He grabbed Chris' hand and pressed it against his hardening erection as proof of this statement.

"We haven't even finished eating dinner," Chris protested weakly, knowing it was in vain.

"I don't care. I'd rather have you." Jazz's fingers were undoing the front of Chris' slacks, fumbling in his eagerness. His mouth came up and pressed against Chris' face, just to one side of Chris' lips, in the closest thing to a kiss that they had shared. "Want to feel you inside me."

And then they were both struggling to get naked next to the dining room table with its beer bottles and half-finished plates of food, with the lamp on overhead and the smell of soy sauce heavy in the air.

Jazz dropped to his knees in front of Chris and wrapped his lips around Chris' cock, clearly trying to get as much saliva as possible spread over his length.

"That won't be enough," Chris protested as Jazz turned around for him.

"It's okay," said Jazz. "It's fine."

"No. If this is the first time we're going to ... I'm not going to hurt you."

Jazz got up and disappeared around the corner into the kitchen for a few seconds, and came back with the bottle of cooking oil that Chris had used to grease the wok earlier.

"S'quicker," he said to explain why he hadn't gone to the bedroom for the lube, as Chris grabbed onto him. Jazz twisted the top off of the bottle with one flick of his wrist and poured a puddle out into his palm. Reached out with his slippery hand and encircled Chris' cock, stroking and spreading the oil from tip to base.

"Oh, God," Chris said, quivering.

"Nope, just me," said Jazz, waggling his eyebrows. "How do you want me?"

But Chris was at the point where he was beyond descriptive speech; he shook his head helplessly as his hands stroked at Jazz's waist.

Jazz turned away from him and leaned over the dining room table, his ass waving invitingly in the air. "What if I were to do this?" he asked. "Would that give you any ideas?"

Chris stepped forward, still holding onto Jazz's hips, and in one long, slow, slick motion slid into him. The feeling of being inside him without the latex between them was exquisite, so amazing that he couldn't believe that he had forgotten how good it felt. It had been more than four years—a long time—but still, you wouldn't think you would forget something so good. It was the difference between skinny-dipping and swimming with all your clothes on.

Jazz was panting beneath him, very still. Chris could feel Jazz tighten around him for an instant, relax, then tighten again. He didn't know if Jazz was doing it deliberately, but it was ... if Jazz didn't stop, Chris was going to come right now, before they even had a chance to enjoy this.

Jazz spoke, his voice strangled. "Just ... don't move for a minute, okay? This is so ... God, this is ... I don't want to..."

"I know," Chris said, and suddenly, as if a switch had been thrown in his brain, he found his voice. He wasn't sure if it was because, for once, Jazz was the one sounding desperate, but he didn't think it mattered. "This is amazing. You're amazing, Jazz. You feel so incredible." Chris moved, just a tiny bit, to see what would happen, and wonder of wonders the top of his head didn't fly off.

Jazz trembled and groaned, and Chris could feel his lover's legs shaking. He wrapped an arm around Jazz's waist supportively and pulled out a bit, then thrust gently back in. It was so wet—the slickness of the vegetable oil was startling. Lube never seemed to stay wet for very long; the oil spread itself thinner and thinner without losing any of its slipperiness. Why did they even bother to buy lube, when canola was so much better?

Thinking about all of this was just about distracting enough. Chris had started moving again almost without realizing it, and it felt so good that he didn't ever want it to end. "Oh, God, Jazz, I had no idea it was going to be like this ... you feel so good..."

Jazz made a little choked sound, and his hands gripped the edge of the table even harder, his fingers white. "Chris..." he gasped.

Chris reached around and grasped Jazz's straining cock in his fist, but before he could do anything more, Jazz jerked in his arms and came so hard that his legs would have gone out from under him if Chris hadn't been supporting some of his

weight already. And the feeling of Jazz tightening around him again, with the oil sliding everywhere and the heat and the unbearable dreamlike quality of it all, sent Chris shooting over the edge to join him.

Somehow, Chris managed to retain enough of his senses to prevent the two of them from falling to the floor. When he finally came back to himself, Jazz was a near-limp bundle in his arms and they were both soaked with sweat and shaking like leaves.

Chris manhandled Jazz a step or two over to the closest chair and shoved him into it. "Sit down," he said roughly. "Are you okay?"

Jazz nodded slowly. "Holy shit."

"That pretty much sums it up." Chris sat down in the chair next to him and ran a trembling hand through his hair, then grimaced as he realized he was just spreading the oil further around.

"I didn't ... that was..." Jazz stopped.

"You sound like me."

Jazz looked up at him. "That's not a bad thing, you know."

Chris shrugged.

"No, seriously. It's okay—I mean, however you are, that's good." Jazz reached out for Chris' hand. "And still ... wow. That was crazy."

"We'll have to try it again. Soon." Chris smiled.

"Now." Jazz stood up and gestured toward the bedroom with his head. "But I think we'd better try it lying down this time, because otherwise one of is gonna get hurt." He picked the bottle of oil up off the table.

"Think we should buy stock in canola?" he asked thoughtfully.

* * * *

Chris doesn't drink anymore. He used to, casually, and with Jazz—a beer here, some wine there. But he's never been the kind of person who hangs out in bars with friends, getting drunk as a way to pass the evening. He doesn't see the point, really, and now if he drinks he remembers Jazz and the anniversary and it all turns into some big miserable experience, a new one that's familiar in a way he doesn't like. The alcohol lets him slip away from himself, but when he does that, he loses Jazz at the same time.

Chris is going to be the same person when Jazz wakes up as he was when Jazz had the accident. He's not going to have Jazz wake up to find some stranger, someone who drinks and doesn't take care of himself. Jazz isn't going to lose him that way.

When Jazz wakes up, Chris is going to be there. He's going to be the same, and everything's going to go back to normal.

Chris was warm and comfortable, and then an insistent shrilling pulled him up out of the deep sleep he was in. He'd been sleeping so soundly that for a few seconds he couldn't figure out where he was or what was happening. His brain was slow to respond, and even after he'd realized that he needed to answer the phone, it took half a minute before he could get his arms to work.

"Hello?"

"Yeah, I'm looking for Chris Turner."

"Yeah. That's me." Chris craned his neck so that he could see the clock on his bedside table. Christ, it was after two in the morning. "Who is this?"

"Name's Troy—I'm down at the Brass Cat in Arlington. We got a friend of yours here, he's had too much to drink and he won't let us call a cab. Finally managed to get your name and number out of him. You gonna come down here and take him home?"

The fog in Chris' head was lifting slowly. "Jazz?" he asked. "What's he doing there?"

Troy snorted. "Getting really fucking drunk, until about fifteen minutes ago when I cut him off. He was pretty pissed off about it, too, but I can't keep pouring for him when he's in this kind of shape. Took his keys away an hour ago."

"Thanks," Chris said. "I appreciate it. Tell me where you are and I'll be there as soon as I can."

Even in the middle of the night with no traffic, it was at least a twenty minute drive, so Chris had plenty of time to wonder what the hell was going on. Jazz wasn't much of a drinker from what he'd seen so far, so the thought of Jazz so plastered that he couldn't get home was disturbing. Had something happened?

They'd spent the night together two nights ago. Last night, Chris had gone to the gym, and when he'd called Jazz after getting home, Jazz had said he had something to take care of tonight. He hadn't mentioned that the something included excessive drinking.

Chris pulled up outside the bar—at least there were plenty of parking spaces on the street at this time of the morning.

He went in and looked around, but it wasn't hard to spot Jazz because the place was nearly empty.

Jazz was sitting on a stool at the bar, leaning over it with his head on his arm. His hair was pulled back in a ponytail holder and his shoulders were slumped like he was completely exhausted.

Chris went over and sat down on the stool next to him. He touched Jazz's arm lightly, and then squeezed it more firmly when the first touch failed to get his lover's attention. "Jazz?"

Jazz didn't move or lift his head, but he said, "Chris."

"Yeah, who else?" Chris rubbed Jazz's arm soothingly. "You okay?"

Jazz lifted his head far enough to give the bartender a dirty look. "I would be, if what's-his-face hadn't cut me off."

"Come on, let me drive you home."

"He took my keys, Chris."

"You aren't seriously suggesting that it would be a good idea for you to drive, are you?"

"No, that's not the point. I wasn't gonna drive ... but they're *my* keys."

"I'll get them back for you, okay?"

Chris went over to the other side of the bar. "Troy, right? Thanks for calling me. Can I get his keys for him?"

Troy reached back and snagged the keychain from a bowl on the back counter. "Here."

"Thanks."

Chris went back over to Jazz and pulled him to his feet. "Come on."

Jazz weaved unsteadily and Chris had to put an arm around him to get him out the door and into the passenger seat of the car. By the time Chris got in, Jazz was leaning forward with one hand covering his face.

"Are you going to be sick?" Chris asked.

Jazz shook his head. "I don't think so." His voice sounded hoarse, raw.

"How much did you have to drink?"

"I don't know. A lot." Jazz reconsidered. "Not enough."

"I'll take you home, and we can come back for your car in the morning, if you're up to it."

"Okay." Jazz sighed.

Chris started up the car and pulled out onto the street. "So what's going on?"

Jazz leaned his head against the car window and closed his eyes.

He didn't speak again for the rest of the ride to his house, and Chris would have wondered if he had fallen asleep if it hadn't been for the convulsive swallowing every minute or so. He didn't know if Jazz was trying not to be sick, or if he was trying not to cry, or what.

It was only about ten minutes before Chris was pulling in to Jazz's driveway. He shut off the car, went around to the passenger side, and opened Jazz's door. "Come on," he said.

Jazz crawled almost meekly out of the car and swayed on his feet. Chris got a hand under his arm and walked him into the house, which Jazz never locked. He sat Jazz down in the kitchen.

"I just wanna go to bed," Jazz protested, softly.

"You need to drink some water before you do, or you're going to be sick as a dog in the morning," Chris said, getting a glass and filling it from the gallon of spring water Jazz kept in the fridge. He set it down on the table next to Jazz's hand and sat down next to him. "You want to tell me what happened?"

"Nothing happened," Jazz said.

"Right. Drink that." Chris nudged the glass closer to Jazz, who picked it up and took a tentative sip. "Jazz? Tell me."

Jazz sighed. "Today's ... it's the seventeenth anniversary of my dad's death."

"Oh." Chris looked down at his hands awkwardly. "That's ... I'm sorry."

"Yeah, me, too."

Chris pointed at the glass of water again. "What ... what happened to him?"

"Aneurysm." Jazz glanced up at Chris as if looking for something, and then continued. "In his brain. He was standing there one minute, and the next he just ... keeled over. He hit the floor like a rock. They said it was ... he didn't feel any pain. It was instantaneous." Jazz sounded as if he were quoting someone, repeating something he'd repeated many times before.

"That's ... awful. You were nine?"

"Yeah."

Chris tried to get Jazz to look at him again. "So is this a regular occurrence? The drinking on the anniversary, I mean?"

"Now."

"What do you mean, now?"

Jazz pushed the glass of water away and laid his head down on one arm, facing Chris but with his eyes closed.

"When I was ten, I spent the day in my room and refused to come out. And again when I was eleven. After that my mom made me go to therapy—you know, failing to process the death..."

Chris reached out a hand and smoothed Jazz's hair.

"Okay..."

"So for the next couple of years I pretended everything was fine. But it was too hard. When I was fifteen, I got drunk with some friends who knew how to get beer and I went home and puked the whole next day. And again when I was sixteen, and again when I was seventeen. My mom sat me down and said that she understood it was hard on me, but that she wanted me to find some other way to deal with my feelings until I was of age. After that, it was my decision if I wanted to get falling-down drunk, and she wouldn't complain. And she was ... there were tears in her eyes when she said it. I had to—I promised, and I kept it. But after I turned twenty-one, this is just ... it's how I get through the day, you know?"

"You could have told me," Chris said gently.

"I know. I wanted to ... part of me wanted to." Jazz rolled his head on his arm. "It's stupid. What was I supposed to say, 'Hey, Chris, want to come watch me drink myself into a stupor?'"

"Maybe. I would have said yes. I mean, not that I would have wanted to watch, but I'd rather have been there than have you be alone."

"I know it's stupid," Jazz said. "I just ... I don't know what else to do. I have to do something."

"Well, next year..." Chris trailed off awkwardly. "I mean, if we're still ... I'll come with you, okay?"

Jazz opened his eyes and looked at Chris. "It's not pretty," he said.

"That's okay."

"I don't talk about it. I just get drunk and stare at the walls."

"All right. I'll just sit there with you."

Jazz closed his eyes again and smiled. It was tight and pained, but for a brief instant he looked like the man Chris knew—or thought he knew. "I'm sorry," Jazz said, very quietly, after a minute or so had passed.

"It's okay," Chris said, equally quietly. "Drink some water, will you?"

"Yeah." Jazz sat up and took a few sips. He looked up and met Chris' eyes. "I mean it—I'm sorry."

"It's okay," Chris repeated. "As long as you're all right ... that's what matters."

"I'm not," said Jazz. "I will be in the morning—it's only this one day, honest—but tonight—shit, Chris, I'm so far from all right."

Chris slid forward in his chair and put a hand on the back of Jazz's neck. "Come here," he said, and pulled Jazz toward him into a crooked hug.

"What the hell is wrong with me?" Jazz asked miserably. "I mean, people lose parents all the time. Kids lose parents. They don't end up feeling like this, do they?"

"It doesn't matter," Chris said, rubbing the back of Jazz's neck underneath his hair. "It doesn't matter how other people deal with stuff—everyone's different. You just have to do the best you can."

"But it's pitiful," Jazz protested. "After all this time."

"If you manage to get through every other day of the year but this one without falling apart, I'd say you're doing pretty well."

"It doesn't feel that way," Jazz said, his breath warm against Chris' neck. "It feels like I'm losing ... everything."

Chris tightened his arms around Jazz. "I'm still here," he said quietly. "Whatever you need ... just tell me, and I'll do it, if I can."

"Just ... take me to bed?" asked Jazz. "Come to bed with me?"

"I can do that," Chris said, and led him upstairs.

"I don't want to talk about this in the morning," Jazz said as Chris helped him undress. "Okay? It's just—this is one night out of time. In the morning it doesn't exist anymore. Okay?"

"Okay," Chris said soothingly. "Whatever you want."

They fell asleep with Chris lying on his back, Jazz cradled on his chest. The sound of Jazz's steady, deep breathing lulled Chris off into slumber.

Some time later, Chris didn't know when exactly, he was woken by the soft brush of Jazz's fingers against his already throbbing erection. He could tell from the way his balls ached that he'd been hard for some time, and he wondered for how long Jazz had been touching him. All thought fled as the tip of

Jazz's finger ghosted over the head of his cock, pressing lightly into the well-moistened slit. Chris gasped and thrust his hips upward helplessly.

The room was completely dark. It was like being made love to by a phantom, a spirit who was there in thought only. Jazz had moved away from him, so that his hand, his long slender fingers, were the only parts of him touching Chris. Chris could hear Jazz's breathing, harsh and labored, off to his side.

Chris reached out and found Jazz's shoulder and followed it down until he discovered that the hand that wasn't touching him was wrapped around Jazz's own erection, pulling on it frantically.

Jazz batted his hand away, and when he spoke his voice held a good deal of desperation. "Let me do it. I need to..."

Chris' cock was straining against the gentle touch of Jazz's hand. The rhythmic sound of Jazz pumping his own erection speeded up until Jazz groaned in frustration and need.

"I can't..."

"Let me," said Chris, and shifted down to take Jazz into his mouth.

Jazz groaned again, more softly this time, his hips shifting so that Chris could take him in more deeply. "Oh, yeah, that's what I need..."

Chris applied himself with a will, sucking Jazz in as far as he could, using hands and tongue and lips to take care of his lover. He kneaded Jazz's balls between his fingers, flicked Jazz's piercing with one finger until Jazz moaned, then pumped Jazz with the other hand while he licked avidly at the

head of Jazz's cock. Chris' own cock was pressed between Jazz's lower leg and the sheets, hips thrusting as he sucked on Jazz.

Jazz whimpered and began to pump into Chris' hand and mouth, his speed increasing as he neared the edge. "Oh, God, Chris, yes, just like that. Oh, yeah..."

Chris sucked harder, encouraging Jazz wordlessly. Suddenly, Jazz stiffened and froze as he came with a cry, his hands flying to hold Chris' head steady as he spilled his pleasure into Chris' throat in long spurts. Chris groaned and came, too, his cock sliding against the sheet as he rode the wave to its completion.

When it was over Jazz was sobbing, and after a moment Chris moved back up to take Jazz into his arms, letting Jazz cry on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry," Jazz said, repeating it over and over between hitching breaths and small noises. "I'm sorry."

"Shhh," said Chris. "It's okay, it's okay. Shh. Jazz, it's okay." He kept telling Jazz that everything was fine, in the same sort of voice that Jazz had used to tell him that his father hadn't felt any pain when he died. The sort of voice that was intended to deny and comfort and cover up.

Jazz fell asleep in Chris' arms again.

A couple of hours later Chris had to get up to go to work. Jazz got up with him and drank the coffee that Chris made and stared at the table but made reasonable attempts at normal conversation.

They didn't talk about it.

Chapter 6

"Hey, babe," he says softly. He smooths the dark hair away from Jazz's forehead, which isn't really necessary because his hair hasn't grown back a lot, yet. It's more a habit than anything else. Chris kisses Jazz and sits down, taking Jazz's hand between his own.

"The house is fine," he starts. "Kimberly's cat keeps digging in the back garden, and it's driving your mom crazy. She went out and bought some stuff to sprinkle around the edges of the plot, but she doesn't think it's working.

"Sunny and Greg send their love—Sunny said to tell you she'll be in to visit on Sunday. I told her not to bring flowers again, because you'd say it's not necessary, but she won't listen to me. She says she's bringing them to make herself feel better, and if you don't like it you can wake up and tell her yourself.

"Work's fine. I think Barry has gotten used to my schedule finally, and he doesn't say anything about my hours. I'm still doing at least six hours more work every week than anyone else, so he can't really complain.

"And..." Chris' voice becomes thick with emotion, "And the roses out back are starting to fade, Jazz, and you're going to miss them if you don't wake up soon. And I was thinking about painting the living room, blue, like we talked about, but I've got a bunch of paint samples and I don't know which one to go with. Would you like the grayer one better than the one that's more sky-colored? I don't want to pick the wrong one and have you end up hating it.

"You've been asleep for a long time, Jazz. Three months. I miss you. Can you please ... just wake up soon, okay? We need you at home."

The first time Jazz had introduced him to Sunny and Greg, Chris'd felt nervous and awkward. These were Jazz's friends, his real friends, who had known him for years and years. They knew him better than Chris did, and Chris couldn't help but feel that this was some sort of test, one that would prove to Jazz whether or not he was someone worth being with.

All of his worry had been for nothing, because it had become clear almost immediately that not only did Sunny and Greg like Chris, but he liked them as well. Sunny reminded him of a younger version of Jazz's mom Judy—not yet as mellow and relaxed, but similarly perceptive and open and friendly. Greg was a farmer—organic produce, nothing that had been touched by pesticides. He had a thick brown beard and an easy smile.

Now, nine weeks since their first meeting, Chris felt comfortable in their house and with the routine that had been established. For years Jazz had been spending Saturday nights at their house, having dinner and watching movies and just hanging out, and now Chris had become a part of that routine.

So when Chris arrived at their house that night, he didn't knock, but instead shoved the screen door open with his knee, a six-pack of beer under one arm and a plastic bag from the video store in the other hand. "Hey!" he called as he went down the hallway into the kitchen.

Sunny's voice greeted him before he even reached the end of the hallway. "Chris? Is that you?"

"No, it's a complete stranger who's bringing you beer and movies," he said, kissing her cheek on his way past. He put the beer in the fridge and the videos on the counter.

"Oh, maybe we should have complete strangers over more often." Her hands were busy chopping cucumbers for salad. A pot of tomato-smelling soup simmered in a crock pot on the counter.

"Smells good," Chris said. "Can I help?" He crouched down to pat the marmalade cat that twisted around his ankles meowing desperately.

"I'm almost done," she said, sliding the vegetables off the cutting board and into a large wooden bowl. "Stir the soup?"

"Sure." Chris lifted the lid off the crock pot and set it on the counter. He was just stirring down into the bottom of the crock when arms slid around his waist from behind and a warm solid chest pressed up against his back.

"Hi," Jazz said.

"Hi." Chris put the spoon down, the lid back on the crock pot, and turned around inside of Jazz's grasp to face him.

"How was work?"

Jazz made a face. "I got stung by a wasp. Or maybe it was a hornet." He pulled back and yanked his sleeve up, twisting his arm so that he could show Chris the angry red welt.

"You're not allergic, are you?" Chris asked worriedly. "You only got stung the once?"

Jazz leaned in and kissed the tip of his nose. "No, not allergic. It hurt, though. For a few seconds I didn't know what

the hell was happening—I was jumping all over the place going 'Ouch! Ouch!'"

"Do you want some ice?" Sunny asked.

"No, it's fine. It happened hours ago." Jazz paused as the screen door in the hallway slammed and heavy footsteps came toward the kitchen.

"Hey, darling," Greg said, as he came over to kiss his wife. "Dinner soon?"

"As soon as you're ready," she said pointedly, looking at his filthy hands.

"Okay, okay, I can take a hint." Greg went to the sink and squirted some hand soap into his palm. He turned the water on and started to wash his hands. "How are you guys doing?"

"Good," Jazz said. "Other than getting stung at work today."

"Bee? Hornet?"

"I think it was a wasp, but I couldn't say for sure."

Greg turned back toward them, drying his hands on a towel. "Should put baking soda on it, if it happens again. Draws the poison right out."

"I'll remember that, the next time I get stung while mowing a lawn," Jazz said wryly. "Baking soda in my hip pocket."

They all made several trips to the big dining room table, carrying bowls and plates and beer and salad. Greg took the crock out of the crock pot and brought the whole thing into the dining room along with a ladle. They sat down to eat.

"This soup is great," Jazz raved. "What's in it?"

Sunny smiled. "Tomatoes—ones that I canned last fall, actually. The last two jars. Timed that pretty well, didn't we? And a bunch of fresh stuff from the gardens—zucchini, onions, corn, carrots ... umm, peas. At least one other thing I'm forgetting."

Chris had been delighted to discover that Sunny and Greg were vegetarians—not that he was one himself, but he always enjoyed meeting people who were into healthy living. The meals at their house were always delicious and different, and even Jazz loved Sunny's cooking, although he also liked hamburgers and steak.

"It is great," Chris said. "Next week, why don't you let me come over early and cook dinner for you guys? Sunny shouldn't have to do it every week just because she's naturally talented."

Sunny looked pleased at both the compliment and the offer. "That would be nice," she said. "I do love to cook, but I'd like to see what you can do in the kitchen."

Chris shot his eyes over to Jazz, who was already opening his mouth to, no doubt, make some kind of comment about Chris' sexual talents in the kitchen. Jazz grinned sheepishly and gestured with his slice of bread.

"Chris is a great cook," he said. "He's even managed to show me a thing or two."

"I'm not sure microwave popcorn counts as cooking," Chris protested.

"It does for me," said Jazz. "If I can produce something edible without setting the kitchen on fire, I'm satisfied."

"I don't think you're trying," Greg said. "It's not that hard to cook. You can learn if you really put your mind to it."

"Not cooking," Jazz said cheerfully. He seemed completely comfortable with his failure in the kitchen, as if it was on par with not being able to fly an airplane. "Other stuff, maybe."

Chris felt the need to stick up for Jazz. "It doesn't matter if he can't cook. You should see some of the other stuff he can do—he's great with his hands..."

Jazz snickered.

"Stop," Chris said, holding up a hand in Jazz's direction. "That's not what I meant. He can build stuff—have you seen the coffee table he made? And he can rollerblade and rock-climb and play any sport half an hour after you show him the rules. And he can repair plumbing and electrical shortages, and..." Chris trailed off when he looked at Jazz and realized that Jazz was staring at him with a very strange expression on his face.

Everyone was quiet for a minute, while Jazz continued to look at Chris thoughtfully, his eyes shining with something Chris wasn't able to define.

"More bread?" Sunny asked the room, trying to deflect whatever was going on.

"Sure," said Jazz, and reached out his hand toward the basket without taking his eyes off of Chris. "Thanks." But he didn't stop looking at Chris.

"What?" Chris asked him finally.

Jazz gave himself a little shake. "Oh, sorry. I was just ... thinking."

"About what?"

"I'll ... let's talk about it later, okay?"

Chris didn't get the impression that it was about anything bad, not from the expression Jazz had had on his face. He decided to let the subject drop. "Okay."

As they finished up dinner Chris continued to feel like he was the center of attention—Jazz kept looking at him, and the rest of them were watching Jazz watch him. It was strange and more than a little disconcerting, but mostly in the way that left him wondering what was going on. He wasn't worried, but intensely curious.

Chris helped Sunny bring the dishes and leftovers back to the kitchen and then started rinsing plates and loading the dishwasher while Sunny had Greg look at some problem she'd been having with her car. Chris was leaning over the dishwasher when, for the second time that night, Jazz's arms wrapped around his waist.

"Hey," Jazz said, very softly.

Chris straightened up and pressed his arms against Jazz's, hugging him back as best he could considering the position he was in. "Hey. So ... what was all that before?"

"Back at dinner, you mean?"

"Yes, that's what I was thinking of."

Jazz's arms gripped him more tightly. "I was ... you were talking about me, you know?"

"What?"

"You were ... you were saying all kinds of nice things about me. And you looked like ... like you really thought all that stuff was true."

"Well, it is true," Chris said, thinking back. "Why would I say it if I didn't think it was true?" He tried to turn around but Jazz stopped him.

"Wait a second, okay? I just want to say one more thing, and then you can ... I'm only gonna be able to say this here. I..."

"It's okay," Chris said encouragingly. "Whatever it is, you can say it."

"I wanted ... to say 'thank you' for that night when I got wasted. I never—no one ever took care of me like that before, like it was okay for me to lose it. Rich—my ex, he always tried to talk me out of getting drunk, so I ended up doing it away from him and not coming home until the next day. And he was always pissed off about it, and wanted to talk about it, and it drove me nuts. Okay, more nuts." Jazz made a sound of frustration.

"It's okay," Chris repeated.

"Yeah, I know. Because it's you. And that's what I was thinking..." Jazz turned Chris around now and looked at him earnestly.

"What were you thinking?" Chris asked, his hands on Jazz's waist.

"I was thinking..." Jazz leaned forward a couple of inches to press a gentle kiss onto Chris' mouth. "That I'm in love with you."

Chris froze. Although he'd fantasized—heck, even *dreamed*—about kissing Jazz, he hadn't expected it here and now. He'd almost gotten used to being with Jazz without

kissing. To feel Jazz's lips against his was ... almost unreal. He pulled back a bit. "You're ... what? Say that again."

"I'm in love with you," Jazz said patiently. "And, if you don't mind ... I'd really, really like to kiss you again. More than once, probably."

Chris nodded. "Yeah," he said hoarsely. "That'd be..." And then Jazz's mouth was on his again, and everything Chris had been wanting was within his reach.

Jazz's hands were on Chris' face, holding him gently, and Chris tangled his own fingers in Jazz's hair so as not to let him get away. The kissing started out careful, exploratory, deeply intense from the first instant. Jazz tasted like salad dressing and beer, and yet somehow exotic at the same time. Chris suspected that he himself tasted wholesome, like Grandma's cooking, and that thought made him groan and pour himself more fully into the kiss. If this wasn't going to work out, if Jazz left him next week or even tomorrow, Chris wanted the taste of Jazz to be permanently imprinted in his mouth so he'd never forget.

Chris pushed Jazz backward and sideways against the counter, moving their lower bodies together at the same time that their tongues entered the fray. Jazz's tongue was slick and hot, and when he moaned into Chris' open mouth, the temptation to strip him naked and have him right there on Sunny's counter was so strong that Chris had to pull away.

"Say it again," he asked.

"I'm in love with you," Jazz repeated without hesitation.

Chris took Jazz with his mouth again, kissing him bruisingly hard. He pulled back. "I ... me, too. I love you, too."

They continued to kiss frantically for long minutes, grinding against each other and moaning softly. Chris' hands still tangled in Jazz's hair, Jazz's hands grabbing onto Chris' ass to pull him ever closer.

Some time later Chris heard a noise from behind him.

First Greg's voice. "Oh, jeez, can't they wait 'til they get home?"

And then Sunny's. "Shhh! They're kissing."

Jazz moved his mouth away from Chris' long enough to beam over Chris' shoulder at the couple loitering in the doorway. "We're in love," he said happily, and then went back to kissing Chris.

* * * *

It seems like Jazz gets paler every day. He's as white as the hospital sheets at this point—whiter, maybe. He's never been pale like this; he always spent so much time outside, whether working or playing, that various shades of tan, depending on the season, were par for the course.

But now Jazz's tan is fading, and along with that it seems like he's getting skinnier every day, despite the feeding tube. Chris strokes his hand over Jazz's arms, and sometimes he even pulls up the johnny and rests his hand on Jazz's stomach, feeling it rise and fall as he breathes. Chris wishes he could roll the bed over to the window and let Jazz sleep in the sunshine.

Chris fell asleep on the drive to Vermont. He hadn't intended to, but he wasn't an early-morning person and, honestly, sometimes it was easier to let Jazz drive when he didn't have to pay attention to the way the car changed lanes or veered suddenly when Jazz decided to put a new CD in. So by the time Chris woke up, they were driving down a long hilly paved road toward the water.

"Are we almost there?" he asked, yawning.

Jazz flashed him a grin. "Yup. Trust me, this reservoir is the prettiest thing you've ever seen. We're gonna sun and swim and relax."

The car bumped its way into a dirt parking lot and Jazz clambered out immediately, followed more slowly by Chris. They gathered up their towels and Chris' beach bag and headed down to the water.

"Not here," said Jazz, as Chris started to pick his way across the sand. "If we go through the woods a ways, there are all these rocks ledges. It's cool."

Chris let Jazz lead the way through the woods on the rocky dirt trail covered with vines that threatened to trip him every third step. They walked for nearly ten minutes, and Chris was just getting ready to say something when some people passed them going the other direction.

People who were wearing sneakers and sandals.

And nothing else.

"Jazz!" Chris hissed. "Those people were naked."

"Yeah. This part of the beach is ... umm ... clothing-optional."

"I guess we know which option they chose. Why didn't you tell me?"

Jazz kept walking. "I thought you might get all freaked out and refuse to come. And I really wanted to bring you here, Chris." He turned and, to emphasize his point, gave Chris a soulful look with his blue eyes. "I wanted you to have a good time."

Chris folded. As usual. Jazz knew just how to play him. "Okay," he said reluctantly. "But optional means I don't have to take my clothes off in public, right?"

"Sure. But there's hardly anyone here, and the people who are here aren't looking for a free show."

Chris found that very difficult to believe, but as long as he could leave his clothes on, he'd deal. "All right."

They found their way to a ledge that was just out of direct sunlight, laid their towels out, and took off their shoes. Jazz didn't stop there—he immediately stripped naked and lay down on his towel. Chris groaned inwardly at the sight of Jazz's slender, muscled form. He could feel himself growing hard inside his swimsuit.

"Mmm," Jazz said, stretching luxuriously. "It's so good, Chris. Being naked in the fresh air—it's so natural."

Chris pulled off his T-shirt as a compromise, and took the bottle of sun-block out of his bag. He started rubbing it into his arms. "You should put some of this on," he said. "Otherwise you're gonna wind up all burnt to hell."

"Yeah, in a little while," said Jazz, distractedly. He was watching Chris rub the sun-block onto himself. Bouncing up onto his knees, Jazz took the tube away from Chris and

started to apply the sun-block to Chris' chest. "You feel so good," he whispered into Chris' neck, and Chris felt his half-hard cock twitch in reply.

Jazz rubbed sun-block onto Chris' back and legs, his own hardened length brushing against Chris as he worked.

Chris looked around. There were a few people nearby, but not many, and Jazz had been right—they did all seem to be minding their own business. Time for a little turnabout...

Jumping to his feet, Chris stripped his swimsuit off in one motion, and took three steps to the edge of the ledge before jumping into the water. Before he'd surfaced he felt, rather than heard, a splash next to him as Jazz joined him in the water.

Jazz pouted as he brushed his hair back away from his face with one hand, treading water. "No fair. You didn't tell me we were going in."

"We came to swim, didn't we?"

"No, we came to get naked. Swimming's just an extra benefit." And Jazz wrapped one arm around Chris and kissed him.

The water was cold and the kiss, still new and almost shocking, was fiery, the two combining to result in one very, very mushy Chris. Unable to keep both of them afloat and kiss at the same time, he paddled back toward the ledge until he could touch the sandy bottom, then planted his feet and returned Jazz's kiss properly.

Their cocks slid together under the water, and the two men kissed until they were both breathless. Jazz finally gasped, "Love you," and attached his mouth to Chris' left

nipple, sucking furiously as Chris shivered and rocked his hips.

"Jazz," he said softly. "Oh, God ... keep doing that."

Jazz obeyed, slipping one hand beneath the surface of the water to grasp Chris' straining cock. Chris bucked so hard he almost threw Jazz off, but his lover hung on like a leech, loving him with mouth and hands.

"Wanna suck you," Jazz said, and disappeared under the water.

Chris bit his lip hard to keep from crying out as Jazz's hot mouth wrapped around the head of his cock. The water was cold enough that it made Jazz seem that much warmer in comparison. Jazz got in one or two good sucks before bursting back up, gasping for air.

"You're gonna drown if you keep doing that," Chris said fondly.

"Then move." Jazz hauled him several feet closer to the ledge until Chris' cock was bobbing in the warm summer air, and then dropped to his knees in the water.

"Jazz!" said Chris. "People are going to see." Not that there was anyone within view.

"No, they aren't. Besides, what are they going to see? How hot you are? How much I love you?" Jazz licked the head of Chris' cock slowly, as if savoring the taste, and Chris groaned softly. He was so whipped.

Chris used one hand to gather back Jazz's long hair, holding it away from Jazz's face, as Jazz went to work on his cock. Jazz was an expert at deep-throating, and also smart enough to know that it lost its appeal if done every time—

Chris never knew when to expect that Jazz would take him in all the way, the head of his cock nudging into the smooth warm depths of Jazz's throat. As always, the technique had Chris on the edge within a minute or two, gasping and thrusting his hips forward and unable to stop himself even if he'd wanted to.

Jazz reached one hand up and pinched Chris' nipple, hard, and at the same time reached his other hand around to squeeze Chris' butt cheek. He swallowed, once, twice, and then Chris was coming so hard that he thought he might fall down, and one little tiny part of his brain was coherent enough to think that at least he was in the water and wouldn't get hurt. He tried very hard not to scream.

Gradually, Chris stopped moving, and as the shudders faded he dropped to his own knees beside Jazz and grabbed him, kissing him with brutal force.

"I can't believe I let you do that," he muttered, embarrassed.

"Sure you can," said Jazz. "Come on, let's go up and lie in the sun for a while."

They climbed up onto their ledge and stretched out again. The sun had shifted and was now beating down onto the rocks they were lying on. It felt undeniably decadent, and Chris thought he might fall asleep, if he weren't too busy watching Jazz bask in the sun like a cat. Jazz was lying on his stomach so that Chris could see the little tattoo that was drawn, like a kiss, into the perfectly soft spot between Jazz's right thigh and butt cheek.

Jazz sat up suddenly. "Want a back rub?" Without waiting for a reply, he hitched one leg up and over Chris, straddling him, thighs on the outside of Chris'. His talented hands began to knead and rub, and his cock pressed tantalizingly against the crack of Chris' ass. After a few minutes the slip became more pronounced, and Chris knew that Jazz was leaking onto him, shifting his weight deliberately to allow for more contact.

Jazz leaned over so that he could whisper into Chris' ear. "God, I want you so much. I wanna do you, Chris. Can I? Please?"

Chris closed his eyes and tried not to think about who might see them. He was lying on his stomach, facing the water—it would be easy enough to pretend that they were completely alone. "Okay," he said roughly.

Jazz slid back a little, teasing Chris' opening with one finger and then with the head of his cock. "I didn't bring any lube," he said, disappointedly.

"Sun-block," Chris suggested.

"It won't sting?"

"I don't know." Chris could tell by the way Jazz was pressing against him that his lover was desperate for release. "Try it."

In a flash Jazz had spread a generous amount of the lotion between Chris' butt cheeks, and then his slippery cock head was pressing against Chris, meeting resistance for a long moment before slowly, slowly sliding in past the tight ring of muscle.

Chris thrust his own cock down as Jazz slid home, but the towel wasn't sufficient cushion against the rock beneath him. He'd have to concentrate on thrusting backward instead.

Jazz thrust a bit deeper, and then bumped against Chris, thrusting deeper still. He wasn't pulling out, but rather bumping the tiniest increment deeper with each motion. Chris writhed backward against him, wanting more movement and knowing it was coming but not knowing when.

Then the world was a big sparkling shudder as Jazz pulled back and thrust fluidly forward again, pumping into Chris so quickly that there was no time to adjust position or think or even breathe—Chris was responding, but it was only his body that knew enough to do so. There was slick movement and delicious friction and Jazz speeded up the tiniest bit and then froze, and for a moment Chris thought he was going to come.

But after a long pause, Jazz began to move again. And this time it was slow and slippery and delicate, long thrust in, long slow pull out, and Chris' body, which had been doing so well without him only seconds before, didn't know how to respond. He wanted more—faster, harder—and struggle as he might, he couldn't get it.

Chris managed to pant, "Jazz. Please..."

"It's okay, baby," Jazz murmured softly. "It's good this way. Just relax, and let it be good."

Despite the way that Chris was holding his body slightly upright to protect himself from the rock surface beneath him, he almost thought he could do this forever. Or possibly for not another second, depending. He was hard again, and aching, and he wanted Jazz's soft lips around him. He wanted

Jazz's hand pumping him. He wanted something concrete and yet somehow indefinable.

For almost ten minutes they danced thusly, Jazz sliding his cock slowly in and out of Chris, Chris trying to stay still and take it. Chris could feel his peak building as the teasing drew out, and finally he whimpered despite himself.

"Please," he said again.

And this time his request was granted, and Jazz started pounding into him again, harder and faster, and Chris couldn't stand it. He let most of his weight fall back onto his crotch, rubbing his cock frantically against the towel, desperate for the orgasm that he could feel mirrored in Jazz's thighs as they tightened, and then Jazz was pouring into him. Warm come gushed deep into his body at the same time that his own shot out onto the towel underneath him.

Gasping, Chris shifted and slid Jazz to the side so that they were lying next to each other, both of them panting as they recovered from their exertion.

It wasn't until they got up later that afternoon to get dressed and head home that they realized that Jazz had sunburned his ass.

Chapter 7

Curry reminds Chris of Jazz, so he doesn't get Indian takeout anymore. He doesn't cook it anymore, either, despite Richard's complaints. Richard doesn't understand why Chris won't, and Chris doesn't have the energy to explain it to him. He thinks he'd probably cry, if he tried, and there's been enough of that in the past few months for a lifetime.

How could he possibly explain to Richard that Jazz used to make fun of the curry-stained couch in his old apartment, when that was so long ago, long before Richard ever came back? A time when it was just Chris and Jazz. How could he explain that the smell reminds him of Jazz's breath, that the taste reminds him of Jazz's mouth? Despite everything, it's too intimate to share.

Chris thinks that Richard wouldn't understand, so even though it's probably not fair, he doesn't tell him. He leaves him to wonder, and they both cry their tears in private where they can't hurt each other.

Chris was working diligently at his desk, typing in some code for a new website, when he heard a familiar voice that just didn't belong in his office. He looked up in amazement to see Jazz leaning against the door frame.

"Hi," Jazz said. "I was wondering if the birthday boy wanted to go out for lunch."

Chris couldn't help but smile. Trust Jazz to throw a monkey wrench into a perfectly good plan. "I thought we were going out for dinner."

"That, too," Jazz agreed. "But it's your birthday. You should get taken out at least twice. Anyway ... I've never been in here. Not into your actual office, I mean."

"Well, here it is," Chris said, sweeping his arm. "Desk, chair, computer, trash can. Pretty much says it all."

"Calendar, paperweight, files, printer," said Jazz. "Nice. It's nice to see where you sit all day."

"Yeah, this is the reason for my many hours at the gym."

"No, your obsession is the reason for your many hours at the gym." Jazz tilted his head sideways and waggled his eyebrows. "Think you can set the obsession aside long enough to have a high-calorie lunch?"

"Not if you want me to have a high-calorie dinner. We could have a healthy, low-calorie lunch, though."

Jazz sighed theatrically. "Okay, I suppose that's better than nothing." He glanced down at his jeans and T-shirt, both of which were slightly grimy. "I don't think I could get in anywhere nice, anyway. Deli up the street? You could have salad, if you're really worried about the health thing."

"Sure." Chris saved the file he was working on and grabbed his coat.

They went down on the elevator and out onto the street.

"Aren't you cold?" Chris asked.

Jazz snorted. "With this metabolism? Although I guess you wouldn't know it to look at me—not enough body fat to keep me warm, huh? But no, I'm almost never cold."

Chris reached out and smoothed a stray lock of Jazz's hair back behind his ear, and Jazz grabbed his hand and held it,

pulling Chris to a stop. He leaned in and kissed him sweetly. "Happy Birthday," he said.

They continued walking, and Chris could feel the blush on his cheeks gradually diffusing. This was still all new and stomach-tingling—not just the kissing, but the fact that Jazz was willing to show him affection in public. It had been such a long time since he'd been with someone like this, and it had been different with Drake—the stomach-tingling had always been accompanied by a faint feeling of nausea, an underlying nervousness that had kept him twitchy. This was ... a happy stomach-tingling.

Chris followed Jazz up the street, vaguely aware that he would follow Jazz anywhere.

* * * *

Chris opened the door to his apartment and was immediately nearly overcome with the smell of food. He could hear Jazz humming in the kitchen.

Chris went in and threw his arms around Jazz. "Please tell me that's food that you *didn't* cook," he said pitifully. "I'm starving."

"And late," said Jazz. "Wouldn't they even let you out on time on your birthday?"

Chris waved his hand. "I screwed up something just before quitting time, and I wanted to finish it before I left. I don't like to leave stuff unfinished, you know?"

"I know." Jazz moved away to take some tins out of the oven. "And of course I didn't cook. What the hell kind of

present would that be for your birthday? It's Indian, from Swagat's."

Chris knew he'd recognized that smell. Curry, rich with coriander, turmeric and ginger. Coconut milk. His stomach rumbled loudly.

"I tried to tell you you should have had more than a salad for lunch," Jazz pointed out, laughing.

"I thought we were going out tonight."

"We can if you want to," Jazz said. "We'll just stick this in the fridge for tomorrow. But you've been working so many hours, and you were saying last night you were tired. You practically fell asleep at lunch, so I thought..."

"No, this is great. It's a great idea. I just want to be with you ... I don't care if we eat here. And I love curry and I'm starving." Chris snagged a piece of naan from its foil pouch and took a huge bite.

"Okay, go sit down and I'll feed you."

Chris devoured curry and biryani and more bread until he was full, then leaned back in his chair and slowly sipped at the very good wine Jazz had poured into his glass. "Mmm..." he said. "That was ... perfect." For once, he might have out-eaten Jazz.

Jazz smiled and picked up the last piece of bread. "Want to split it?"

"No, I'm good. You have it."

"I got a cake," Jazz said slowly. "But after this meal, I don't suppose you want any. We can save it for tomorrow..."

Chris groaned in contentment. "Yeah, the thought of more food right now ... not going to happen."

Jazz got up from the table and went into the living room, and then came back with a small wrapped package. "Well, if there's no cake, then ... happy birthday, Chris."

Chris took the gift carefully, aware of a look of pleasant surprise on his face. Not that it should be a surprise, but still ... he hadn't thought about it. Hadn't anticipated it. "Thanks." He looked at the wrapping paper, blue with silver glints, and the ribbon, also silver.

"You gonna open it?" Jazz asked.

"Yes, I ... yes." Chris tore the paper off and was confronted by a hinged box that looked like it had come from a jewelry store. He opened the box and there, lying on dark blue velvet, was a thick, chunky gold watch. It was gorgeous—it looked like the kind of watch a much classier person would own, and like the kind of watch Chris would never have considered buying in a million years for precisely that reason. "Wow," he said softly.

"Do you like it? If you don't, we can take it back and exchange it for something..."

"No," Chris said quickly. "No, I love it. It's ... it's amazing. It's perfect." Chris stood up, dragged Jazz to his feet, and kissed him. Long and slow, trying to let all of the love and wonder he was feeling slip through into Jazz.

"Let's go to bed for a little while," Jazz said when they finally pulled apart. "I'll clean this up later."

Chris let himself be led into the bedroom, then hesitated. "I should brush my teeth—my breath must be..."

"Just like mine," said Jazz, kissing him into submission. "I want to taste you, even with the curry and onions. Much better than mint."

Chris had to admit to himself that the taste of spice in Jazz's mouth was more than pleasant—it enhanced his natural flavor, creating layers upon layers where each movement of his tongue brought a nuance that he hadn't anticipated. He'd waited so long to be able to kiss Jazz—it had felt like years—and now he thought he'd never get tired of it.

Jazz was slowly undressing him, pushing him down onto the bed, onto clean sheets that he must have put onto the bed earlier. Chris tried to sit up, to pull Jazz down with him, but Jazz put a hand on his chest and gently held him flat.

"No," Jazz said, grinning. "You just lie there, and let me."

Chris lay on his back, one hand behind his head and the other resting on his belly, as he watched Jazz undress himself. Jazz pulled his T-shirt up and over his head, exposing the thin but well-muscled torso that Chris found so unbearably sexy. Jazz's biceps flexed enticingly as he took the leather hair band off and shook his head, letting his long dark hair free to spill over his shoulder.

Jazz unbuttoned his jeans, keeping his eyes on Chris' face the whole time, not embarrassed at all by the show he was putting on. In fact, from the look in his eyes, Chris would have said that he was getting off on it. Chris certainly was—his balls were tight beneath his cock, his erection leaking steadily onto his belly.

Jazz peeled his jeans off and ran a hand down his own chest, pausing to tweak a nipple slightly. Chris groaned softly,

and then again as Jazz's hand continued down to fondle his cock, Jazz's eyes never leaving Chris for an instant.

Chris slid his own hand down but was stopped when Jazz pounced on him.

"Oh, no," Jazz said. "Let me." He pushed Chris' hand behind his head to join the other one and knelt between Chris' legs. He slowly traced upward from Chris' calves, up his thighs, stopping just below where his legs joined. Then he moved his hands up to Chris' collarbone, stroking down the length of his torso to end at his navel. His touch was exquisitely light, almost tickling, and it made Chris strain toward him, wanting more.

"Jazz," he said pleadingly.

"Shh. Let me."

Chris closed his eyes and focused on the feeling of Jazz's fingers on his skin, sliding slowly across, awakening every inch of him. Every once in a while Jazz's hair would brush over him like a whisper, speaking to him in a strange secret language that he couldn't quite translate.

When the warmth of Jazz's mouth suddenly encircled him, he gasped and reached for Jazz, only to have his arms pushed back against the mattress again. Jazz sucked on him gently, delicately, like he was some kind of gourmet sweet. It was enough to tantalize but not enough to satisfy.

Jazz pulled away so that he could speak. "Keep your eyes closed," he instructed. His lips closed over Chris' cock again, his tongue tracing the head, slipping under the small edge of the foreskin, teasing.

He moved away again and Chris made a small noise of frustration. He didn't open his eyes, but he felt the bed shift as Jazz moved around, heard the sound of the bedside drawer opening and the snap of a bottle top, smelled the scent of lube. Then Jazz's mouth was on his, warm, and full of the taste of curry and wine, rich and fruity over the taste of Jazz himself.

A hand slick with lube gripped Chris' erection, stroking wetly up and down. Chris groaned into Jazz's open mouth, and Jazz swallowed the sound as if he were made to. Jazz's weight shifted again, the mattress dipping as his knees settled on either side of Chris' chest, and then he slid down onto Chris' cock until his ass was cradled against Chris' pelvis.

Jazz rocked his hips and leaned forward. "You can open your eyes now," he said.

When Chris did he saw nothing but Jazz, hair loose, movements wanton as Jazz shifted and rocked against him, driving him wonderfully crazy. Jazz was tight and hot and the way that he kept sliding his hips in tiny circles was mind-meltingly good.

"Oh, Chris, this is ... you're so hot," Jazz murmured. "You're so hard ... you feel so good..." He continued to rock and twist and shift and slide, one hand going to his own cock and stroking it, making sure that Chris was watching him pleasure himself at the same time he rode Chris.

Chris groaned at the sight and suddenly, without any warning, he was coming, everything in him rushing into Jazz.

Jazz stiffened around Chris' still-spasming cock and came into his own hand, some of his seed spilling down onto Chris'

stomach. "I love you..." Jazz said in a choked voice. "I love you, Chris."

Jazz fell forward onto Chris, who wrapped his arms around him and kissed him lingeringly. "I love you, too," Chris muttered into Jazz's hair.

"Happy Birthday," Jazz said.

They lay in comfortable silence for a while as their breathing returned to normal. Jazz rolled off of Chris and settled down against his side, warm and cushioned.

"Umm..." Chris paused.

"What?" said Jazz, lifting his head.

"Did you say there was cake?" asked Chris.

Chapter 8

Chris doesn't like to leave Jazz alone for too long. He visits twice on Saturdays and Sundays, and Judy comes on Saturdays as well. Sunny visits almost every Sunday—sometimes Greg comes with her, sometimes not.

Whenever Chris leaves, he makes sure the TV is on. He thinks that some kind of background noise is imperative—it doesn't seem fair to leave Jazz all alone in silence. The TV is better than nothing at all.

When Judy comes she often plays tapes that she used to play for Jazz when he was little. Chris likes the thought of Jazz sitting on her lap, listening to "Free to Be, You and Me". He can just picture Jazz as a kid, all full of energy and barely able to sit still. The stillness now makes him seem less and less like the Jazz they know.

Sunday. They'd taken a long hike, and then gone back to Chris' apartment to shower only to discover that there was no hot water. Again.

"I don't believe this," Chris complained.

"Really? After all the times this has happened, you don't believe it?"

"I just mean ... why the hell am I paying all this money for a place to live when the drains get clogged and there's no hot water and the window is cracked and they keep saying they're gonna fix everything and they don't?"

Jazz rubbed his back soothingly. "Drains get clogged everywhere," he pointed out reasonably. "Hot water heaters die. It's just a fact of life."

"But I hate this place. Maybe I *should* move," Chris said.

"You could always move in with me—plenty of room," Jazz sounded casual, almost too casual.

Chris felt every muscle in his body tighten up.

"Chris? What's wrong?"

* * * *

Drake turned to look at him casually, not unusual because everything Drake did was casual. "You should move in."

"You mean ... here?" Chris squeaked. Drake's apartment wasn't as nice as his, even though it was bigger, but it was Drake's apartment. The thought that it could be their apartment was ... "Okay."

Drake grinned in his heart-stopping way. "Cool. Like the idea of you being around whenever I want you."

Chris melted. There was just something about Drake, that smile, his way with words, that turned him into mush.

* * * *

Chris sighed in satisfaction as he surveyed Drake's apartment—their apartment, now—looking like something out of a magazine. Lovingly decorated in Chris' not-so-spare spare time. Colors Drake liked, fabrics Drake had chosen from options Chris had given him.

It still didn't feel like home, but Chris hoped that it would soon.

* * * *

Chris walked into the apartment and threw his jacket onto the chair near the door, knowing that Drake would be annoyed that he hadn't hung it up but not having the energy to care. He was pretty sure he was fighting something off—his throat was scratchy and he was exhausted. So exhausted that he'd decided not to go to the gym, but instead had just come home to go to bed.

It wasn't like him to head home early, so the atmosphere in the apartment seemed wrong, somehow. Usually when he got home from the gym, freshly showered and ready to cook dinner, Drake was watching TV or reading a magazine or, on the best nights, just waiting for him.

Drake generally got home at least an hour before he did, so he should be there somewhere. Chris went down the hallway and looked into the den, but it was empty. The door to the bedroom was closed.

With a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach, Chris walked slowly over to the bedroom door. He put out his hand, turned the knob, and shoved the door open.

Drake was kneeling on the bed behind a man Chris had never seen before, shoving his cock in and out of him with an expression of agonized bliss on his face. Both men had their eyes closed, so Chris was able to watch without interrupting as Drake reached around and fisted the other man's cock, pressing kisses onto his back.

"Oh, yeah, that's it," the stranger moaned. "You haven't lost your touch, D..."

Drake grunted and shoved faster. "Gonna make you come so hard..." His eyes opened for a split second, closed again, and then opened and looked right at Chris.

Chris stared at him, waiting for him to stop, for the fumbling and the apologies and the begging to begin.

Drake didn't say anything. He didn't stop. He continued to fuck the man beneath him while looking at Chris. The expression on his face was bland, but held a tinge of defiant pleasure.

Chris pulled the door closed and went into the kitchen.

More than fifteen minutes later, Chris heard the bedroom door open. Drake came into the kitchen wearing only his jeans and looking flushed.

"He's gone," he said. He waited for Chris' response.

"Good."

"It's not ... it's just sex."

"Right." Chris paused. "How long?"

Drake shrugged. "Couple of months."

Chris closed his eyes. They'd only been living together for five. "I'll move out as soon as I can find a place."

"You don't have to. I mean ... you know I love you, Chris. I just need ... I can't just be with one guy, you know?"

"Would have been nice if you'd warned me about that before now." Chris could only speak flatly, as if he felt nothing. Inside he was a raging storm of emotions, wanting to lash out, to hurt Drake, to hurt himself, to find some physical representation for the hurt.

"You can stay." Drake didn't even seem like he really cared whether Chris stayed or not.

"No. No, I can't."

"Why not?"

Chris looked at him in disbelief. "Can you promise me that this will never happen again?"

Drake had the good sense to look abashed, whether it was genuine or not. "No."

"Then I can't stay." Chris stood up and went blindly toward the bedroom. He could get a few of his things. Then he realized that he'd have to actually go into the bedroom to do that, and stopped. He'd have to go back in there eventually, but not tonight. He just couldn't. "I'm going to go..." Where, exactly? His friends had faded into the background when he'd met Drake, and he hadn't talked to any of them in months. Where was he going to go?

"I'll be back tomorrow to get some of my things."

* * * *

"You should move in."

* * * *

"You could always move in with me..."

* * * *

Jazz's hands were on his shoulders, kneading softly.

"Chris? What's wrong?" He sounded concerned, almost afraid.

Chris realized that he'd been sitting there without speaking for an unknown amount of time, flung into memories he'd hoped he'd forgotten.

"I can't," he said raggedly, and stood up, moving away from Jazz.

"Can't what? Move in with me?"

"I can't," he repeated, and he knew he sounded more than a little crazed, but there was nothing he could do about it. His body was poised to run, to get away, internal alarms blaring so loudly that he couldn't hear himself think. He knew he was beyond rational thought, anyway.

"It's okay," Jazz said, moving toward him. From the look on his face it was clear that his intention was to comfort Chris. Chris took a step away from him, and Jazz's expression crumpled into upset confusion. "Whatever it is, just ... tell me."

"I can't," Chris said again, and wasn't the third time supposed to be the charm? Or maybe that was bad things coming in threes. He was lost. "I have to go."

"Go where? Chris, talk to me. What's going on?"

"I have to go. I'll ... I can't. I just have to go." Chris moved backward, away from Jazz, toward the front door.

"You can't drive like this," Jazz said.

"I won't," Chris said dully. "I'll walk. Just ... let me go."

"Okay. Will you call me later? Call me."

"All right," Chris said. He wasn't sure what Jazz had asked him to do, but it seemed best to agree with him. Go, go, his mind was shouting at him. Just get out.

He turned and went out the apartment door, leaving it open behind him, Jazz standing in the living room, alone.

* * * *

On the days that Chris is angry, he rages at Jazz, a quiet rage that doesn't require a raised voice or vicious words. It's a soft anger, flickering into flame occasionally, but for the most part just a burning ember.

He mostly just repeats variations on a theme. Why hadn't Jazz listened to his concerns, why did Jazz have to have the damned bike when he knew how dangerous they were, why hadn't he been more careful, why had he always been such a careless driver?

And then come the ones that slice deeper: Why didn't I stop you? Why didn't I do something? When the theme shifts gears into self-blame, Chris knows it's almost over, for the time being, but he can't derive any comfort from that fact. He knows it's going to start again, later. The self-blame is like a poison, each beat of his heart drawing it deeper in until the tears come.

He doesn't know who to be angrier at: Jazz, or himself.

Chris walked and walked until finally he looked up and realized that he didn't know where he was. He thought that maybe he hadn't been thinking in all that time. He didn't have any conscious memory of what he'd been thinking about, in any case. The repetition of his feet on the pavement was a rhythm like a heartbeat, telling him that, if nothing else, he was still alive. Even if it didn't feel that way.

He looked up again, the slap-slap of his feet on the cement sidewalk still echoing in his ears. Starbucks.

Chris went in and ordered a coffee, even though he never drank anything with caffeine after five and it was ... well, it must have been well after five by now. He didn't see a clock

on the wall and his watch was ... He thought the watch Jazz had given him was on top of his dresser, where he usually left it when he took a shower or did anything active that might break it. It wasn't waterproof, or even water-resistant. There wasn't anything magical about it.

He sat down at a table and held the cardboard cup between his hands, feeling the coffee gradually cooling. After a while, he realized that it was cold, but he didn't want to walk anymore and he thought that if he threw it away people might be annoyed with him sitting at the table. Buying another one seemed wasteful. He kept holding the cold coffee.

He looked at the lines on his hands, the pattern on his skin. He looked at the surface of the coffee, slightly oily, swirling when he moved the cup. He didn't want to think.

After another hour or so had passed, he got up, threw the coffee into the trash can, and started to walk back. He wasn't sure which direction he'd come from, so he decided to let his legs carry him whichever way they wanted to and just hope that they figured out how to get him home.

The apartment was locked. When he went inside, it was dark and empty. His chest felt tight, like there was a fist shoved in there where it didn't belong, taking up space that his lungs and heart needed. His stomach was achingly empty, but he knew he wouldn't be able to swallow past the lump in his throat. Everything hurt.

Chris' feet hurt. He'd hiked all day and then walked all evening. He wondered how far he'd walked altogether—more than he would have at the gym, although at least at the gym

the treadmill was padded, cushioned. His head ached. He wanted some Tylenol and a hot shower.

The cold shower was what had started all of this in the first place. Stupid apartment complex. Everything ended up broken.

He went toward the kitchen for a glass of water, and saw the note in Jazz's handwriting on the dining room table. He walked past it without reading it, got his water, and came back to sit at the table. He picked up the note, looking at the curves and loops of the handwriting, imagining the pen scrawling elegantly across the page as Jazz wrote, focusing on the lines and not the words.

He drank some water. Finally let his brain absorb the words on the page.

Dear Chris,

I don't understand what happened, but I want to. I want to listen to whatever it is you have to say. I'm here for you. You know that, don't you? I love you. Call me.

—Jazz

He crumpled the note up in his hand and let it sit on the table, wrinkled and small. What was the point, really? In the end it would come down to unpleasantness, or worse. Despair. He thought that he could get through this, now, but just barely. If he waited any longer, it would be worse, and he wouldn't be able to stand it.

He finished his glass of water but left the empty glass on the dining room table. He went into the living room to find a magazine or something to look at, and saw the answering machine light blinking its little Morse code at him. He pushed

the button and turned the volume down so he wouldn't have to listen to the message.

Chris went to bed, where he didn't sleep and tried not to think.

In the morning he went to work like a zombie, not even thinking until he'd already parked his car that it probably wasn't the best idea in the world to drive when he barely knew what he was doing. He was bleary eyed and drank three cups of coffee, which only made his stomach feel worse. He worked through lunch because he didn't want to eat, and went home to two new messages blinking on his machine.

He turned the volume back up and pushed the button because he didn't know what else to do, and it felt better to do something than nothing.

Beep "Chris? It's me. Are you okay? I'm getting ... I'm worried about you. I know something's going on. I wish you'd tell me what. Call me. Even if you don't want to talk, just ... call me and let me know that you're okay. Please? I love you." *Beep*

Beep "Chris, it's me again. Did you go to work? I can't believe you went to work. Look, if you don't want to talk to me, then have someone else call me and let me know what's going on, okay? I'm getting really freaked out and if I don't hear from you soon I'm gonna come over there and camp out on your doorstep until you tell me to go away. I ... I still love you. Please call me..." *Beep*

Chris went to the dining room table and uncrumpled the note that was still sitting there, flattening it with his palm

against the smooth surface of the table. He didn't read it again, he just wanted to hold it.

He needed to call someone. If not Jazz, then who? Sunny? It was dinner time, she was probably home.

Ring

Ring

Ring

Ring

Beep "You've reached Greg and Sunny. We can't come to the phone right now, so leave a message and we'll call you back as soon as we can. Wait for the tone..." *Beep*

"Hi ... Sunny, it's Chris. Can you ... can you do me a really big favor? Can you call Jazz for me, and tell him ... God, I don't know. Tell him that I need some time, and I'm okay ... well, not *okay*, but ... oh, God, don't tell him that." Chris took a deep breath. "Tell him I'll call him when I can. Okay? Thanks."

Chris went to the bathroom and tested the water in the sink. Wonder of wonders, it was actually hot, so he stripped down and got into the shower wearily. The hot water beat a tattoo on his back, and when he dropped the soap he was too tired to bend over and pick it up, so he just left it there, trying not to think about the slimy mess it would become.

He toweled dry and climbed into bed. It was only slightly after six in the evening, but he was so tired that the thought of sitting up and, well, thinking more was just too exhausting. He slid down into sleep.

When he got home from work the next night, Chris was feeling distinctly lightheaded and weepy. He realized that he

hadn't eaten anything for two days, other than too many cups of coffee, which probably didn't count. He missed Jazz and he wanted someone to come over and take care of him.

He ate a sandwich—turkey and sprouts on whole wheat—and wept all over the bread as he ate. He wasn't sure if the crying was because he was so tired, or so hungry, or so lonely. Was it really Jazz that he missed, or was he just afraid of being alone again? It hadn't taken long for him to get used to being with someone—someone to have sex with, someone to wake up next to, someone to love.

And that was the problem. He loved Jazz, and he was afraid.

He went into the living room and looked at the phone. The answering machine was blinking at him incessantly, so he pushed the button.

Beep "Chris? It's me. Jazz. Thanks for having Sunny call me. I'd rather talk to you myself, but ... thanks. At least I know you're going to call when you can. It helps. I miss you—a lot—and I love you. A lot. I hope you call soon because I really want to hear the sound of your voice. I love you, Chris. I do. We can work through this, whatever it is, but this silence—it's scaring the crap out of me. Call me. When you can." *Beep*

Chris looked at the machine. This wasn't going to be easy, but it needed to be dealt with, and putting it off wasn't going to make it any easier.

He picked up the phone and dialed.

"J-Jazz? It's Chris. Can I come over? I think ... I think we need to talk."

* * * *

Every once in a while, there's an evening when Chris has run out of things to say. He just sits and holds Jazz's hand between his own. These are the nights when he doesn't even have the energy to cry.

It makes him feel unbelievably awful, because he knows that if their situations were reversed, Jazz would always be able to think of something to say. He would never run out of words. And yet he can still hear Jazz, telling him that however he is, is how Jazz wants him. Chris wants to be somebody else for Jazz, even though he knows Jazz wouldn't want him to be someone else.

Chris' hands were trembling as he pulled into Jazz's driveway. He didn't know what he was going to say, and he didn't know how Jazz would react when he said it. The fist inside his chest had somehow expanded, and it was hard to breathe right, and he was a little bit worried that he was going to throw up.

On somewhat shaky legs Chris walked through the porch and raised his hand to knock on the door, a practice he'd stopped weeks ago but which had apparently resurrected itself now. Before his knuckles could make contact with the wood, the door opened.

"Hi," said Jazz. He had a small, hopeful smile on his face, but he looked nervous.

Chris wondered if Jazz felt like throwing up, too. "Hi. Can I—?"

Jazz was already moving back to make room for Chris to pass. "Yeah, sorry, come in. I'm just ... kind of at a loss, you know?"

"Do you want to ... should we sit down somewhere?" Chris paused in the kitchen.

"Is this gonna be a needing-to-sit-down kind of conversation?" Jazz looked distinctly miserable now, and Chris felt like a heel.

"No. I mean ... not like that. I still ... I love you, Jazz. I don't want to—" Chris' words were cut off as Jazz wrapped his arms around him, hugging him tightly.

Jazz was murmuring softly against his shoulder, and Chris couldn't make out what he was saying.

"What?"

Jazz didn't loosen his hold, but he shifted his cheek slightly so that Chris could hear him. "I thought I did something ... I thought you didn't want to see me any more. Oh, Chris, I ... God, I missed you."

Chris let himself be hugged, let himself breathe in the scent of Jazz's hair, couldn't stop himself from sliding his hand down to the small of Jazz's back. "I missed you, too. Can we ... let's go sit down, okay?"

Jazz pulled back, his eyes suspiciously bright. "You're not breaking up with me?"

Chris shook his head. "No, but ... we need to talk."

"Okay." Jazz took his hand and led him into the living room, where they sat down on the couch.

Chris moved away slightly, and Jazz looked hurt all over again. "Sorry," Chris said. "I just ... if we're going to ... if I'm going to talk, I need a little space. It's not you."

Jazz nodded slowly. "Okay. I can try to understand that."

Chris rubbed his thumb over the back of his other hand, a gesture that had started the day before and which had, strangely, become habit. He was getting a reddened mark on the place where he was rubbing. "I'm sorry I freaked out," he said, formally. It was easier, somehow, when he could be formal—the distance was a relief.

"What happened?" Jazz's voice and eyes were gentle.

"You said I could move in with you."

"Yeah," Jazz said. "I did. But why did that freak you out?"

"It ... I guess it reminded me of when Drake asked me to move in with him." He guessed? God, he was such an idiot. It wasn't Jazz that was the problem—it was him. He was so screwed up ... years had passed and he was still standing in the doorway watching Drake fucking someone he hadn't even known existed, still taking that long last look at the apartment he had decorated that had never been his.

"Chris ... can I ask you something?"

Chris' head jerked up. "Yes."

"Do *I* remind you of Drake?"

That wasn't a question that required much thought to answer. "No. You couldn't be more different."

"Then why is it so hard to believe that I'm not gonna do what he did?"

"I don't know." Chris rubbed at his forehead, wishing he could pry it open and find some kind of explanation. "Because I'm really screwed up."

"Tell me about what happened with Drake. I want to understand."

Chris stood up and went over to stand at the window, looking out but not really seeing anything. "We met, I fell in love with him, he said he loved me. He asked me to move in, I did. I ... I spent a couple of months decorating the apartment, until it was just right. Everything in his favorite colors, fabrics he picked out ... it looked great. Like it should have been in a magazine."

"It sounds like things were good for a while," Jazz said neutrally.

"I wanted them to be. I think maybe I was just pretending they were. I didn't want to see it, you know?"

"Do you think that's what's happening now?"

"No ... but I didn't know it was happening then, either. Maybe it is ... and I don't mean that in a bad way, you know? I don't ... I'm not trying to offend you."

"Keep talking," said Jazz.

"Okay." Chris traced a fingertip down the inside surface of the window glass. "So for months before I found out ... wait ... first ... the first night I slept with him, we didn't use any protection. He said he wanted me, and he didn't want to use a condom, and I wanted him so damned much ... I would have let him do anything, probably."

Jazz didn't say anything.

"I was sorry later, of course—not because I ended up getting anything, because I didn't, although obviously that was sheer luck—but because I was so stupid. I could have gotten HIV. But I wasn't thinking about any of that. I wanted him, and I would have done anything to have him. Anything. Does that make me sound really awful?"

"No," said Jazz.

"So then ... five months after I moved in, I came home early from work. Well, not early from work. I didn't go the gym after work, so it was like coming home early. Drake didn't expect me—he didn't have any reason to think I'd be home that early. I walked in on him and ... God, I don't even know what the guy's name was. I never asked ... how fucked up is that?" Chris was aware that he was swearing, something he did rarely enough for it to sound weird coming out of his mouth. He didn't wait for Jazz to answer, just kept talking. Now that it was flowing, he felt like he needed to get it out. "I went into the bedroom—our bedroom—and he was in the middle of fucking this guy I'd never even seen before. And turns out he'd been doing him for months."

After a pause, Jazz said quietly, "I won't do that to you."

Chris turned and looked at him. "I didn't think Drake would, either."

"Would it have been that different if you hadn't moved in with him?"

"I guess not," Chris said, after careful consideration. "But all the time I spent on the apartment—I guess I was trying to make it feel like our apartment, instead of just his. I didn't want to think that it would never feel like it was mine."

"This was my house first," Jazz agreed. "It *would* be ours if you moved in, but it might not feel like it for a long time."

Chris felt his heart start doing that frantic, sick pounding thing. "I can't," he said.

"You don't have to," Jazz said. "If you aren't ready, I don't want you to. I want to be with you—all the time, or as much as possible—but you shouldn't move in here if the idea makes you nuts."

"It does," Chris said. "I don't want it to, but it does. Just the idea of it ... it makes me feel like ... taking off, and not looking back. And I don't want to do that, either. I want to be with you ... I don't want to leave you." He couldn't remember feeling this conflicted in his life. When things had fallen apart with Drake he had been devastated; now, he was desperate, sick with fear and worry and the potential for loss. The potential was worse than the actual loss itself.

"I don't want you to leave me," said Jazz. "I love you."

Chris' stomach did a little flip that wasn't entirely pleasant. "I don't know if you should," he said. "I don't want to hurt you. I don't want you to hurt me. It's..." He ran out of reasonable words. "Shit."

"It's not easy. Good things aren't always easy. That's okay. I still want you."

"I ... I still want you, too," Chris said. The fist in his chest felt like it was squeezing his heart now, crushing him, and there was nothing he could do about it. It made him want to put his own fist through the window pane, a feeling he didn't even know how to begin dealing with. "I don't know what to do."

"You look like you're gonna jump out of your skin," Jazz observed.

"Yeah ... it feels kind of like that, too." It felt like he wanted to peel his skin right off, actually.

"What did you do ... after you found out about Drake and the other guy, I mean?"

"I left. Left that night, and went back the next day for some of my stuff, when I knew he wouldn't be there."

"Where did you go?" Jazz sounded curious in a non-prying sort of way, just the kind of thing Chris felt capable of answering.

"A hotel. I didn't ... I'd lost touch with most of my friends at that point, and I wasn't in a frame of mind where I could call my parents. And I wouldn't have, anyway. The first night was bad. The second night ... that was worse."

"Why?"

"I don't know," Chris said thoughtfully. "Maybe ... the first night, it didn't really seem real. I was so tired, and I felt sick, and I guess I kind of thought that somehow in the morning everything would be all right again. I mean ... I didn't really think that, but I was able to fool myself. The second night ... I couldn't fool myself anymore."

"Didn't you have anyone to call? Anyone?" Jazz looked angry at the thought that Chris had been all alone.

"No. I think that's why I..."

Jazz waited, but when nothing more was forthcoming he stood up and took a step toward Chris. "Why you what?" He had brought the non-prying, slightly flat tone back into play.

Chris found himself answering despite himself. "I tried to kill myself," he said without emotion. "And screwed it up royally, just like everything..."

Jazz took a step closer, and Chris could see that his hands were balled into fists. "You *don't* screw everything up," Jazz said fiercely. "But, fuck, I'm glad you did that one time."

Chris looked back out the window. It was too hard to see the expression on Jazz's face. "I took a whole bottle of sleeping pills, but then I drank half a bottle of vodka and ended up puking for three hours. I thought being so sick might actually kill me, by the time it was over. It was stupid."

When Jazz spoke again his voice was soft, but Chris didn't turn to look at him. "But this time ... you didn't..."

"No," Chris said, and almost smiled as he heard Jazz's tight sigh of relief. "Believe me, I'm never going to take sleeping pills and vodka at the same time again. And anyway ... somehow, this time it was me doing it to myself, you know? I knew that I was the one freaking out. It wasn't anything you did."

"I pushed you," said Jazz. "You weren't ready, and as usual I'm moving way too fast."

"It's not you," Chris said. "It was a perfectly reasonable thing to suggest, under the circumstances. You didn't know I was going to freak out." He turned then to look at Jazz, who was still standing in the same spot.

"I wouldn't have suggested it if I'd known it would upset you."

"I know."

"So, if I promise not to suggest it again ... as long as you know that the offer stands, for whenever you're ready ... do you think we might be okay?"

Chris smiled. "We're okay. Well, *I'm* totally screwed up, obviously, but ... we're fine."

"Does that mean I can kiss you now?" Jazz was poised—Chris could see him quivering.

"Now would be good."

Then Jazz was in his arms, all hard muscle and smooth skin and lips that tasted like he'd been eating something sugary: jellybeans, gumdrops. Jazz kissed him as if he was starving, and Chris thought that he was probably returning the kiss in just about the same way. He wanted to wrap himself around Jazz and never, ever let him go. There had been times yesterday—and today—when he thought he'd never kiss Jazz again. What had he been thinking? How had he thought it possible that he could give this up, even if he was still terrified that it was going to end when he least expected it?

Jazz's tongue was in his mouth, teasing his own with gentle sliding strokes, Jazz's lips sucking at him, making him crazy. When Jazz sank down onto his knees Chris followed willingly, unable to give up the taste of Jazz's lips. Jazz was sweet and exotic, the taste of him bringing to mind foreign breezes and the sound of distant ringing bells. Chris' hand cupped the back of Jazz's head, keeping him close.

"I thought we'd never do this again," Jazz said with a little groan, burying his face in Chris' neck and then, apparently as an afterthought, licking it, tracing lines that only he could see.

"Me, too," Chris said hoarsely. "I'm sorry, I don't know what I was ... I wasn't thinking..." He had to trail off and concentrate on breathing as Jazz's lips pressed against the base of his throat, sucking hard as if he were trying to leave a mark.

They tipped over slowly, Chris beneath Jazz as Jazz's mouth worked at his throat, the pain of breaking blood vessels under the skin a sharp edge that he welcomed, grateful to be with Jazz in whatever way possible. The idea of him being marked by Jazz, belonging to him visibly, was jolting.

"I'm sorry, too," Jazz said. "I should have thought before I asked you about the whole moving in thing ... I knew that hadn't worked out with Drake..." His breath was hot against Chris' throat as he spoke.

Chris grabbed him and kissed him again, hard, and then pulled back far enough to look at him. "Stop it," he said gruffly. "It's not your fault."

"But I..." Jazz was silenced with another bruising kiss.

Chris rolled them so that he was on top, pressing Jazz into the floor with the weight of his body. Jazz made him so hot. Chris was desperately hard, like he usually was when he was touching Jazz, wanting them both to be naked, wanting to be inside of Jazz, wanting.

Suddenly desperate beyond measure, Chris' hands worked at Jazz's jeans, unbuttoning them, shoving them down to mid-thigh and then abandoning them there because he was too needy to remove them further. Jazz managed to work them the rest of the way off by himself.

Chris was on his knees above Jazz, one elbow on the floor, one hand between Jazz's legs as his lips found the tip of Jazz's cock and wrapped around.

Jazz made a little noise in the back of his throat and squirmed, and then immediately went still as Chris' probing fingers slipped up between his legs and found his tight hole.

"Want you," Chris managed to say. "God, Jazz ... want you so much." He licked at Jazz's cock, traveled further down and licked at his balls, then further still to flick at his guiche with an agile tongue.

"You've got me," said Jazz between panting breaths. "I'm right here."

"Want all of you," Chris said, and bent lower to swipe his tongue across Jazz's opening, slicking it with his saliva before penetrating it with the tip of his finger.

Jazz made a sound of complete delight that went straight to Chris' cock. Emboldened, Chris spread Jazz's legs wide and licked there again, reveling in the sweet sounds of pleasure that came from deep in Jazz's throat. He'd never put his mouth on anyone like this before, although he'd had it done to him, and he hadn't imagined it could be so good. Jazz was warm and tasted just fine—slightly salty, slightly bitter.

And the way Jazz was squirming was enough to make Chris even more desperate.

Chris awkwardly managed to undo his own pants, shove them down to his knees and free himself, all while his tongue worked at Jazz. He spread as much saliva around as he could, letting his tongue slide inside Jazz, and then licked his own palm and wrapped the damp hand around his own cock,

stroking to spread the moisture. He groaned and licked Jazz again.

Jazz squeaked. "Oh, shit, you'd better hurry," Jazz said breathlessly. "I can't take much more of this."

"Won't have to," Chris muttered, and shifted and thrust and slid right into Jazz, balls deep in one smooth thrust.

"Oh, fuck," said Jazz, his eyes wide. "Fuck, Chris..."

"Yeah," Chris said, agreeing. When he thought he could do it without flying into a million pieces, he pulled out and thrust forward again. His breath hitched in his chest and his balls ached and it was ... perfect.

"Faster," begged Jazz, wrapping one leg around Chris' waist.

As Chris started moving, one thought kept echoing through his brain—Jazz is mine. *Mine*. With each thrust he strove unconsciously to drive the point home.

Jazz was snapping his hips up to meet Chris, obviously caught up in the rhythm that Chris was setting, not faltering for an instant beneath Chris despite his uncomfortable position on the floor. "Fuck, fuck," he chanted, and his voice was like fuel for Chris' fire.

"You're mine," Chris said, slamming into Jazz again.

"Yes."

"I don't want you to fuck anyone but me," he growled, hearing the words as if someone else had said them.

"I won't," said Jazz fiercely. "I don't ... oh, God ... I don't want anyone but you."

Chris could feel his orgasm lurking at the base of his spine like a snake poised to strike. If he could just hold it off a little

bit longer ... he wanted to feel Jazz clenched around him. He reached between them and took hold of Jazz's cock, squeezing and stroking just so, flicking his smallest two fingers over the tip in the way Jazz liked best. He shifted the angle of his thrusts slightly, increased the force just the tiniest amount.

Jazz's breathing sped up immediately. "Oh, God," he said. "Oh, fuck, Chris, I'm gonna—" And then his entire body was arching as he came in hot jets between their bodies, his come slicking their skin, and his expression of ecstasy was enough to push Chris up and over.

Chris groaned and buried his face against Jazz's chest, his body moving in uncoordinated, jerky stutters as he came. It was the longest orgasm he could ever remember having—it seemed to go on and on, fading but not quite disappearing. Jazz was warm underneath him, and better than perfect.

Jazz was smoothing Chris' left shoulder gently, murmuring his name repeatedly, surrounding him with skin and sound.

They lay there for a long time as their breathing slowly returned to normal.

"Come on, baby," Jazz said finally. "Let's go to bed."

* * * *

When Chris wakes in the morning, his first thought is always of Jazz. Sometimes he dreams that Jazz is in bed next to him, and when he rolls over he is always disappointed to discover that his dream isn't reality. Often, he takes comfort in Richard's body instead, the two of them wrapped around

each other in a careless desperation that belies their true feelings for each other.

Everything is muted and gray in the early morning hours, and the color that Chris expects with the sunrise is never bright enough.

When Chris woke, Jazz's arm was wrapped around his waist, Jazz's chest warm against his back, Jazz's hand ... clutching his cock in a death grip. Chris couldn't have moved if he'd wanted to, which thankfully he didn't. After the past couple of days of thinking about what life was going to be like without Jazz, he was happy to lie here in Jazz's arms and soak up the atmosphere for as long as he could.

Jazz made a little noise of contentment and snuggled closer, without loosening his grip on Chris. His breath was hot against the back of Chris' neck, each exhalation making the little hairs at Chris' hairline tickle slightly. Chris lay very still, waiting to see if Jazz would wake up or go back to sleep.

Jazz's breathing evened out and slowed down, his hand relaxing. Chris relaxed, too, bringing a hand up to cover his mouth as he yawned quietly.

He was just starting to drift back into the gray when he felt Jazz stir again; only his hand this time, his fingers slipping lower to gently trace the loose skin of Chris' balls, which immediately began to tighten in reaction. Jazz's tongue poked out to lick the back of Chris' neck with a dryish pulling sensation that gave Chris goose bumps. Otherwise Jazz was completely still. Only his hand and his tongue moved.

Chris couldn't help but shift backward, his ass bumping against Jazz's cock. Jazz's little squeal gave him away.

"I knew you were awake," Chris said quietly.

Jazz pushed his cock forward into Chris, the damp trail it left telling Chris that Jazz had been hard for a while. "How did you know?"

Chris reached a hand down and closed it over Jazz's, which was still moving over his cock. "This might have given you away."

"Mmm..." Jazz said to the back of his neck. "What can I say, I'm just a horny guy in the mornings."

"You're a morning person," Chris reminded him. "I am *not* a morning person."

"You were awake before I was."

"But I was going to go back to sleep."

Jazz's hand slid out from under Chris' and glided up his chest to draw what might have been figure eights across his skin. "Are you gonna go back to sleep now?"

Chris shook his head. "No, I think I'm up."

"Me, too," said Jazz, and pushed himself against Chris again. "I'm definitely up."

Suddenly Chris felt the slick intrusion of two obviously lubricated fingers being pushed into his ass. He gasped at the unexpected burn. "Jeez, give a guy some warning, will you?"

"Sorry." Jazz didn't sound sorry at all. "Isn't it good?"

The burn turned into stretch, which then turned into something like a dull throbbing pleasure. "Oh..."

"Is that a good sound?"

"Yeah, what do you think?" Chris said, concentrating on the way Jazz's fingers were sliding back out of him. "Oh, fuck..."

"Happy to," said Jazz, and then Chris felt the blunt head of Jazz's cock pressing into him, and for a second the stretch was more than just a burn, it was actual pain.

Chris sucked in a breath between his teeth, and Jazz stopped.

"You okay? Shh, it's okay, just relax." Jazz's hands smoothed against the muscles of Chris' lower back, and after a moment he was able to relax.

And "Oh," he said as Jazz slid the rest of the way in without anything more than a slight stretch, and oh, Christ, it was good. The feel of Jazz inside of him was like nothing else, so full that he was complete.

Jazz started a slow dance, in and out, his hand on Chris' hip to guide him. Chris' cock was leaking onto his belly and the sheet beneath him—he could feel the wet spot against his side—and yet he felt no sense of urgency. It was a relaxed fuck, he decided. They both wanted to come, and they knew that sooner or later they would get there. It wasn't a matter of racing toward the finish line.

Jazz slipped a hand around to stroke him in time with his thrusts, and it was a miracle how good this felt, how every time it was so much better than Chris remembered it being, even though that couldn't possibly be the case. The push forward that filled him, nudging against him just so, and then the retreat which felt just as good while leaving him longing for more.

Then Jazz's hand left him and he whimpered at the loss, but only for a moment because Jazz was bringing Chris' own hand down to make a tunnel for his cock, and Jazz's fingers

were cupping his balls. He was being fucked by Jazz and he was fucking his own hand and Jazz was pulling at his balls gently, just enough to distract him from how close he was to coming.

So that was why his orgasm took him by complete surprise, why one moment Jazz's hot length inside him was a caress and the next a catalyst, a push and a shove, up and over. Spilling down like a waterfall, river to the ocean.

Jazz moved one more time and they fit together like they were two parts of the same whole—just for a moment, the moment before Jazz cried out and spasmed inside him, and then everything fell back apart into its pieces again and the world was the same.

Chris brought Jazz's fingers, sticky with his own seed, to his mouth and kissed them, licked them, tasting himself and loving Jazz both at once. He could feel forever stretched out in front of them, and it felt good.

"Good morning," said Jazz.

"It is now. Are we going to get up?"

"That wasn't up enough for you?" asked Jazz in a pouty voice. He slid backward and out of Chris. "Oh. Wet spot. Guess it's time to get out of bed. Please note that I didn't use the word 'up.'"

"Duly noted," said Chris. "I'm gonna be late for work if I don't get moving pretty soon."

"Yeah, I've got to get a move on, too." Jazz sat up and the sheet slipped lower down his body, exposing his softened cock to the chill morning air. "Oh, brr."

"I thought you were never cold," said Chris, who actually agreed with Jazz's assessment of the temperature.

"Almost never," Jazz said. "I'm gonna shower. You want to join me?"

"Of course."

They were both too tired from the morning's activities, combined with those from the night before, to give each more anything more than half-hearted gropes under the hot running water. Chris was grateful that he'd taken to leaving some changes of clothes at Jazz's house—it would have been more than inconvenient to have to drive all the way home this morning, when his office was only ten minutes away.

"So ... we're okay, right?" Jazz asked, rather shyly, over toast and coffee.

"Yes, we're fine." Chris leaned over and kissed Jazz, all crumbs and jam and bitter like coffee. "Again, I ... sorry I freaked out like that."

"Yeah, we're both sorry," said Jazz, and he was smiling. "Two sorry guys, that's us."

"I don't want to go to work." Chris was studying the lines of Jazz's face, memorizing him.

"Me, either."

"Damn."

"Yup." Jazz looked disgustingly cheerful. "I love you."

Chris felt a grin spread across his own face. "I love you, too. Even if you did scare the crap out of me by asking me to move in with you."

"I won't make that mistake twice," said Jazz, and his eyes were serious.

Sleeping Stone
by Alexa Snow

Chris heard what he was saying. "I'll remember that."

They finished their breakfast, smiling over their toast, and went to work.

Chapter 9

Chris and Richard watch rented videos in the evenings, a lot. Somehow they seem less real, less immediate. On two occasions, they have to shut a movie off after the first ten minutes because something about one of the characters reminds Richard of Jazz. The first time it happens, Richard just gets up without saying a word and disappears into the bathroom, locking the door behind him.

Chris pauses the movie and waits, and after a few minutes goes and knocks on the door. It's then that he hears the choked sounds that Richard makes when he's trying to pretend he isn't crying.

Chris goes back and turns off the movie, and waits some more. Richard comes out after fifteen minutes or so, his eyes red and hollow. It isn't until the next day that he manages to explain what set him off, that something the character said was so like something that Jazz had said to him years before that he couldn't bear it.

The second time it happens Richard just says, "Shut it off." So Chris does.

He understands because he has his own memories to deal with.

Chris groaned and buried his head in the hollow of Jazz's shoulder. "I can't believe you talked me into this."

Jazz turned enough so that he could speak into Chris' ear. "Shh."

Chris rolled his eyes even though Jazz couldn't see him in the darkened movie theater. "This is awful," he whispered back.

"Shh!" Jazz poked him in the ribcage, and Chris jerked away from him. "Be quiet! You're gonna piss people off."

"But it's so bad!"

Jazz turned to him in exasperation. "If you don't want to watch it, don't. Go out into the lobby and wait until it's over."

Chris sighed, hunched down in his seat, and turned his attention back toward the movie screen. He'd never been a fan of Marlon Wayans or ... okay, he didn't even know who this other guy was, but this was beyond awful. Not that he'd expected the movie to be much good from what he'd read about it, but Jazz had been insisting that he'd wanted to see it for more than two weeks and finally Chris had relented and agreed to take him.

Jazz was obviously delighted with the movie. He had an ability to immerse himself in a film, to somehow get right into the world of the movie and live the story in a way that Chris found alternately enviable and puzzling.

Chris thought about all of the things he could have been doing instead of sitting here and internally picking the plot (if one could even call it that) of this movie into threads. Even going to the gym was better than this—he could be getting exercise, and it was easy to tune out the televisions at the gym. He could be ... well, other than the gym and work and Jazz, what was there, really? He didn't spend much time cleaning his apartment, and he didn't read all that much, and really, Jazz was pretty much the center of his world at this

point. And that was such a scary thought that his brain veered away from it and he had to think about something else.

And anything would be better than this movie, right? Chris held his wrist up to try to catch enough light from the screen so that he could see what time it was. Well, at least they were more than an hour into the movie—with any luck there was only another half an hour or so left, and then he could drag Jazz away to get a coffee or something. Somewhere that they could talk. Or where he could listen to Jazz talk, which was one of his favorite ways to spend his time.

He shifted in his seat again and Jazz's hand clamped down hard and unexpectedly on his thigh. "You're driving me crazy," Jazz said.

Immediately Chris felt guilty. Jazz was so easy to please—he just wanted to see this stupid movie, and all Chris had to do was sit here for an hour and a half and pretend to like it. "Sorry," he whispered back.

"No, I mean the way you keep moving," Jazz said. "You're driving me crazy." He guided Chris' hand to the front of his jeans, where Jazz's erection was straining against the heavy denim.

"Oh! Umm ... sorry."

Jazz looked at him sideways. "Don't be sorry unless you don't intend to do something about it."

Chris gestured helplessly. "But we're..." He looked around. The theater was mostly empty—the movie had been released several weeks ago, and had gotten terrible reviews, so there weren't many people watching with them.

"There's no one here," Jazz said, leaning in close to breathe hotly against his ear. "We can move in closer to the wall, if you'd like a little more ... privacy?"

The low growly quality in Jazz's voice sent a thrill down Chris' spine. They were in the middle of their row of seats, with no one closer than five rows away. Would anyone really see anything? He did have his jacket draped over the back of his chair...

Chris leaned forward so that he could free his jacket, and then draped it casually over Jazz's lap. It was enough to make him feel less vulnerable. He slid his hand under the jacket and undid Jazz's jeans, all while pretending to watch the movie, his face turned toward the screen as though that would convince people that he wasn't about to give his boyfriend—*boyfriend*—a hand job in the middle of a movie theater.

He eased Jazz's erect cock out of his pants, grateful that Jazz was wearing button-fly jeans and he didn't have to worry about scraping him on a zipper. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Jazz bite his lower lip. Jazz's skin was smooth and warm against his palm, softness laid over hardness.

Chris could feel Jazz inhale sharply as he started to move his hand, but, surprisingly, Jazz managed to stay quiet. Usually he was unable to control his tendency toward being vocal, and it seemed strange to Chris that Jazz was so silent beside him. On the other hand, it was also strange to be watching a bunch of modern-looking people dressed up in medieval (or sort-of-medieval) garb running around on bad

sets while his hand was on Jazz's cock. Life was a mystery, all right.

But even if Jazz wasn't talking or, actually, making any noise at all, his body language spoke volumes. His thigh under Chris' arm was hard as rock, and when Chris glanced down he saw Jazz's hand gripping the armrest, knuckles white. Was he getting off on the idea of possibly being caught? And how likely was it, really, that they would be?

Glancing around and seeing nothing but a few people engrossed in the movie, Chris doubled his efforts, stroking more quickly and reaching his other hand across to slide up under Jazz's T-shirt and pinch a nipple. Jazz clutched at the armrest, the muscles in his arm tightening all the way up to his shoulder as he tried to stay quiet, the way his hips were rocking in the seat a dead giveaway to how close he was to orgasm.

Chris flicked his fingers over the head of Jazz's leaking cock once, twice, and then Jazz made a strangled sound as he came, pumping up into Chris' hand with quick jerks of his hips. As soon as he had finished he whirled on Chris and kissed him thoroughly.

"Your jacket's all sticky," he said softly against Chris' cheek.

Chris shrugged. He hadn't thought about it, but it certainly wasn't going to be the worst thing that had ever happened to him. At that moment the hardened erection in his pants was a bigger concern.

"I love you so fucking much," Jazz whispered. "Let me show you."

He shifted to the far edge of his seat, leaned over the armrest, and nuzzled Chris through the front of his jeans. Chris gasped in surprise. "Jazz!" he hissed sharply, a little bit more loudly than he had intended. "People are going to—"

Jazz sat back up quickly and licked at Chris' ear. "Not if you're quiet," he whispered. He took his time, nibbled on Chris' earlobe, licking his way down his neck to bite gently on his throat before returning his attention to the part of Chris that was so desperate for it.

Chris didn't realize that the armrest between them lifted up until Jazz squirmed in discomfort at having to lean over it and raise it. How convenient, although Chris was pretty sure this activity wasn't among the imagined ones when the seats were designed.

Jazz rested one hand on Chris' thigh as he blew his hot breath through Chris' pants, the warmth turning to moisture somehow and making Chris twitch despite himself. He could feel the ache from his swollen erection spreading out into his thigh muscles, everything heavy and wanting to be touched.

Jazz made quick work of undoing Chris' jeans, sliding his hand inside and pulling Chris' cock out and then into his willing mouth. Chris dug his fingernails into the palm of his hand, the pain a sharp reminder that they were in public and whatever happened, he needed to keep his damned mouth shut. Not that he was the talkative type during sex anyway, but the occasional moan did slip out.

Jazz's mouth was like hot, wet silk. Chris had received plenty of blow jobs in his day, but Jazz was the master—he knew just how to swirl his tongue, just how to give those little

pulsing sucks that made Chris think that his heart was going to stop because *nothing* could be that perfect, could it?

He was staring at the screen but not seeing a damned thing (thank God) and he was dimly aware that a part of him was praying that no one would walk by and see him getting sucked off in the middle of "Dungeons and Dragons," and another slightly bigger part of him was aware that he was never going to be able to forget this awful, awful movie. But the rest of him was focused on his cock and the way Jazz's tongue was moving across his skin, slick with Jazz's saliva and his own pre-come. Jazz's tongue was spiraling and so was Chris' concentration, spiraling down into a tiny point where every nerve in his body was straining toward release.

He could feel it coming long before it happened, slowly creeping along his nerve endings like they were a fuse. It was a sizzle, a sparkle, a movement in the right direction, inexorable but not fast enough to overwhelm. He could feel it ... Jazz's lips were teasing it out of him ... and it was creeping ... and it was so close that he could taste it at the back of his throat, a lingering flavor like sharp dust ... And then it was slamming through him, dynamite exploding and blowing him into little pieces, and he was coming and Jazz's throat was swallowing around him. Shock waves which slowly turned into ripples, which gradually faded into smaller ripples and finally drifted away.

Still breathing heavily, Chris came to his senses enough to wonder if he'd given them away. He looked around quickly, but everyone was still staring at the movie screen as if nothing had happened (and from what he'd seen of the movie

before he got distracted, Chris was pretty sure that nothing had.)

Jazz was still licking him, humming silently so that only Chris could feel it. He released Chris and sat up slowly, smiling, and pressed his mouth to Chris' so that Chris could catch the lingering flavor of himself there.

"Great ... movie," Jazz whispered.

Chris nodded, fumbled with himself and his pants, watched as Jazz casually sat back, fixed his own pants, and returned his attention to the screen.

Maybe this wasn't such a bad movie, after all.

Okay, no, it was awful. Awful. But if these were the results of taking Jazz to see a bad movie, Chris thought he could probably stand to do it. Every once in a while. Since, you know, it made Jazz so happy.

* * * *

The first time Chris really loses it after the accident isn't when he gets the phone call, even though that is what he will remember as the lowest point of all time. He holds it together through the drive to the hospital, through the look on Richard's face as he comes through the emergency room doors, through the long hours of waiting for Jazz to come out of surgery.

And when they finally are allowed to see him, it's not the tubes and wires and monitors that throw Chris. It's not even that Jazz is so still and broken, his arms pale and bruised against the white sheets.

No, the first time that Chris really loses it is when he realizes that they've had to shave Jazz's head—all of his gorgeous long dark hair, gone.

He cries hysterically over Jazz's prone form, soaking the sheets, and knows no one will suspect that his tears are totally inappropriate under the circumstances.

Jazz was humming loudly as he put the strands of popcorn and cranberries they'd strung earlier onto the tree in the living room. He refused to call it a Christmas tree—insisted that it was a Yule tree, and that the party they were having tomorrow on the 21st was a Yule party. Because apparently Yule was on the 21st. And all of it was fine with Chris—he didn't care what they called it, as long as he was with Jazz.

They'd gone on a huge shopping trip the day before, and bought everything they'd need to host the party—champagne, ingredients for punch and a hot beverage that Jazz said was properly referred to as "Wassail". Lots of vegetables, stuff to make dip, a large assortment of cookies and pastries. Jazz's mom Judy was going to provide a cake and some freshly baked bread, and Chris was currently chopping onions for the quiche he was going to bake.

He smiled as he heard Jazz restart the same song on the CD again. The man was obsessed with music—currently it was one of the songs on this medieval-style seasonal album, something about the Cold Winter.

Jazz came into the kitchen behind him. "Can't I help with something?" he asked, cheerful but obviously trying to sound plaintive.

"Do you really think that would be a good idea?"

"But there's not really anything else left for me to do, now. The tree is all set, and the decorations are up, and we aren't going to mix the drinks until tomorrow..."

"You could sit and keep me company?" Chris suggested.

"Sit?" Jazz said in disbelief. It was certainly true enough that he sat as rarely as possible, even though Chris had pointed out that if he relaxed more often he might not burn so many calories and be so hungry all the time.

"Okay, *pace* and keep me company?"

Jazz leaned over onto the counter near Chris, watching as he chopped onions into small neat squares. "Couldn't I chop vegetables?"

"I'm almost done," Chris said. "Just these few, and that's it. The pastry's finished, so we'll just whip up some eggs and throw everything in the oven."

"I could do the eggs?" said Jazz doubtfully.

"If you really think it's a good idea, go ahead," Chris said. "I'll try not to remind you of the last time you made scrambled eggs when they were all full of broken shells. I don't think I need to tell you how disgusting crunchy eggshell quiche would be."

Jazz laughed. "No, you're right." He pulled out the folding step stool and sat down on it. "Are you sure we need three quiches? There aren't going to be that many of us."

Chris shrugged. "If we don't eat them all at the party, we can have leftovers for later. It's no big deal."

"I guess. I don't want you to go to a ton of trouble, though. It's just a few friends—they won't care if all we have is chips and cookies, you know?"

"I know, but ... I just want it to be nice."

Jazz got up off the stool—what had that been, thirty seconds actually sitting?—and came over to rub Chris' shoulder. "It'll be nice either way. I don't want you to get all worked up over this ... just relax."

Chris turned his head to look at Jazz, and nodded. That was when the knife slipped sideways, skidding off the hard end of the last onion and catching Chris across the meaty flesh at the base of his thumb.

"Shit!" Chris swore and jerked, dropping the knife, which bounced off the counter and fell onto the floor with a clatter. He clamped the fingers of his other hand over the wound, but the blood was flowing freely and dripped between his fingers, down his wrist, onto the countertop.

"Shit!" he said again.

Jazz grabbed onto him and dragged him the couple of steps to the sink. "It's okay," he said calmly. "It's fine, let's just take a look at it." He pried Chris' fingers away from the cut and rotated the injured hand carefully.

Chris turned his face away while Jazz looked—he didn't mind the sight of other people's blood, but seeing his own was enough to make him feel queasy. Jazz turned the tap on and held the cut under the running water, presumably to wash enough blood away so that he could see more clearly, and the stinging burn increased. Chris' hand jerked involuntarily. "Sorry," he said tightly.

"It's okay." Jazz was looking right at Chris now. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I just ... I'm better if I don't look at it."

"It's bleeding a lot," Jazz said. "Stay right here." He went over to a drawer and got out a clean dishcloth, then came back over and pressed it down firmly over the cut. "No ... come sit down."

Jazz pushed him onto the step stool he'd been using earlier. "I think you need some stitches," he said, lifting the edge of the cloth to peer at the wound again. "It's really deep—we're not gonna be able to keep the edges together just by wrapping it up."

"Shit," Chris said, again. "What if we butterfly the edges together with those good Band-Aids?"

"It's on your hand, Chris," said Jazz. "You can't mess around with deep cuts on your hands—you use them too often."

He sighed, trying to ignore the pain that was throbbing along with his heartbeat. "You're probably right. It's just ... I wanted to get all of this stuff done before tomorrow, and we're going to be at the emergency room for *hours*, waiting, and..."

"Knock it off. We'll either get the stuff done later, or we won't. It doesn't matter." Jazz pressed the cloth harder against the cut, and Chris felt himself pale. "Sorry, just ... it's still bleeding a lot. Come on, let's get you out to the car."

Chris spent most of the car ride silently cursing himself for his clumsiness. Trust him to screw up a perfectly good evening. He squeezed the cloth against his hand more tightly, wincing at the pain. The cloth was well-soaked with blood now, but he did think the bleeding was slowing a little bit. And thankfully the nearest hospital was close by.

They only had to sit in the waiting room for twenty minutes before they were ushered back to a small curtained area.

"Guess you picked a good time to get hurt," Jazz said, one hand warm on the back of Chris' neck. "At least there's not a big wait."

"Yeah," Chris said. He was sitting on the cot and Jazz was standing behind him, so he leaned back against Jazz's chest, injured hand still cradled in the good one.

Jazz's arm came around the front of Chris, hand smoothing at his T-shirt as if trying to remove wrinkles. "You okay?"

Chris nodded. His hand hurt and all he could think about was the last time he'd been in an emergency room. He leaned a back against Jazz a little bit harder, looking for comfort.

This was a minor injury compared to the one he'd had then, and even that hadn't been all that serious. He'd been walking down the stairs and tripped over something a little kid had left in the stairwell—he couldn't quite remember what it was, some toy—and fallen down half a flight, spraining his ankle. He'd hobbled back up the stairs and called Drake, but Drake hadn't been able to get away from the office. Or so he'd said.

At the time, Chris had thought it was just one of those things. Bad timing, and that on any other day Drake would have dropped everything to come and help him when he was hurt. He'd driven himself to the hospital, sat alone in the waiting room, waited alone while the X-rays were developed, and driven himself home with a pair of crutches next to him

in the front seat and a prescription for painkillers in his pocket.

Drake had come home late that night to find Chris sitting in front of the television, pretending to watch whatever it was on the screen while fretting that something might have happened to Drake on his way home from work. He'd apologized for being late and had actually made Chris dinner, for once, and Chris had been pleased that Drake had gone to the effort.

It hadn't occurred to him then that maybe Drake's inattention to the whole situation had been about Drake. He'd thought the situation normal, figured himself for a romantic sap with delusions about boyfriends who came to the emergency room with you and held your hand and made you feel better. Now, here, he wasn't so sure.

Jazz's hand was still stroking Chris' chest gently, moving up and down in little circles that chased away his contemplation and brought him back to the present. He spent far too much time thinking about Drake, he decided, and not enough about Jazz. He was a fool. He should be enjoying this—well, not the fact that he was in the emergency room waiting for stitches, and he almost laughed—but the part about Jazz.

"You okay?" Jazz asked again.

"Yeah," he said, and turned his head so he could look at Jazz.

Jazz's eyes were dark with concern, and his lower lip had that slightly swollen look that told Chris he'd been chewing on it again.

"Thanks," Chris said simply.

"For what?"

"For being here." Chris shrugged awkwardly and then winced at the pull in his hand. "For being you, you know?"

"You're welcome," said Jazz, and twisted forward to kiss Chris.

That was, of course, when the doctor or whoever the heck she was walked in, but Chris didn't even care enough to blush. She didn't look embarrassed, anyway, just matter-of-fact.

"I'm Dr. Sharis," she said, glancing down the file she held. She put the papers down and stepped closer, taking Chris' hand gently between her own and slowly removing the dishcloth. "Knife?" she asked.

Chris nodded and kept his eyes studiously trained toward the floor so he didn't have to look at his hand being poked and prodded. Jazz's hands were warm on his shoulders, Jazz's chest warm against his back.

"Well, you're right," she said briskly. "You're going to need a few stitches. Let me get a local anesthetic and we'll get you fixed right up." The woman bustled around the room, collecting supplies from various drawers and cabinets. She slid a chair over next to the cot and gestured at it. "Sit here, and rest your hand on the bed," she instructed. "Less chance of you moving while I'm stitching."

Chris sat in the chair and tried to pay as little attention to what she was doing as possible as she stuck a needle into his hand and then began to stitch. He could tell that Jazz was trying to distract him—talking to him, stroking his hair—and

he appreciated it. He let himself concentrate on little things—Jazz's fingers on his hair, the ticking of the clock.

"There you go," said the doctor finally, taping some gauze over the stitches. "Keep it dry, and I'll send someone in with a prescription and instructions about when to get the stitches taken out. You can come back here to have it done if you like."

"Thanks," Jazz said before Chris could even respond.

She smiled at both of them warmly. "You're welcome."

"How's it feel?" asked Jazz as the doctor pushed the curtain aside and left.

"Numb. That's the beauty of Novocain, I guess."

"I'm glad it doesn't hurt."

"Me, too." Chris climbed up onto the cot next to Jazz and looked at his watch. "We've still got time to get back and finish that stuff up, I think."

Jazz laughed. "Well, it's either gonna be you one-handed, or me with two good but untalented ones. Jeez, Chris, let it go, would you? It's just a party. It'll be fine; we can order pizza or something."

"Yeah, I know. I just ... it's the first time we've done something like this as a couple, you know? I wanted it to be nice."

"It will be nice, whether we have quiche or not." A nurse came into through the curtain with some papers. Chris had to sign two of them to show that he understood the directions he was being given about how to care for the wound properly, and Jazz whisked the little slip that was his prescription out of his hand.

"You may find you don't need those," said the nurse, nodding at the prescription. "Some people discover that over-the-counter pain medication is enough for them."

"Right. Thanks," Chris said. "Is there anything else?"

She checked the papers he'd signed. "No, you're free to go unless you have any questions."

"Okay, thanks then." Chris got down off the cot slowly and Jazz hopped down beside him.

As soon as the nurse left, Jazz wrapped an arm around his waist and nuzzled at his neck. "Come on, babe. Let's get you home."

In the car, Chris closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the seat.

"You want me to stop and fill this prescription?" Jazz asked as they neared the shopping plaza that was a few miles from his house.

Chris considered this. "Yeah, I think so. If you don't mind. Like she said, I might not need them, but if I do ... I'd hate to wake up in the middle of the night and wish I had them, you know?"

"Yeah. I'll stop at the pharmacy now, and you can sit in the car."

"That's okay—I'll come in."

The line at the pharmacy was short and the man behind the counter told Chris it would be about ten minutes while they got his pills. He and Jazz wandered the aisles rather aimlessly.

"We need shampoo," Chris said, picking up a bottle of the kind that was in Jazz's shower and tucking it under his arm.

He winced; he should have said that Jazz needed shampoo. It was Jazz's home, not theirs.

"I can carry that." Jazz took it from him. "Good thing we're getting those pills, if your hand is starting to hurt already."

Chris nodded, failing to understand for a minute what had just happened, and then realized that Jazz thought he had winced because he was in pain. He felt stupid, and a bit deceptive, but didn't correct Jazz's assumption.

"Turner?" called the pharmacist, and the moment was broken. They collected the bottle of pills and paid for the shampoo and went back to Jazz's house.

What followed was an exercise in either futility or hilarity, depending on your viewpoint. Jazz, attempting to follow Chris' directions to the best of his ability, tried to whip up the egg and cream mixture required to make the quiche.

First, he was supposed to crack a dozen eggs. He broke each one individually into a small dish at Chris' suggestion—that was so that when he got egg shell into the cracked eggs it would be easier to pick it out. In the process, two eggs were dropped on the floor, and a third just sort of ... exploded during the cracking, sliming the counter and Jazz. It took more than fifteen minutes before Jazz got a dozen eggs, without any shell bits, into the big bowl.

He managed to measure the cream without any serious mishaps, but when he went to mix the eggs and cream together, he somehow lost his grip on the bowl, causing a wave of egg and cream to flow over the edge of the bowl and down the front of the counter onto the floor. Chris assured him that it was fine, trying to speak calmly to ward off the

slight edge of hysteria that was starting to build in Jazz's voice.

There wasn't enough of the mixture left, after Jazz was done with it, to make three quiches, so they made two and Chris had Jazz put the third crust into the freezer for some future meal. With the quiche baking safely in the oven at last, Chris and Jazz sat in the living room on the couch, snuggled up to each other.

Chris' good hand was stroking Jazz's hair, picking little bits of egg shell out of it when he encountered them. "You're going to have to shower with a Brillo pad," he said.

Jazz groaned. "Don't tease me," he said pitifully. "I know I'm hopeless."

"You're not hopeless." Chris was floating on the pain pill he'd taken half an hour before. "You have plenty of talents—cooking just doesn't happen to be one of them."

Jazz shifted his position so that he could kiss Chris' jaw. "Thanks."

"No problem." Chris could feel his eyes starting to unfocus. "Love you."

"Love you, too. You okay? You wanna go to bed?"

"Would I have to get up and walk?"

"Um, yeah, unless you want me to drag you up the stairs. I don't know if I'm strong enough to carry you in anything other than a life-or-death situation."

"Okay, okay," Chris hauled himself to his feet, but Jazz stood up with him so his arm was still around Jazz's shoulder. "You coming, too?" he asked, surprised.

"I'll get you settled and come back and turn off the oven. Do I put them in the fridge? Assuming I manage not to drop them on the floor, I mean?"

"Mm-hmm." Chris could tell that he was walking up the stairs, but he couldn't feel his feet. It was strange, but not completely unpleasant.

When Jazz pressed him down onto the bed, he closed his eyes and let himself drift away, safe at home.

Chapter 10

They tell them that if Jazz doesn't wake up soon, he's going to have rehabilitation issues—all of this lying around, not moving, will start deteriorating his muscles, tightening his tendons, slowly but surely. Chris isn't sure why they tell them this. Is it because they're trying to prepare them for the eventuality that Jazz won't wake up, thinking that this information will make them feel better somehow? Or is it that they just don't realize that telling them about something they can't change is like slow torture?

There are moments when Chris is positive that Jazz is going to wake up; a tiny twitch of a facial muscle here, a finger moving there. He hopes.

"Are you gonna look at that all night?" Jazz moaned. His bare feet were propped up on the arm of the couch, his only clothing a pair of worn jeans that were soft to the touch and just a little too big for him. He'd shoveled snow at work all day, and since he'd met Chris at his house that evening he'd been complaining about how sore he was.

Chris had sent him off to have a long hot bath while he cooked dinner, and now that they'd eaten they were lounging in the living room. Chris was sitting in a chair and flipping through a magazine, not really reading it.

"You want me to rub your feet?" he asked, putting the magazine down on the floor and getting up.

"Yes, please." Jazz shifted back to make room for Chris, and put his feet into Chris' lap.

"It'd be better with some lotion or something," Chris said, starting to rub anyway.

Jazz let his head fall back onto the couch and groaned in pleasure. "Feels fantastic this way. God, you've got great hands. It doesn't hurt?"

He was referring to the hand Chris had injured. "No, it's all healed up. Well, the scar tissue is a little bit tender if I poke it, so..."

"Yeah, don't poke it."

Chris concentrated on massaging Jazz's feet—he rubbed at the arches with his thumbs, deep sturdy presses that dug down in between the tendons. He flexed and curled each foot, then curled and straightened each toe individually. Jazz's eyes were closed and Chris could feel the muscles in his legs gradually relaxing as he started to doze. He must be worn out—Jazz almost never fell asleep before ten or eleven at night, no matter what he'd done during the day.

"Don't fall asleep," Chris said, feeling bad about keeping him awake but knowing Jazz would be unbearably sore if he slept where he was.

"Won't," said Jazz, in a voice that sounded like he already had.

"I'm serious." Chris swung Jazz's legs over onto the floor and patted his knee. "You won't be able to move in the morning if I let you sleep here. Do you want some dessert or something?"

Jazz opened one eye. "We got any of that pie left?"

"I don't know; it's your house. I wasn't here last night, remember? Did you eat all of it, or not?"

"I don't know," said Jazz. "You weren't here last night."
Chris looked at him in confusion.

"If you weren't around, it's not important enough for me to remember," Jazz explained, with an expression on his face that said he refused to feel silly about it.

"Oh." Chris felt himself flush. "Um ... thanks." He stood up and went into the kitchen, calling back over his shoulder, "Any idea where the pie would be, if there was any left?"

"Top of the fridge?" said Jazz from directly behind him, moving past him to grab the box. "Oh, yum, pie. You want some?"

"Sure. Just a little."

Chris toyed with his slice of pie and watched as Jazz wolfed his down. For the past four or five weeks, he hadn't been able to stop thinking about the differences between Jazz and Drake. In some ways, he thought it was strange that he'd been attracted to both of them—Drake was so aloof, Jazz so friendly. Where Drake was casual in a detached way, Jazz was casual in an open, accepting way.

What it all came down to, in the end, was that Chris wanted to live with Jazz. He was ready, but somehow that didn't make him any less nervous about saying it out loud. He'd been thinking it for the past two weeks, gradually building up more and more steam behind the idea.

He looked up to see Jazz staring at him. "What?"

"That's what I was gonna say. What's with you?"

"I don't know. Nothing." Chris knew he sounded defensive. God, he was such an idiot. He couldn't even manage to think without it being totally apparent. To Jazz, at least.

"Really." Jazz didn't sound convinced, and no wonder.

For a minute Chris thought all of the feelings and words and ideas in him were going to rise up from his chest and choke him. He couldn't separate them from each other, not enough to be able to say what he wanted to say. What *did* he want to say?

"Give me a minute, okay? I'm ... trying to sort something out."

"Okay." Jazz used the side of his fork to scrape little bits of piecrust off his plate, and then licked the fork and repeated the motion. He looked like he was trying to be nonchalant, but he wasn't succeeding.

"I was thinking..." Chris started.

"Mm-hmm?"

"That maybe ... no, that I would—if you still wanted—that I'd like to move in. Here. With you." As if that didn't make him sound like the world's biggest moron.

Jazz sat up a little straighter in his chair, but continued to scrape at his plate with the edge of his fork. "Really?"

"Yeah. If you still wanted."

"You sure?"

Chris nodded slowly. "I'm not saying ... I mean, I might still freak out about it. But that doesn't mean I don't want to. I was thinking ... my lease is up at the end of February. And it's not like I have a lot of stuff to move ... none of the furniture, anyway."

"That's true." Jazz was still scraping at his plate like he was trying to take the design off it. "We wouldn't need to rent

a truck or anything ... Really?" He looked up at Chris then, and the smile that flashed across his face was brilliant.

"I take it it's okay with you?"

"Of course it's okay. It's better than okay—I'm thrilled. Are you sure?"

"I think so." Chris smiled ruefully, knowing that he sounded anything but sure.

"Are you really sure?"

"As sure as I'm going to get, I think," Chris said. "I don't know ... I think another year could go by and I'd still be nervous. I think five years could go by and I'd still be nervous. It's not about you, you know?"

"So you keep telling me," said Jazz, and Chris couldn't help but think he looked unconvinced.

He slid his chair over closer to Jazz and took hold of the hand that wasn't gripping the fork. "It's not you, Jazz," he said earnestly. "I'm sorry I don't ... I don't have a lot of flowery words to tell you. To let you know how ... well, how important you are. To me. And ... it's not you. Whatever issues I have, they're in my own mind."

Jazz leaned in and kissed him, gently. "Okay. Sorry if it seems like I need a lot of convincing."

"We seem to be doing that multiple-apology thing again, don't we?"

"Yeah. Two sorry guys," Jazz said. They were both smiling. "So ... when were you thinking you might move in? If you decided to, I mean."

"Middle of the month? That'd give me a couple of weeks to move my stuff before my lease runs out—it'd be less

stressful, we wouldn't have to move everything all at once. I could just do it a little at a time."

"Sounds good to me."

"And I'll pay rent—whatever you think is fair, and we can split all the bills. And I'll cook..."

"That'd probably be a good idea, considering what happened to the quiche the last time you let me help."

"And I don't think I'm going to be really annoying to live with—I mean, we've been spending an awful lot of time together anyway, and I'll try not to—"

"Chris," Jazz said sharply, leaning in and kissing him again. "Relax. Take a deep breath. It's gonna be fine."

Chris did as instructed. "Right. I know, you're right." He smiled shakily. "Told you I might still freak out, didn't I?"

Jazz stood up and took his plate to the sink. "You gonna eat that?"

"No." Chris handed the plate over so that Jazz could finish what he hadn't eaten, which Jazz did in about three bites, putting that plate into the sink with the first one and coming over to Chris, standing next to him with a funny grin on his face.

"What?" Chris asked.

"I was just thinking about how gorgeous you are."

Chris could feel himself blushing. "I'm not gorgeous."

"Yeah, you are." Jazz sank down onto his knees and stretched up to kiss Chris, a long, open-mouthed kiss with plenty of tongue that ended with a sharp nip to Chris' bottom lip. "Fucking gorgeous," Jazz repeated.

Chris groaned as Jazz's hand found its way into his lap and began to fondle him gently. Jazz kissed him again, harder.

"So fucking gorgeous I get hard every time I look at you," said Jazz.

Chris groaned again, desperately fucking Jazz's mouth with his tongue. He wondered if Jazz knew how hot all the talking made him, and suspected that Jazz did.

"Get naked," Jazz said suddenly, and moved back so that Chris could obey.

In less than a minute, Chris was undressed and being pushed back onto the chair he'd been sitting on, a mostly naked Jazz climbing onto his lap while clutching a bottle of lube. Where the heck had that come from?

Jazz's knees were on either side of Chris' thighs, balanced precariously on the edges of the chair. He held the bottle of lube directly over Chris' cock and let some drizzle down, then used his other hand to slick it over Chris' skin. Chris let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding and grabbed Jazz around the waist to help steady him—he could feel Jazz's thigh muscles trembling from the strain of balancing his weight on such little space.

When Jazz dropped the bottle onto the floor and reached around to prepare himself, Chris thought he might come right then just from the look on Jazz's face. Pure pleasure, and the way his other hand on Chris' shoulder clamped down ... Chris could imagine the slick warmth of Jazz around his own fingers, could almost feel the way Jazz tightened around him. He gasped and leaned forward to lick at Jazz's nipple, as much to distract himself as Jazz.

A low moan was Jazz's response, and he shifted his weight again, his cock stuttering against Chris' chest as he raised himself up. His hand grabbed onto Chris, guiding him, and then he was lowering himself down, impaling himself on Chris' cock.

Chris fastened his teeth around Jazz's nipple and bit, gently, as Jazz settled his ass into the curve of Chris' lap. Jazz's cock was trapped between them, begging for release as it twitched against Chris' belly.

"Oh, fuck," said Jazz in a low voice. "God, Chris..."

The angle wasn't perfect, and Chris had to slouch into a position that made his lower back ache, but he was strong enough to hang on to Jazz, support some of Jazz's weight as he leaned backward to make the ride smoother. Jazz's legs were trembling again, and his movements as he slid up and then back down on Chris were jerky, unsmooth.

Chris switched his concentration to Jazz's other nipple. With his face right up against Jazz's chest, he could smell Jazz—sharp and salty like sweat, sweet like soap, and, drifting over the other scents, a faint odor of incense. He could feel his balls drawing up close to his body and he lifted his face to look at Jazz.

Jazz's eyes were closed, his expression one of intensity, but he must have sensed Chris' gaze because he opened his eyes and stared down into Chris'.

"Chris ... oh, fuck. Fuck me..."

Jazz's legs were trembling more pronouncedly now, and Chris could tell he was nearing the end of his strength. Chris gripped Jazz more tightly around the waist and lifted slightly,

then pistoned his hips up and down, slamming back and forth between the chair against his ass and Jazz around his cock.

"Oh, God," Jazz said, and his fingertips were digging into Chris' shoulders. "Oh, I'm so close. You're so good inside me and I'm gonna ... oh, fuck, I'm gonna come, Chris..." And then Jazz was shouting and he clamped down around Chris like a vise; there was no way Chris would have been able to withstand that, even if he hadn't been so close to coming himself.

Chris bucked up into Jazz, feeling the tightness around him squeezing and releasing as Jazz came, and exploded. In an effort to keep from screaming, he bit down on Jazz's chest, trying not to break the skin but not sure if he was succeeding. The pulses of pleasure were so intense that all he could do was shudder until it was over, Jazz moaning and shifting his hips, pressing his already-spent cock against Chris' wet belly.

After a moment in which they both concentrated on breathing, Jazz leaned back, pulled Chris' face up to his, and kissed Chris fiercely.

"You bit me," he said in wonder, and then continued before Chris could apologize. "*Cool.*"

"I didn't mean to," Chris said. "It just kind of happened."

Jazz was inspecting the spot, which was reddened and even slightly purpled where the edge of Chris' teeth had sunk in. "No, it's good. It felt good."

"Doesn't look like it would." Chris brushed his fingers over it and sighed.

"It's good," repeated Jazz, and kissed Chris again before shifting his weight slightly. "Okay, I need to get up soon or I don't think I'm going to be able to."

Chris helped Jazz stand up on his cramped legs and they both found their clothes and got somewhat dressed—it was too cold to be hanging around naked.

"I wish we hadn't finished that pie," Jazz said conversationally. "I'm hungry again."

"You're always hungry."

"Yeah, what can I say?" Jazz grabbed onto Chris' ass and kissed him again. "I'm a man with an appetite."

Thank God for that, Chris thought to himself.

* * * *

Chris likes the quiet of the kitchen in the early morning, before he leaves for work, on the mornings when Richard doesn't get up with him. He often stands at the window and looks out as he drinks his first cup of coffee. The roses are just about dead now, and there are so many herbs in the raised bed that Judy put in that they're just a giant tangle—he can't distinguish one from another.

It was never the silence that he liked best about this house, but he likes it now because it gives him time to think, alone, without anyone else's burdens on his shoulders.

"Are you sure that's all of it?" asked Jazz, pushing some loose locks of hair back behind his ear.

Chris clapped his mittened hands together to knock off the worst of the snow and kicked at the porch door again in an attempt to get it to close. Figured he had to finish moving in

the middle of a freaking snowstorm. "Yeah, I hope so. But they said they'd call me if they found anything I'd left behind, so it's fine."

"They say anything about the couch?"

"No, but I don't think they've been in there yet. They said something about sending me my security deposit in six weeks ... little do they know." Chris finished prying his boots off and left them and his coat on the porch.

"Poor couch. At least we got some extra use out of it, since it was already stained." Jazz wagged his eyebrows at Chris and looked around at the piles of boxes and bags in the kitchen. "Are you sure this is everything?"

"Pretty sure. But I've been moving stuff for weeks now—just not whole car loads, you know?"

"Yeah. Upstairs?"

"Mm ... most of it. I'm not sure which bits go where. Anyway, you should just let me deal with it."

Jazz peered inside a plastic grocery store bag. "Bathroom stuff," he announced. "And I wanna help."

"Okay, well that one and ... this one, I guess, can go upstairs. I'll just figure out which ones stay down here..." Chris was pawing through the bags, trying to find the ones that held his kitchen gadgets. He didn't notice when Jazz left to go upstairs. While he was sorting through some more stuff, Jazz came and went a few more times. By the time Chris had looked up again, most of the boxes and bags were either gone or unpacked.

He went upstairs and found Jazz in the—their—bedroom, putting his clothes away in drawers.

Jazz looked up. "I'm just putting these here for now," he said quickly. "You can rearrange them however you want. I just thought..."

"Thanks," Chris said simply. "You don't have to help."

"Want to. Jeez, Chris, it's not like I'm doing you some big favor letting you move in here. I want you, you know?"

"I know, it's just..." Chris shrugged helplessly. "Well, anyway, thanks." He moved to the boxes on the floor and started handing the folded clothes to Jazz. "We'll have to get another bureau," he said finally, when the drawers were full.

Jazz shook his head. "There's plenty of room on the shelves in the closet—we can rearrange stuff until we get everything where we want it." He piled a few smaller boxes into bigger one and crumpled up the bags. "I'm hungry. You want a sandwich or something?"

"Sure—come on."

They ate grilled cheese sandwiches with tomato while Chris slowly came to the realization that this was actually his home. It had sunk in, partially, when he'd taken a long last look at his mostly empty apartment, but now it seemed more immediate.

"I'm glad your mom is okay with this," he said finally. "I hate to think what it would be like if she wasn't."

"You know she likes you. And it's not like she doesn't know I'm gay—if I'm not going to give her any grandchildren, at least she can have you as an extra bonus son."

"Speaking of which, I need to call my parents and let them know I moved."

"You haven't told them yet?"

"No—it's not like they're still sending me care packages or anything. I didn't even go home for my birthday this year, which I know I'm going to keep hearing about until next year..."

"You should call and get it over with," Jazz said. "You're just gonna keep obsessing about it until you do."

Chris sighed. "Yeah, you're probably right. I just hate to do it, you know? There're going to be all kinds of questions that I don't feel like answering, and it's going to degenerate into this long unpleasant silence that'll make me want to scream."

"So when it gets to that point, hang up. And then scream, if it makes you feel any better." Jazz reached over and poked his arm. "Go on. Do it."

"Now?"

"Yes, now. It's not gonna get any easier if you wait."

"But I—"

"*Chris.*" Jazz spoke firmly, and it was obvious he was trying to get through to him. "Seriously. You're going to be miserable until you do this, and I don't want to have to watch you being miserable. Call."

For a minute Chris felt pissed off—who the hell was Jazz to tell him what to do and when to do it? But the more rational part of him insisted that Jazz was right, and that he'd be relieved when it was over. Better to get it done.

"Okay," he said. "I'm gonna—I think I'll use the phone upstairs."

"Okay." Jazz looked at him seriously. "Good luck."

"Thanks."

Chris climbed the stairs reluctantly. Chances were good his mother wouldn't give him too hard a time—oh, there would be the expected barbs about his failure to come home for his birthday, the typical guilt-trip about his lack of visits in general—but it wouldn't be unusual.

He sat on the bed and dialed the number, aware that something inside of his chest was trembling slightly. The phone rang three times before it was picked up on the other end.

"Hello?"

Damn, it was his father. He hadn't thought about the fact that it was the weekend. "Hello, Dad, it's Chris." Yeah, because he wouldn't want his father to think that it was one of his other sons.

"Christian. Your mother's not home."

"Oh. Well, I was just calling to let you know that I've moved in with a friend. I wanted to make sure you had my new address."

"You moved? Why the hell did you do that? That was a nice apartment you had, Christian. I hope you didn't do anything to lose your lease."

"No, Dad, I left because I wanted to move in with my friend." Chris tried to be patient, knowing he didn't sound it.

"Is this some woman? You know your mother and I don't approve of couples living together before marriage..."

"Yes, Dad, I know. And no, it's not a woman."

"I don't know, Christian. I wasn't thrilled the last time you had a roommate—it doesn't look right, two men living together. People might get the wrong impression."

The temptation to force his father to say out loud what that impression might be was strong, but Chris let it pass. "It's a nice house," he said mildly. "And he's a nice guy. It's less expensive than living alone."

"If you'd done something more with your life, you wouldn't have to worry about finances," his father continued. "You do realize that these dot com industries are on the verge of collapse, don't you?"

"My company's doing really well. I'm not worried about losing my job."

His father let out a snort. "I'm busy. Do you want me to have your mother call you back?"

God, no. "That's okay. Just let me give you my new address and phone number." Chris recited them and waited while his father presumably wrote them down.

"All right. I'll tell her you called."

"Yes, thanks."

"Goodbye."

"Bye, Dad."

For the first time in a long time ... well, maybe for the first time ever—all Chris felt was anger and disgust at his father. He was more used to feeling ashamed, to feeling as if he were a disappointment no matter what he did. This anger was new. What the hell was that about, anyway? He shouldn't live with a woman *or* a man? He wondered again if his parents suspected that he was gay. Would that explain his father's distaste, if he knew or thought he knew?

Chris wanted to punch a wall or break something, but that was stupid and juvenile and—oh, look, the phone was in

pieces on the floor. He honestly had no memory of having thrown it, which he thought rather absently kind of sucked. If he was going to break things, he ought to at least get some satisfaction out of it. Sighing, he picked up the three pieces—two of the phone, one the battery pack—and snapped the thing back together; when he pushed the button it still seemed to work. Good.

He put the phone back on the base and turned to find Jazz standing in the doorway watching him.

"Sorry," Chris said sheepishly, gesturing at the phone.

"It still works, doesn't it?"

"Yeah."

"No harm, no foul." Jazz smiled. "How'd it go?"

"My mom wasn't home, so I had to talk to my dad." Chris shrugged. "It went ... about the same as it always does, except I ended up pissed off instead of depressed."

"What was different?"

Chris thought about that for a minute. It wasn't like his father had acted any differently than usual—in fact, it was possible that some of the phrases had been identical to ones he'd used in previous conversations. "I don't know," he said finally. "Nothing. Me, maybe."

"Different you, huh?"

"Maybe."

"So, assuming this different you is still into cooking, you wanna come downstairs and help me rearrange the kitchen stuff? I was going to suggest that you do it a while ago, and now that we've got all of your stuff to add to all of my stuff..."

"Sure."

They went downstairs and started to rummage through the cabinets, unearthing things neither of them even recognized; Jazz said he couldn't remember having sorted through things after he'd moved in.

"Why would I?" he asked reasonably. "It's not like I was doing much more than heating water. And microwaving frozen stuff, but I brought the microwave in myself."

"No, it makes sense," said Chris, looking dubiously at the cord of an old-fashioned waffle maker. "I think this had better go—I don't think it's safe."

"Good thing we've got all these boxes," said Jazz, piling the discarded stuff into one of them. "What about this?" He held up a blue glass bottle.

"It might look nice on the windowsill."

There was a knock at the door.

"Well, fuck," said Jazz, glancing out the window over the sink. "It's still snowing like crazy. Who the hell could that be?"

He went over to open the door while Chris tried to decide how many wooden spoons they really needed, anyway. Eight just seemed excessive, no matter how much cooking he might do.

Chris heard the door open. Heard Jazz suck in a breath of air as a low voice said, "Hi, Jazz."

Jazz said, "Richard."

And then silence, and Chris turned to see a large man looming in the doorway.

There was more silence, as they all stood there.

Finally, Jazz seemed to recover slightly. "This is Chris. Chris, this is Richard ... my ex."

Chapter 11

Chris watches them sleep.

Richard is peaceful, the lines that are around his eyes from trying to read too often without his glasses smoothed out. His nose is straight and perfect and his lips look thin but relaxed. His smile lines are still visible, even when he's asleep. Chris thinks that he can almost see the younger man Richard came from, while he's breathing evenly and dreaming of investments and the designer suits that he likes but never wears.

Jazz is peaceful, too, but in a different way. It's like all of the energy within Jazz is sleeping, lurking just below the surface and waiting for someone to wake it up. Like if Chris could wake up that energy, Jazz would wake as well. And as much as he wants Jazz to wake up, he loves to look at him like this, when there's no one and nothing to stop him from staring and marveling and hurting. It's a beautiful pain that Jazz invokes in him.

"Richard," Chris said, and wasn't sure whether to offer to shake the man's hand, or not. Finally he decided that the moment to had come and gone, and turned to look at Jazz.

Jazz looked—well, stunned would be about the right word for it. He looked like someone who had had everything all arranged, only to be told that the world was going to turn upside down.

Chris felt like the world had already turned upside down. Here was the ex that he'd heard so much about—well, he hadn't known the man's name was Richard, because Jazz had

never actually said his name—standing in front of him like a real person. Chris hadn't thought too much about what Richard would look like; he was surprised that Richard was so good-looking.

Jazz shook his head. "No," he said. He moved past Richard and went out the still-open door onto the porch, rummaging around for his boots.

Chris stepped past Richard as well, cringing as his socks came in contact with the slowly melting snow on the wooden floor. "Jazz. Jazz." He shut the door between the house and the porch, trying for some sort of privacy.

Jazz was too focused on tying his boots to look up. "I can't stay," he said.

"Jazz. Come on. You can't just..."

"I need some air," Jazz said. "It's too much, I need some time to ... I'm just gonna take a walk."

"Jazz, it's *snowing*. There's like two feet of snow on the ground. Where the hell are you going to go?"

"For a walk," Jazz repeated. "It's just snow."

Chris grabbed Jazz's upper arm and held on tight. He didn't know what to say to keep Jazz from walking out on him.

Jazz's eyes met Chris', then, and his face softened. "It's okay," he said, his voice losing some of its panic. "I'm just gonna take a walk. I'm coming back."

"Half an hour," Chris bargained. "You'll freeze, otherwise."

"I'll be okay. I'm gonna come back—it's just a walk."

"Okay." Chris started to release Jazz's arm, and then found himself pulling Jazz into his arms, instead. He kissed Jazz

with a need born of desperation and fear. "Come back," he said, and let Jazz go.

Jazz pulled on his coat, yanked a hat down over his hair. "Half an hour." His eyes said more.

Chris nodded and went back into the house, closing the door. Not saying anything to Richard, he went into the dining room and watched as Jazz struggled out into the snow. He watched until Jazz disappeared in the haze of white, like the snow had swallowed Jazz up.

"Is he okay?" Richard was standing in the doorway.

Chris shrugged. "I think you just surprised the crap out of him. Couldn't you have called or something?"

Richard looked ashamed. "I thought about it. I was afraid ... I didn't know if he'd see me, if I..."

Chris went back into the kitchen and put the kettle on the stovetop. Jazz would be cold when he got back; he'd want coffee or maybe hot chocolate. Belatedly, Chris thought out loud, "You want some tea or something?"

Richard shook his head. "I'm good. Thanks. It's..."

"What?" Chris asked after a minute.

"I'm sorry. This is awkward and you're caught up in it. I'm sure you're a nice guy. Sunny said..."

"You talked to Sunny?"

"Yeah. I called her, about a week ago. I wanted to know how he was ... I was hoping..."

Chris caught this. "You were hoping he wasn't seeing anyone."

"Sunny said you guys are serious, that you're moving in."

"I already did." Chris gestured to a couple of empty cardboard boxes in the corner.

Richard nodded. His hair was brown, dark like walnut, and had some natural curl to it. He had the sort of lips that seemed to be constantly struggling to smile, even when the circumstances didn't warrant it. "I see."

"You want to..." Chris struggled with being welcoming, despite all the reasons he didn't want to be, "...come in the other room, sit down?"

"Okay."

When they were sitting it was worse, because they didn't want to look at each other—at least, not while the other was noticing—and there wasn't anything to do but look around the room.

"Is it weird to be back here?" Chris asked finally.

Richard did look at him, then. "I guess. It looks different ... when Jazz's grandmother lived here, it was ... well, some of it's the same, I guess. Those tables—" and he pointed. "And that lamp, I think. But before it was more old-fashioned looking, now it's more ... lived in."

"Are you back in town for long?" Chris realized he didn't know where Richard had been all this time. He didn't think Jazz had known.

Richard looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure," he said. "It depends on some things."

"Like Jazz?" Chris couldn't believe he was being so blunt—he felt like an ass, but on some level it also felt good to be ... what? Protecting Jazz, like he was some kind of possession?

"Not just that, but yes."

"You're still in love with him."

"Wouldn't you be?"

Chris had to admit that Richard had a point there.

"Probably. Well, yeah, I guess I would." He tried to think about living without Jazz, and the cold feeling that had been sitting in the pit of his stomach without him even realizing it lurched around, knocking at him.

"I've thought about him every day since he left me," Richard said. "Every day. I didn't even want to leave town, but I was afraid that if I stayed I'd do something I'd regret—keep calling him, try to find excuses to bump into him. I was driving our friends crazy, asking what he was doing, who he was seeing, if he was okay..."

"So you left. Where'd you go?"

"New York."

"Not far, then."

"No. I always thought I'd come back."

"Where are you going to stay?"

Richard shrugged. "At a hotel for now. If it looks like I might be staying longer, I'll get something else. My business is pretty flexible—I can do it from anywhere."

"What do you do?"

"Stock market."

He might as well have said 'rocket scientist' for how much that meant to Chris, but he nodded as if he understood. "Oh."

"How about you?"

"Web designer."

"Huh. You don't look like..." Richard trailed off, looking embarrassed.

"What?"

Richard waved a hand at him. "Sorry, you know, the type. You're all buff and..." He looked even more embarrassed. If Chris had been in a better mood, he would have thought it was cute. "Never mind."

"I didn't know your name," Chris said without thinking.

"What?"

He wished he'd kept his mouth shut, but he couldn't take it back now. "Jazz never ... he never used your name. It was always 'my ex' this and 'my ex' that."

The little smile looked good on Richard. "Huh. Did he ... talk about me a lot?"

"Not a lot, but some. He told me about, you know, what happened with your cousin, and what happened after that..."

"Right." The smile had been replaced by an expression Chris couldn't even begin to decipher. "Did he tell you what an ass I was?"

"Um..." Sort of.

"I was an ass," Richard said, as if providing clarification.

"Yeah, I think I got that part. How exactly?" Chris was curious to see what Richard would say.

"After ... well, after, I was ... I couldn't stop thinking about it. I know, now, that I was being overprotective. Hell, I think I even knew it then. I just didn't know how to stop myself."

"He did say you kind of drove him nuts."

"Drove him right out of my life, more like," Richard said, and Chris thought he could detect a hint of bitterness in his tone. "He was ready to move on, and I was ... I was still

stuck back in that same spot, you know? I was dragging him down."

"You aren't mad that he left?"

"At the time I was. 'Mad' isn't a strong enough word. Furious? I thought he was crazy, walking away from the best thing he ever had." Richard smiled ruefully. "I know, ego. And no offense."

"Right. Hang on a sec, okay?" Chris got up and went back to the window, looking out at the falling snow, but there was no sign of Jazz. He hoped Jazz wouldn't get lost and freeze his ass off in the snow.

"He's not back?" Richard asked.

"Not yet."

"I should have called. I didn't mean to send him out into the snow."

"Well, he just needed some time to think, I guess."

"If he were anyone else he could have done his thinking upstairs, huh?"

But Jazz wasn't anyone else, and wasn't that the whole point? "I think he needed to move."

"He never was one for sitting still." Richard sighed. "From the first time I set eyes on him until the day he left me, I don't think I ever saw him sitting down for longer than it took to eat a meal. Usually not even that long."

It bothered Chris that Richard knew Jazz so well. Hell, it bothered him that the guy was sitting here in Jazz's living room while Jazz was out walking in two feet of snow, trying to think—or maybe trying to avoid thinking. Chris went back to

the window again, and still didn't see anyone; not that it had been half an hour yet.

There was a noise from the kitchen as the door opened.

Chris headed for the kitchen, not paying attention to whether or not Richard was following him. Jazz stood in the doorway, the ends of his hair that stuck out from under his hat coated with snow.

A wave of relief that Jazz had actually come back washed over Chris. "You okay?" he asked.

"Yeah. And I came to at least one conclusion," Jazz answered.

"What's that?" said Richard quietly from behind Chris.

"I want you to get the fuck out of my house."

* * * *

By the end of the second week, Chris cancels the phone in Jazz's room. It's convenient to have it there—better than going down the hall to the pay phone if someone needs to make a call—but he doesn't like the idea of it ringing and ringing when no one but Jazz is in the room. It just seems wrong, somehow, for Jazz to have to listen to a phone that no one is going to answer.

Especially when it might be Richard on the other end of the line.

"I want you out of my house," Jazz repeated, when Richard and Chris both stood there, momentarily stunned. "This is my house, and I say who's here and who's not."

Richard nodded. "That's fair. I'm sorry—I shouldn't have just burst in on you like this."

"No kidding." Jazz's voice was flat, but his eyes flickered to Chris' for a second as if looking for support.

"Can I call you? Just to talk?" Richard was pulling gloves out of his coat pocket.

Jazz looked uncertain. He shifted his weight to his other foot, glanced down at the floor. "Yeah. Okay. Just ... give me a couple of days, okay?"

"I will." Richard turned to Chris but didn't offer his hand. "Nice to meet you," he said.

"You, too."

Jazz moved further into the kitchen to let Richard pass by, and sighed audibly when the outside door closed against the snow. He stepped back onto the porch and took off his boots and hat, shaking his head to remove some of the snow from his hair before coming back into the kitchen and closing the door.

Chris stood there awkwardly. "Good walk?" he asked.

"It's cold," said Jazz. "So, no."

"I was going to make you some coffee. Or hot chocolate?" Chris moved to the stove and turned the heat under the kettle up to bring the water to a boil.

"Coffee would be great." Jazz rinsed out the French press and spooned ground coffee into it. Then he sighed and went over and leaned against Chris' back, one arm around his waist.

All Chris could do in that position was hug Jazz's arm, so he did that with as much feeling as he could. Jazz leaned his forehead against the back of Chris' shoulder and sighed again, more heavily this time.

"That was quite a surprise, wasn't it," Chris said.

"Oh, yeah, it was definitely that, all right."

"You okay?"

"I don't know. I mean, yeah, sure I am. Just ... like you said, surprised."

"Did you think you wouldn't ever see him again?"

"I guess. I'd heard he'd moved out of state—he kept in touch with Sunny, and once I knew that I asked her not to mention him. I didn't want to always be wondering when she'd bring him up—kinda like having a bomb dropped on you, you know?"

"Yeah." The water was boiling so Chris moved away enough to pour some over the coffee grounds in the pot. He put the top on the French press and turned around, noting how white Jazz's hands were. He took one between his own. "You're freezing," he said. "Why don't you go take a shower, and I'll bring you the coffee in a couple of minutes?"

Jazz nodded rather listlessly. "Yeah, that's ... okay, thanks."

Chris waited three minutes for the coffee to steep and then pressed the grounds to the bottom of the pot and poured coffee into a mug. He went up the stairs and into the bedroom, putting the mug down on top of the dresser.

"Jazz? Coffee's ready," he called through the open bathroom door.

"Thanks," Jazz said back, his voice muffled.

Chris went into the bathroom and leaned against the sink. "You okay in there?"

"Yeah. Just thinking."

"Do you want to ... I mean, you could tell me about what happened with Richard. If you wanted to."

"You mean after. Well..." There was a long pause, and then Jazz started talking again. "It'd been going on for a while, the watching me, the wanting to know where I was every second. Then this one night, I went out to play pool with Sunny—did you know we went through a pool phase—and I totally forgot to call him. I was supposed to call at like eight or something, and before I knew it, it was almost ten. And then I realized my phone wasn't even on, and as soon as I turned it on it rang and it was Richard."

"He was worried?" Chris ventured.

"He was pissed. Well, underneath the pissed off part I guess he was worried, but I didn't really hear that at the time. I just heard him yelling at me, telling me that I was supposed to call and I didn't, and how I was irresponsible. I ... finally I hung up on him. Turned the phone back off."

"What did Sunny say?"

"She tried to get me to talk about it, but I was too pissed off. I wanted to go home and throw the phone in his face. I wanted to punch him in the face. I mean, I wouldn't have, but I wanted to, you know?" Jazz waited for a response.

Chris nodded. "Yeah, I know."

"And the more I thought about it on the way home, the more pissed I got. But it was, like, a quiet pissed. I wasn't angry, I was burning. And underneath it was this pain in my gut, because I knew I couldn't stay with him. I knew I had to go, and I didn't want to go."

"You still have any hot water in there?" Chris asked, despite the steam wafting out into the bedroom.

"Yeah, it's good. So then..." Jazz paused. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No," Chris lied.

"I told him, and I left. It was almost harder because I knew I was doing the right thing. Does that make any sense?"

"I don't know."

Jazz turned off the water and slid the shower curtain back, reaching for a towel. He scrubbed it over his hair vigorously, messing it into a glorious tangle. "God, I can't believe he just fucking showed up here at the door without even calling or anything. What a fuckhead." His brow was furrowed.

"He wanted to see you. I'd want to see you, if it were me."

Jazz was keyed up again. "So why the fuck didn't he just call?"

"Hey, I'm not defending him," said Chris, holding up his hands. "I was just telling you what he said."

"Yeah? Well did he say why the fuck he suddenly decided he had to see me *now*, after all this time? Damn it! Just when we've got a good thing going here, he had to come barging in and fuck me all up. It's not fair!"

"He said he missed you."

"Well, I fucking missed him, too, for a long time!" Jazz looked like he wanted to explode. "Fuck. Fuck. Fuck."

"Come on, get out of there and come drink your coffee."

Jazz dried himself off and put on his bathrobe, sat down on the edge of the bed, and sipped at the coffee. "Thanks," he said.

"No problem. Is there anything ... well, if you want to talk about him, I'm here." The last thing Chris wanted was to hear more about Richard, but if Jazz needed to talk, he'd listen.

"Yeah." Subdued, Jazz stared at the surface of his coffee. Water from his wet hair was dripping down onto his robe.

Chris went into the bathroom and got a dry towel, then came back out and sat behind Jazz. Gently, he began to pat at Jazz's hair, drying it carefully as though he thought Jazz might break. "It's gonna be okay," he said.

"I know."

"Just give yourself some time."

"Yeah."

"You hungry? Want something to eat?"

"No, I'm good." Jazz sipped at his coffee again, and then suddenly turned his head and looked back at Chris. "Fuck," he said distinctly.

"I think you said that already."

"I kinda think I'm gonna be saying it a lot for the next couple of days." Jazz sounded apologetic.

"That's okay."

"It's really not. It's so not. It's not fair to you, Chris. It really, really sucks."

"It's not your fault, Jazz." Chris stopped drying Jazz's hair and patted his shoulder instead.

"I know. But this ... it's not the way I pictured us spending your first official day living here, you know?"

"Me either." Chris went and hung the towel in the bathroom, then came back and started combing the tangles

out of Jazz's damp hair with his fingers. "But it's okay. Really."

Jazz let his head tip back. "That feels great. You're so good to me."

"You sure you don't want a snack or something? I know it's a little early for dinner."

"I'm not hungry." Jazz sat up and turned around. "Whoa, that's not a good sign, is it?" There was a small smile playing at the corners of his lips.

"Not good at all," Chris agreed. "You must be sick."

"In the head," said Jazz, and leaned in to rest his head against Chris' chest.

Chris felt helpless and strong at the same time. He didn't know what he could do to help—didn't think there *was* anything he could do to help—but he'd be damned if he wouldn't try to keep being there for Jazz. "It's okay," he said, rubbing his hand across Jazz's hair.

Jazz nodded, his head still against Chris' chest. "It sucks."

"It's okay *and* it sucks?" Chris suggested.

"There you go. I just want to ... I don't know, hit something. Break something."

"There's always the phone. It survived my little tantrum pretty handily. I was actually thinking it might have supernatural powers."

Jazz chuckled and the sound went right into the center of Chris. To his heart, maybe.

"Supernatural powers," snorted Jazz. "Superphone."

"Exactly."

"You read too many comic books when you were a kid, didn't you?"

"I thought I might have seen a few boxes in the closet there that belonged to you," said Chris.

"Those are collector's items," Jazz said. "Gonna make a killing on eBay someday."

"Right."

Jazz sighed and slipped his arm around Chris' waist. "This still sucks."

"Yeah, and it's still okay. You sure you couldn't eat something?"

Jazz lifted his head. "Well ... maybe a muffin."

"Okay, come on." Chris stood up and went over to the doorway, and then stopped when he realized that Jazz was still sitting on the bed. His head was low, his hands over his face like he was trying to hide.

"You still love him, don't you?" asked Chris quietly.

Jazz didn't answer for a long time. "I love you," he said.

Chris waited.

Finally, "Yeah. And it's so fucking unfair—to me, and especially to you. But ... yeah. I still love him."

Chapter 12

When it happens, Richard keeps it together for hours. Through the long walk down the hallway, through the surgery, through everyone else's tears. He stands without expression but somehow seems to know how to ask the right questions. He gets coffee for Judy and for Chris, doesn't drink any himself, and keeps one hand on the back of Chris' neck for most of the first twenty-four hours, it seems.

Judy goes home to get a change of clothes, and Sunny and Greg finally leave, and Chris and Richard are allowed into the room with Jazz, who lies sleeping. It's then that Richard makes a little noise, a hitch of breath, a sigh, and as if he doesn't have any strength left in his body he slides to the floor, his head resting against Chris' knee. Chris tries to drag him back up, to hold him, to do something, but Richard just shakes his head. He's crying softly. And then after a few minutes he's sobbing viciously. Chris strokes Richard's head, fingers tangling in his hair, and Richard cries and cries and cries until it sounds like he can't breathe and the knees of Chris' slacks are soaked.

A nurse comes in and asks Chris if he thinks Richard should have a sedative, and eventually Chris nods.

When Chris got home that night, Jazz was at the dining room table stuffing envelopes. It was his latest get-rich-quick scheme, one that Chris didn't even want to begin to get involved with. He tried to ignore the whole endeavor, and gave silent thanks to Jazz's grandmother for not only leaving him the house, but a tidy nest egg as well.

"How's it going?" Chris asked from the kitchen.

"Fine. This takes forever, though."

"Hmm," he said noncommittally.

"Hey, can you come in here for a minute?"

Chris went and loitered in the doorway between the kitchen and the dining room. "What's up?"

"Um ... Richard called."

"Did he?"

"He wanted to know if I'd see him. To, you know, talk. He thought maybe he could take me—us—out to dinner some night."

Chris wasn't sure he'd really heard this correctly. But he was the boyfriend, right? It was his job to be understanding. "Well, yeah, you should do that. You've got stuff to work out."

"I told him I wouldn't go unless you'd come, too. I'd be too nervous."

Chris' heart, which had already been doing a strange little fluttering thing, beat more quickly for a minute. He took a deep breath and tried to slow it down. Not that he wanted to go out with Jazz and Richard and watch them have whatever conversation they were going to have about their old life together, but it was better than not being there.

"Are you sure that's a good idea? I mean, maybe you won't be able to talk with me there."

Jazz shook his head resolutely. "No. I won't go if you won't. And that doesn't mean you should feel like you have to go, because you don't."

"No, it's—that's okay. I don't mind. I do think it's probably a good idea for you to work this stuff out."

"You sound like my mom," Jazz said. "Therapy queen."

"Thanks a lot."

"No, not—I just meant, the talk-things-out thing, you know?" Jazz got up and came over to him, shoving himself up against Chris without preamble so that Chris could feel Jazz's erection. "God, I want you. Been thinking about you all day."

Chris felt a surge of desire. "Let's go upstairs," he said. "We can talk more later."

* * * *

They'd pretty much talked it to death by the time Friday night rolled around and they went to meet Richard. Jazz had had a few more phone conversations with Richard in the meantime, tense ones where he hung up looking tired and sad. When Chris asked him how it had gone, he'd just said that they were rehashing the same stuff over and over again.

Friday night was not a good night to have a relaxing meal in Boston. The place Richard had chosen was packed, so crowded that the people waiting for tables barely had room to breathe. Luckily, Chris and Jazz had had some trouble finding a place to park, and were a little late—Richard was already sitting at their table, so they were able to walk right on past the other people and sit down immediately.

"Sorry we're late," said Jazz. "I'd forgotten how bad parking is in the city."

"Yeah, so had I," Richard answered. "I should have just let you pick somewhere closer to your house. I wasn't thinking. Nice to see you again, Chris."

"You, too," Chris said, thinking that he wouldn't have minded if he'd never needed to see this man again for the rest of his life.

Richard grinned, the curve of his lips breaking the planes of his face into something less attractive and more beautiful. He smiled like a man who knew he was a gift. "You'd probably be happy to never have to see me again. It's okay to be honest, here. Not much point in us all getting together if it's going to be a balancing act."

"Okay," Chris said, letting out a long breath. "Yeah, I'm not thrilled to see you. To be—if we're being perfectly honest, at least part of me wishes you hadn't come back. But Jazz—he needs to get this stuff straightened out with you. So. I'm here."

"I can respect that," said Richard. "I'm glad you care enough to try to help." He paused as a bottle of wine was delivered to the table, tasted what the waiter poured, and then nodded. The waiter poured more wine into Chris' and Jazz's glasses and left the table.

Jazz sighed, and he looked tired again. "So what are we doing here, Richard? I mean—we've gone over this same stuff a bunch of times now, and it's not getting any easier. Clearer. Whatever."

"Then we need to go at it from a different angle. Maybe Chris can help with that?"

Chris considered this as he took a sip of wine. Really, really good wine. Quite possibly the best wine he'd ever ... right. "Where is it that you ... seem to be getting stuck?"

"Everywhere," said Jazz. He picked up his menu and started looking it over. Chris thought that maybe he was actually only pretending to look it over. "I don't see his point of view, he doesn't see mine, there's too much water under the bridge, and I don't have the energy to build a new one." He peered over the top of his menu at Richard. "Did I miss anything?"

Richard's expression was serious. "The part about me being willing to build the new bridge on my own, if I have to? As long as you're willing to let me."

"It's more about what Chris is willing to let you do," Jazz said guardedly. "He's my first priority."

Chris let himself savor this idea, like the wine, as they placed their dinner orders. First priority. He wasn't convinced he'd ever been anyone's first priority before.

When the waiter had left again, Jazz was looking at him worriedly.

Chris smiled and nudged Jazz's knee under the table. "Don't worry," he said. "We're going to figure this out, one way or another. It's okay."

Jazz's knee pressed back against his. "Okay. So ... what do you think?"

"About letting Richard back into your life?"

"Yeah." Jazz nodded, his eyes not leaving Chris' for an instant.

It hadn't escaped Chris' notice that they were talking as if Richard wasn't sitting right next to them. "What do you think? If it's not what you want, then ... oh, I see." For a moment the realization made Chris squirm, and then it slid on past—

maybe the wine helped with that. "You're asking for permission."

"It's not that simple," said Jazz. "I'm not asking—I'm ... trying to get inside your head. Trying to see what you really think. Because I don't want you to say yes if you're not okay with it. And I want to make sure you know I'm not asking to ... be *with* Richard. Just ... friends, you know? If we can figure out a way for that to work."

Chris nodded slowly. "Okay. I can see that. I don't want to be ... the kind of person that tells you who you can have as a friend, though."

"It's worse than that. It's helping me have him as a friend, because I'm not sure I can do that without you." Jazz covered his face with one hand and groaned. "God, this sucks. I'm so sorry we're doing this here. You and I should have had this conversation at home, or ... you're being put on the spot. Any answer you give is okay, Chris. Really. Any answer. Whatever you do, don't tell me what you think I want to hear."

Richard waited, very still, not interrupting the flow of their conversation.

"I don't know," Chris said. "I mean, it's hard for me to know, for sure, how hard this is going to be on you. And even if it turns out to be worth it, I'm not sure that I want to see you miserable in the meantime."

"Yeah." Jazz drained the rest of his glass of wine. "I'm not too crazy about the idea of being miserable, myself."

"But you'd like it, if you two could work things out enough to be friends."

"Yeah, I'd like it."

"What do you think?" Chris asked, turning to Richard.

"You know that I want Jazz back in my life, however I can get him. I won't lie—I won't pretend I don't want him as more than a friend—but I can tell you that I'll settle for friendship if it's all I can get."

Chris leaned back in his chair, trying to relax. "This is getting too—let's change the subject, for a little while. I think we could all use some breathing space."

Their food was delivered then, so they spent some time eating and then gradually the conversation somehow turned around to how Richard and Jazz met.

"I was disgusted with myself," Richard said. "Lusting after this poor innocent kid who obviously didn't know his ass from his elbow."

Jazz spoke quietly, but for the first time that evening he looked almost relaxed, as if he were slipping back into the past and it was a good place. "I knew what I wanted," he said. "You just didn't want to believe me because you thought I was too young."

"You *were* too young. I was in my thirties and you were seventeen."

"I was seventeen and I wanted you, and you wouldn't touch me until my eighteenth birthday." Jazz shook his head. "There were nights I thought I was gonna die if you didn't touch me."

Richard smiled. "It's not like I didn't want to. But it wasn't right. And I wasn't convinced that you..."

"What?" said Jazz finally.

"I wasn't sure you were really gay."

"You've got to be kidding me. I was *seventeen*. You think I didn't know by then?"

"I thought you might be confused," Richard said. "I thought your mom might have been right."

Jazz dropped his fork into his plate in disgust, the clank of silver on china loud despite the noise level in the restaurant. "You seriously thought that I was just looking for some kind of ... father figure? And then you slept with me anyway? That's really sick, Richard."

"Yes, that would be really sick, if it's what I'd done. But no, by that time you'd managed to convince me."

"It took an awful lot of hard work." There was a slight smirk playing around the corners of Jazz's mouth.

"I remember."

Chris was definitely starting to get that third wheel feeling. And he wasn't hungry anymore, even though he'd hardly touched the food on his plate. It was interesting, listening to the two of them talk, but interesting in a way that hurt his stomach and made his heart feel like it was trying to crawl up out through his throat.

Jazz looked over at him and then hitched his chair a little closer to Chris', reached out and took his hand. "You okay, babe? I'm sorry ... we're just going on and on."

"I'm okay. It's just ... it's awkward, you know? I feel like—well, part of me wants to drag you out of here and not come back."

"Yeah." Jazz kept his eyes on Chris', and Chris realized that they were back in that place where Richard wasn't. "I know. And if that's what you need to do, we can do it."

Chris shook his head. "I don't—I don't know what I need. I want you to be able to be friends, if that's what you want, but it's so complicated."

Richard leaned forward and Chris felt a flare of irritation at their moment being intruded upon, which faded when he heard what Richard was saying. "I'm not here to screw things up for you two, Chris. Honestly. I guess that's probably what I'd be saying even if I were, though, huh?"

"You want him back," Chris said flatly.

"I do, but I'm not here to separate the two of you," Richard repeated.

"Well, we can't *both* have him," said Chris, aware that his voice was reaching an edge near hysteria.

Jazz gripped onto his hand harder. "You've got me, Chris. This isn't a contest or ... shit, this isn't working. Come on, we're getting out of here." He stood up, dragging Chris to his feet with him.

"No," said Chris, suddenly seeing with perfect clarity what was happening. "I'm not—I can't say this is easy, but you can't run away from this again, Jazz. One way or another, you have to deal with it. We all do."

"Dealing with it's one thing, but having you feel threatened ... that's something else." But Jazz sat back down reluctantly.

"Maybe it would be better for you not to focus so much on where this is all headed, and just see if you guys even want to be friends again. It's been a long time ... you've probably both changed..." Chris tried not to sound hopeful.

"Much as I hate to admit it, he's probably got a point," said Richard. "Not that I don't want to admit you could be right,

Chris, just—I don't like the idea that we could have changed that much."

"What kind of stuff did you used to have in common?" Chris asked. He was imagining Richard saying that he really loved rap music, or that he'd gotten six dogs and they were like his children now. Or maybe that he hated coffee and couldn't stand to be around anyone who drank it. Something.

Jazz smiled. "Outdoorsy stuff, music, books, movies ... what else?"

"Food," said Richard. "Liking it, but not necessarily cooking it. Did you ever learn to cook?"

"No," Jazz said cheerfully. "I'm still a menace. I even managed to get Chris hurt right before the holidays, and he's good in the kitchen."

"Ah—no wonder you fell in love, a man who can feed that insatiable appetite of yours," Richard teased, and Chris thought he really was talking about food and not something else.

"There's a lot more to it than that." Jazz's eyes flashed slightly, a warning.

Richard caught it and backed off immediately. "Of course there is, I was only teasing."

"I know ... just watch it."

"I will. Sorry."

Chris was watching as if this were a baseball game—the throws, the catches. They played well together, but slightly out of synch, which of course was understandable.

"So, Chris ... what are you into? Other than Jazz, I mean." Richard smiled at him, and for a moment Chris thought he could see in Richard whatever it was that Jazz did.

* * * *

Chris likes to shower alone after work, even if Richard is home. Other times—in the mornings, especially—he's happy to share the shower with Richard. But the evenings are his alone, under the scalding water that he keeps upping the temperature on. Once every couple of days, down to the basement to the hot water heater, and one tiny, hair-width increase of the dial. The hotter it gets, the easier it is to lose himself.

He's beet-red after he gets out, so red that Richard has commented a time or two, but he doesn't say anything anymore. There are a lot of things they don't say to each other, even though Chris suspects they're both thinking them. The shower helps wash away the silences.

Things gradually evolved so that they were spending time with Richard. A lot of time with Richard, and it was okay. They all got along, even though there were moments when things were tense. Jazz and Richard seemed to have worked out whatever issues they'd needed to get past, and Richard had eased off on his obviously desirous behavior toward Jazz, which was a relief to Chris.

The three of them had had dinner on a number of occasions, and twice Richard had come to Sunny and Greg's for their usual Saturday-night hang out.

Chris came home one night to find Jazz already home and Richard there, as well. It was obvious that the visit was totally innocent, even to Chris' suspicious mind—Jazz was sitting on the edge of the sofa and Richard was halfway across the room on a chair, the television was on and they were both laughing but not looking at it.

Chris was jealous, plain and anything but simple. He'd have been really mad if he didn't like Richard—like in a friend sort of way, of course—but damn it all, he did like him. He could see why Jazz had been—was—had been—in love with him. And it wasn't that he didn't like spending time with Richard himself, because he did. It was just—he was resentful, he supposed, of the loss of their privacy, the little intimate world that he and Jazz had been so carefully building before Richard came along and knocked it all over with a carefully placed shove of his four hundred dollar shoes.

He was tired—traffic had been terrible on his way home and all he wanted was to *not* have to cook dinner, to curl up on the couch with Jazz and be still. He didn't have the energy to entertain Richard, even though he was sure that, if asked, Richard would insist that he didn't need entertaining and would probably even cook dinner for all of them.

"Hey," said Jazz when he saw Chris. He hopped off the couch and came over to wrap his arms around him. "How was your day?"

"Shitty," he said, and he couldn't even look at Richard. He was aware of a feeling in the pit of stomach that warned him he was about to be an incredible asshole, and decided he'd better get out of the room while he still could. "Look, I'm in a

really bad mood. I'm going to go up and take a shower, try to see if that helps."

"Okay." Jazz's eyes were full of concern, but he let Chris go.

Under the spray of the hot water Chris tried to relax, tried to let the water wash away his mood, but all he could picture was Jazz and Richard laughing in the living room. Talking in that way that they had, the way that said that the past five years or however long it had been hadn't ever happened.

He was just starting to rinse the shampoo out of his hair when he heard the bathroom door open.

"You okay?" Jazz asked.

He sighed heavily. "Yeah."

"Don't sound it."

"Look, Jazz—I'm in a crappy mood, and if you keep pushing, I'm going to end up taking it out on you."

"Okay. I'll be—well, come find me when you're ready." The bathroom door closed again.

Great, he was already taking it out on Jazz, when he didn't really mean to. Chris finished his shower as quickly as he reasonably could, got dressed in some sweat pants and a long sleeved shirt, and went downstairs.

He found Jazz sitting alone in the living room, pretending to read a fitness magazine. Chris knew he was pretending to read it because Jazz had often commented on how silly the magazine was—from his perspective, people who wanted to be fit should just get out in the great outdoors and run around. He didn't see the point of weightlifting, treadmills, and nautilus machines.

Chris sat down on the couch next to him. "Sorry," he said.

"It's okay. Not like there's some rule you have to be in a good mood all the time." Jazz hesitated. "I sent Richard home. Thought maybe you and I could use a little time to ourselves."

"Yeah. It's not that I don't like him. You know?"

Jazz nodded. "I know. But it's different now ... you're worried about what he's up to."

"I think he's telling the truth, that's the hardest part. I think he really means it when he says that he doesn't want to split us up, but if he wants you back, I can't imagine how he thinks that's going to work."

"He *is* telling the truth," Jazz agreed. "That's the way he is. He's so ... he's almost too honest, you know? He won't lie to make you feel better."

"I almost wish he would. I'd rather not know that he wants you back."

"Do you believe me? When I say that I'm yours?"

Chris found himself nodding. "Yeah, I do. I know you mean it. It's just ... what if that doesn't last?"

"I—fuck, Chris, I love you. I'm not going to suddenly stop loving you."

"You can't know that," Chris said, perfectly reasonably.

"I can. I do know it. I—Jesus, I wish I knew some really sappy romantic poetry or something. Because that's the way I feel about you. I'm not going to stop loving you, and no matter what happens between me and Richard, he is *not* going to take me away from you."

Chris grabbed onto Jazz, dragging him halfway into his lap, and kissed him with a ferocity he hadn't known he possessed. "Damn right," he growled into Jazz's mouth, feeding him the words.

"Yeah. I'm yours. Don't worry," Jazz paused to gasp as Chris' hand found his already rising cock. "Won't let you forget it."

"*You're* the one who needs to remember," Chris said, yanking up Jazz's shirt and finding a nipple with his teeth. Jazz groaned and squirmed, pressing his erection harder against Chris' palm. "Gotta make sure you do." He bit harder, then licked the spot with his tongue to soothe it.

"God. Oh, God, do that again."

Chris moved his mouth over to Jazz's tattoo, the little flitting dragon. Licked it. Bit down, making sure his teeth were around the tattoo and not over it—sunk his teeth into Jazz's flesh like he was taking a bite out of an apple, trying to keep from using so much force that he broke the skin. Jazz nearly jumped out of his arms, but the arch of his body and his low moans told Chris that he needed this, too.

"Oh! Fuck, Chris ... more. Do it again ... harder."

"I'm gonna make you bleed if I do it any harder," Chris said, then applied his tongue again to the sharp-edged red marks on Jazz's chest. The taste of Jazz was strong.

Jazz thrust upward against Chris' hand, making a desperate little mewling sound. "Yeah. Do it."

Chris let this sink in for a minute, and then slid his mouth an inch or two to the right, seeking a fresh spot. He licked gently, once, twice. "Are you sure?"

"Fuck, yes!" Jazz's eyes were nearly wild, glassy with something unnameable trembling just behind them.

"Please..."

Chris licked again and then bit Jazz quickly, feeling the edges of his teeth break the skin. The sharp taste of Jazz's blood met his seeking tongue, and Jazz stiffened in his arms and cried out, bucking against Chris' hand. Chris could feel the warm wetness soaking through Jazz's pants, could feel the pulsing of his cock like a heartbeat as he came, high-pitched sounds issuing from his throat.

Jazz shuddered, clinging to Chris as he gradually recovered. Before his breath was back to normal he was pulling Chris' shirt up over his head and pushing him down onto the couch, crawling up him to kiss him. "That was ... fuck, Chris, that was *amazing*."

Chris couldn't respond because Jazz's mouth was already back on his, lips hard and bruising, tongue darting into his mouth, tasting him. Jazz pulled his own shirt the rest of the way off and then leaned back down, pressing his chest against Chris'. Chris could feel the damp spot as the blood from the place where he'd bitten Jazz touched his own skin.

Jazz's hands were all over him—grasping his arms, pulling at his nipples, tracing his ribs—while they continued to kiss hungrily. He was already half-hard again, thrusting down into Chris.

"I need to ... oh, God, Chris, how could you ever think I wouldn't keep wanting you when you do this to me?" Jazz's breath was hot against his ear. "Need you so bad."

They were both struggling out of their clothes, and when Jazz finally came back to him and Jazz's cock came into contact with his, Chris almost shouted aloud at the sensation. Smooth hot skin against him, hard and rubbing on his own erection, a sliding movement accompanied by the wetness of Jazz's previous orgasm and his own pre-come.

Jazz was singing his own tune, little sounds that strummed at Chris and brought him ever closer to completion.

"Jazz ... please," he whispered, afraid that if he allowed himself to raise his voice he might deafen both of them with his desperation.

"You want me in you?" Jazz asked. "You want me to fuck you?"

"Please..."

With no more lubrication than they already had, Jazz entered him slowly, pushing his way inside. Chris wasn't sure if the heat was his own, Jazz's, or some combination of the two, but it was so good, so fucking good...

"You like that, babe?" Jazz pulled out just as slowly as he'd entered, paused, and then slid back inside, the journey smoother this time. "You like how it feels when I'm fucking you?"

Chris couldn't respond, could only gasp and clutch at Jazz's hips with both hands.

Jazz slid out and in again, a little more quickly. "You don't want me to stop?"

"No!" Chris managed. "God, don't stop."

"I'm gonna fuck you so hard," Jazz muttered. "Not gonna let you forget how much I want you."

Jazz's hips were playing a familiar melody and Chris' own rather ineffectual upward thrusts to meet him were the harmony, but even when the notes went sour it was better than anything Chris could remember. Jazz's cock filled him and then withdrew, stroked forward and against the spot that made him want to moan—did make him moan, he suddenly realized.

"I'm not gonna touch you," Jazz said. "You do it. Go on ... I want to watch."

Driven past the point of normal objection, Chris obeyed without a second thought. He wrapped his fingers around his cock and started to stroke in time with Jazz's thrusts, groaning each time Jazz brushed against his prostate. Their timing was speeding up, each of them seeking the release that was so close. Chris' cock was leaking a steady stream onto his belly and he could feel himself tightening up ... so close...

At the same instant they both froze, locked in place. Chris could feel Jazz's eyes on him for just a moment, and then he couldn't feel anything, wasn't aware of anything but his cock and Jazz's as they both spilled their pleasure on either side of him, outside and in. The ripples lasted for nearly a minute, each one causing the next until they had separated out so far that they were almost unnoticeable.

When the frantic panting had slowed, Jazz pulled his face up out of Chris' neck to kiss him.

"I want you to believe me," he said seriously. "No matter what happens, I'm not going to leave you."

"I—I want to believe you, too," Chris said. "I'm trying."

"I know." Jazz sighed and bent lower to lick his drying blood from Chris' chest. "If you think of anything—you know, anything else I can do to convince you, let me know. 'Cause I'll do it."

"I'll remember that."

Jazz awkwardly pulled out of Chris, and they both sat up, yanking down the blanket that was on the back of the couch to cover themselves. Jazz's leg was thrown companionably over Chris'.

"Gonna need another shower," Chris said after a while.

"Yeah, maybe I can join you this time."

"Sounds good to me."

"You bit me again," Jazz said, inspecting the mark carefully, poking at it with one finger.

"You told me to!"

"I know ... wasn't saying I didn't. Just ... you seemed to be kind of into it."

"Says the man who came just from being bitten."

"Okay, okay ... sheesh, what's a guy gotta do to get a break around here?" Jazz's eyes were glowing with happiness.

"Don't worry about it," Chris said, ghosting his fingers over the mark. "I'll give you whatever breaks you need."

Chapter 13

"Richard? It's me."

"Hi—what's up?"

"I was thinking about maybe going for a drive tonight ... just to look at some scenery, maybe go somewhere we could sit out on the grass."

"Yeah?"

"So—do you want to come?"

"Right. I mean—sure. Yeah, that sounds ... good."

"Okay. Good. I'll be home around six."

"See you then. Chris—wait—don't hang up."

"I'm still here."

"I ... I love you. You know?"

"I do. I love you, too. It's okay—we're okay."

"Not all of us."

"Jesus, Jazz! Would you watch where you're going?" Chris was thankful that he was wearing his seatbelt.

"Did you see that?" Jazz was paying more attention to what he could see in the rearview mirror than to what was on the road in front of him.

"See what?" Chris asked, restraining himself from grabbing onto the steering wheel. "And whatever it was, I'd like to point out that you wouldn't have seen it either if your eyes had been on the road where they belonged."

"It was two little fawns! Right on the side of the highway! Do you think they might wander out onto the road and get hit? Should we do something?" Jazz sounded worried.

"Like what, exactly? Get off at the next exit, turn around, get back on the highway, get off at the next exit again, turn around, get back on the highway, and try to find them? Oh, my God, please tell me you aren't slowing down."

"We haven't gone that far—I can back up in the breakdown lane and we can shoo them back into the woods," Jazz said.

"I can't believe you're—Jazz, you can't even drive backwards in a straight line for ten feet! How do you think you're going to manage going back half a mile?" They were almost stopped already, the tires scrabbling for purchase in the dirt on the side of the road.

"I can do it," Jazz said stubbornly. "What do you think they were doing there? Where the heck was their mother?"

"I didn't even see *them*," Chris said, as Jazz put the car into reverse. "Maybe she was in the woods or something. I'm sure she's taking care of—Jazz! Keep the wheel straight. You're going in a straight line—or at least, that's the idea—so you don't need to keep twisting the wheel like that."

"It's fine, it's fine ... well, maybe we are sort of going into the ditch," Jazz admitted.

Chris rolled his eyes. "Stop the car!"

"Okay, okay. Let's just get out and walk back." Jazz put the car in park.

"I can't believe we're doing this," Chris said, as they started to walk along the side of the highway.

"They're just little baby deer! Wouldn't you feel bad if something happened to them?"

"I wouldn't know about it, because we would have been most of the way home by now. How did you spot them, anyway?" Chris asked.

Jazz shrugged, looking intently at the tree line. "I don't know."

"You're always seeing stuff like that—animals on the side of the road, hawks sitting up on tree branches. Is it instinct or something?"

"Maybe. I like them."

"I know. I like seeing them, too, when you point them out, but I'm not crazy about the idea of stopping on the side of the highway to try to rescue some stupid animals that probably don't even need saving." Chris still hadn't seen deer or any other animals and was starting to wonder if maybe Jazz had seen a fawn-shaped pile of trash.

"I wouldn't be able to sleep tonight if I thought I could have helped and instead I'd left them to get run over. You see them?"

"Not yet. It's starting to get kind of dark—maybe they went back into the woods."

Jazz shook his head. "No, I think we just haven't gone far enough."

"Careful, there's probably a lot of trash and stuff in these weeds. I—ouch!" Chris yelped as he kicked a rock with the side of his foot.

"You okay, babe?" Jazz asked, putting a hand out to steady him.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Chris said, more annoyed than hurt. "Stupid rock—I would have worn my hiking boots if I'd

thought we were going to be traipsing around looking for venison."

"Chris! That's awful. They're *deer*." Jazz sounded horrified.

"Oh, excuse me," Chris said. "It's not like you're a vegetarian or anything."

"No, but cute little deer are different."

"What about cute big deer? Are they different, too?" Chris mostly just wanted to see what Jazz would say.

"I guess ... well, maybe not," Jazz said doubtfully. "I did have this amazing venison pate this one time..."

Chris grinned. "See? You're going to all this trouble to try to rescue them, and in the end they're going to be a meal on your table."

"Not on our table," Jazz said.

"Well, no, not unless I'm out or something," Chris agreed.

Jazz gave him a look out of the corner of his eye; it wasn't a look that Chris was unfamiliar with. "What is it with your phobia of wild animal meat, anyway?"

"I had this Uncle who broke a tooth on a piece of buckshot that was in some rabbit once," Chris said.

"Ah."

"I can just imagine it—what it would feel like to bite into a piece of metal, and then your tooth cracking right up into your gum-line ... he had to have the whole thing pulled, they couldn't even save it." The shudder Chris gave was completely genuine; the idea of it horrified him.

"Well, try not to think about it," Jazz said. "I'm not gonna be serving up Bambi stew any time soon."

"Good," Chris said, then stopped walking. "Hey, come on—we must have gotten to where they were by now. I still don't see anything."

"No. I think you're right—maybe they went back into the woods. I don't see them dead on the road, anyway." Jazz stood with his hands on his hips, looking around.

Chris sighed. "What a waste of time."

"Hey—maybe us walking up scared them and that's why they ran into the woods," Jazz protested. "We saved them."

"They were eating grass ten feet from a busy highway and you think us *walking* scared them?" Chris asked. A police car in the slow lane zoomed past them.

"Maybe. They might not like the sound of human..." Jazz stopped, turning his head to watch. "Hey, is he stopping?"

"Oh, shit. Great, just great."

"It's okay—we're not doing anything illegal. I don't think."

"If he arrests us, I'm never going to let you live this down." Chris winced as the policeman got out of the car and started toward them.

Jazz lowered his voice. "If he doesn't arrest us, will you let it go?"

The policeman had a hand on his stick—was it still a nightstick in the daytime, Chris wondered wildly. "Hello, gentlemen. Is there a problem?"

"No, officer. I'm really sorry." Chris did his best to sound apologetic. "My friend here saw some baby deer on the side of the road here, and he was worried that they were going to run out in the road and be killed, so we stopped to try to ... well, I don't know what we were going to try to do."

"But we scared them back into the woods, so it's fine now." Jazz offered.

"That your car up there?" The policeman gestured at it.

"Yeah," Chris said. "Um, yes. Sir. We'll just walk right back to it and go home."

"Not safe to stop on the side of the highway. In the future, you see wild animals on the edge of the road, you call it in to Animal Control, let them take care of it." The police officer seemed relaxed but still a bit wary.

Chris nodded. "We will, officer. Thanks."

"You all right to walk back to the car?"

"Of course we're—" Jazz started hotly.

"Jazz," Chris said, glaring at him. "Yes, sir, we're fine. Thanks again."

"All right, then. You boys have a good evening." The policeman turned and started walking back to his patrol car.

"You, too. Thanks." Chris said. They walked slowly until the car had driven away.

"Jeez, Chris, could you possibly have thanked him any more times in three minutes?" Jazz asked.

"Screw you," Chris said. "I was trying to be polite so he wouldn't get pissed off."

"You think he'd have gotten pissed off if you didn't grovel at his feet?"

Chris was more hurt than he would have thought possible. "Fuck off. I wasn't groveling, I was being polite."

"Strangest kind of polite I ever saw ... hey, Chris, come on. I was just messing with you." Jazz sounded so apologetic

that Chris felt stupid, but he still couldn't help but feel upset, too.

"Yeah, I know," he said, sulking.

"No, really. I'm sorry—I was trying to be funny." Jazz stopped him where they were and made him look at him.

"Yeah?" Chris said, wanting to hear more.

Jazz squeezed his hand. "Yeah. Guess it didn't work too well."

"No," Chris admitted, "but most of the time you're pretty amusing, so I guess I can cut you some slack." He gave Jazz a quick kiss and started walking again.

"Gee, thanks." Jazz caught up to him a second or two later.

"Now you're the one saying thank you," Chris pointed out. Jazz gave him a funny look. "Come on, Chris. Am I forgiven?"

"Yeah. Of course." Chris closed his eyes for a second.

"Good," Jazz said, sounding pleased. "What do you wanna have for dinner?"

"We still have some of that leftover stew in the fridge. I made way too much—if Richard hadn't come over and helped us eat it the first night, I would have had to freeze some. And I don't think there's any room in the freezer." There wasn't.

"Hey! If that's a jab at my little ice cream obsession, I don't appreciate it." Jazz stuck his tongue out at Chris.

"Oh, you mean the fact that there are eight containers of ice cream in the freezer?" It was a guess as far as the count went, but close enough.

"Nine," Jazz admitted. "And it's just a little obsession ... it'll pass."

"That's what I'm worried about," Chris muttered, not even sure where that had come from.

Jazz shot a glance at him. "What?"

"Nothing," Chris said, but when Jazz remained silent, he repeated it. "I said ... that's what I'm worried about."

"Oh." Jazz was unusually quiet.

Chris waited, part of him hoping it would pass without further comment.

"We're not talking about the ice cream anymore, are we?" Jazz said finally.

"We're not talking about anything," Chris said. "Just drop it."

"You're the one that brought it up in the first place. You think you're one obsession in my long line of obsessions, and I'm gonna get sick of you?"

Chris didn't say anything.

"You think that just because I'm not into rollerblading and tai chi the same way I was before, that means I'm gonna get sick of you?"

"Maybe." Chris looked up ahead of them; they were almost back to the car.

"That's seriously fucked up, Chris," Jazz said. "You're totally different from some ... sport. Or martial art."

"Well, that's good to know. I was starting to worry that I might be starting to resemble kung fu or something."

"I'm being serious, here."

"I know. Sorry." Chris sighed. "Just trying to ... lighten the mood, you know?"

"Stop a second, will you?" Jazz tugged at his arm, but Chris kept walking.

"No, come on," Chris said. "Let's just go home." They reached the car and he got in.

Jazz went around to the other side and got behind the wheel. "I'm not starting up the car until we finish talking about this," he warned him.

"Fine. We can sit on the side of the highway all night until that cop comes back and arrests us for ... well, whatever law it's breaking to sit on the side of a highway."

"I'm not starting the car." Jazz sounded stubborn, which was never a good sign.

"Jazz, if you don't start the fucking car I'm going to come over there, take you out of the driver's seat, and drive the thing myself."

"Oh, please," Jazz said smugly. "You will not."

"Well ... maybe not. Makes a good threat though, doesn't it?"

"Not really. Look, Chris ... we need to talk about this."

"What is there to say?" Chris asked. "I'm worried, you tell me not to be worried. I'm still worried. I don't see how talking is going to change that."

Jazz leaned forward, resting his forehead on the steering wheel. "Okay, you might be right. But ... fuck. Chris..."

"It's okay."

"Is this about Richard again?" Jazz asked, sounding helpless.

"No." Chris shrugged. "No, I don't think so."

"Is it about the obsession thing? Because I might be able to commit to something long-term, because, you know ... ice cream is pretty good. I don't think I'm going to get sick of it." Jazz said the words slowly, letting them mean more than they really did.

Chris heard him. "You think?"

"And you are, like, so much better than ice cream. If I can commit to ice cream, it shouldn't be any problem committing to you." Jazz offered him a hopeful smile.

"Really."

"Yeah. Fuck. I know I'm being all flip here—and I don't mean to be if it makes what I'm saying less ... meaningful. You know I'm serious, right?" Jazz asked.

Chris nodded and reached out to take Jazz's hand. It was meant to comfort him. "I do. And it's not like I think you're lying or anything."

"You just think I don't know my own mind."

"No, it's not that, either. It's just..." Chris sighed and grimaced. "I think you mean it now. But now isn't forever."

"For me it is. With you."

"Okay. If I say I believe you, will you start the car up and take us home?"

"If you say you believe me, will you be lying?" Jazz asked.

"No ... not exactly," Chris said.

"Is that the best I'm gonna get?"

"I think so, yes. For now."

Jazz nodded, looking at least a little bit relieved. "Okay, then. Off we go."

"You know you're supposed to—jeez! Jazz, you're supposed to speed up before you pull out into the lane." Chris closed his eyes.

"You ever try to get up to speed in the breakdown lane, with all the broken bottles and that stupid warning-strip thing?" The car was going almost the speed limit now, at least.

"Normal people do it all the time," Chris pointed out.

Sounding offended, Jazz said, "Oh, so now I'm obsessive, fickle, *and* abnormal?"

"I never said fickle."

"Maybe not, but you implied it."

"You are ... God, you're so annoying. Oh! And yes, I just called you annoying in addition to obsessive and abnormal." Chris laughed suddenly, not even knowing exactly why.

"Okay, as long as we're on the same page ... are we? On the same page?" Jazz looked over at him.

"Yeah," Chris said. "I think we are."

"Good. Kiss me?" Jazz blinked endearingly in his direction.

"Jazz. You're driving."

"Doesn't mean you can't kiss me."

The traffic was thick enough that they weren't going too fast, but Chris wasn't about to take any chances. Well, any chances more than he was already taking being in a car with Jazz behind the wheel. "Wait until we get home. Then I'll kiss you all you want."

"Is that a promise?" Jazz asked.

"Nope," Chris said cheerfully. "It's a threat."

"You know you're just encouraging me to drive faster."

"I didn't know that required encouragement," Chris said, rolling his eyes.

"Oh, it doesn't," Jazz agreed. "I just wanted you to know."

"Jazz, if you can manage to drive the speed limit the whole way home, I will do anything you want in bed tonight."

"Anything?"

"Absolutely."

"Okay ... I can do that." Jazz's hands tightened on the wheel, but he eased up on the gas.

"So I see. Too bad it takes bribery to make you drive safely."

"What can I say?" Jazz waggled his eyebrows at Chris and smiled widely. "Bribery is a powerful tool."

* * * *

The night that Richard breaks the TV is a bad one, partially because it's so unexpected. It's more his style to go and sit quietly in a corner somewhere, or disappear for a few hours. It's not his style to pick up the remote control and throw it violently at the TV screen, and it's even less his style to then go over and throw the TV onto the floor.

When it happens Chris is too stunned to move. He watches as Richard gets up off the couch and picks up the TV—or sort of picks it up, it's pretty heavy—and heaves it onto the floor with a resounding crackle of glass and plastic. Richard kicks it a few times for good measure, and then it's only then Chris realizes that he's crying.

Chris holds him, the way he did at the hospital, and doesn't cry any of his own tears. Richard is crying enough for both of them.

Chris had just gotten in the front door when the phone rang. He didn't hear Jazz anywhere around, so he went over and picked it up after the second ring. "Hello?"

"Hi, Chris, it's Richard."

"Hey, Richard, how's it going?"

"Okay. I was thinking ... you guys free tonight? I was going through some stuff I had in storage and I found a bunch of old photos of Jazz and Sunny and some other people we used to hang out with. I was thinking Jazz—and you, too—might like to look at them."

"Sounds good to me. Why don't you come over in a little while and I can make dinner?"

"No, why don't I swing by someplace on the way over and pick up dinner?"

"Well. Twist my arm."

"I'd like to twist more than that," Richard said in his fake-sultry voice, which recently had begun to sound more like a real-sultry voice. He snapped out of it immediately and went back to his normal voice. "What do you want? Italian? Chinese?"

"Oh, Italian would be great. Can you get some of those—"

"—mozzarella sticks that Jazz likes so much? Sure."

"Darn. We have been spending way too much time together, haven't we?"

"You think?" Richard sounded worried. "Because we can put this off until some other time, if..."

"No, no. I just meant ... you know, we're starting to finish each other's sentences."

"I thought that was kind of neat."

"Yeah, it is," Chris reassured him. "See you in a while?"

"Okay."

Chris took off his coat and hung it on the coat tree, checking his pockets like he always did to make sure that his wallet and keys were there. If he did it when he put the coat away, he didn't have to worry about checking when he left the house.

He went upstairs. "Jazz? You around?"

"Chris? I'm under the bed."

"What?" Chris went into the bedroom and, sure enough, Jazz's sock-clad feet were the only part of him sticking out from under the bed. "Please tell you aren't developing some new kink."

"I'm trying to get my *ring*," said Jazz irritably. "I left it on the bedside table, and when I put my book down last night it rolled off and under the bed and I can't ... quite ... reach it."

"Do you want me to get a yardstick or something?"

"Do we have a yardstick?"

"I don't know. I did say 'or something'."

"You did," said Jazz, fair until the end. "I've almost ... there!"

"You got it?"

"Yeah. Pull me out, will you?"

Dubiously Chris leaned down and grabbed onto Jazz's ankles, but when he pulled Jazz slid smoothly out from under the bed.

"The beauty of wood floors," said Jazz, sitting up.

"Is nothing compared to the filth of wood floors," Chris pointed out. "You're covered with dust bunnies." Not to mention dirt and other stuff that it might be better not to think about too carefully.

"Darn." Jazz looked down. "Yuck. Oh well, it was worth it." He went over and put the ring in the top drawer of the dresser.

"You don't wear it very often," Chris observed.

"No, only once in a while. When I'm feeling nostalgic, or something."

"Oh! Speaking of which, Richard is coming over. He's bringing us dinner and a bunch of old photos or something—he thought you'd want to see them."

"Cool. Yeah, he used to take tons of pictures. Me and Sunny used to tease him like crazy because he always had the camera out."

"So there aren't a lot of pictures of him, then."

"No, probably not. And if there are any, they're probably ones where he doesn't have any head, because I was the one who took them."

"Oh."

Jazz looked at Chris curiously. "You sound disappointed."

"No. I mean—I was thinking it would be nice to see some pictures of Richard, of how he looked when you first met him."

"He was pretty hot," said Jazz, picking up a comb. "At least, I thought so. But then, you know, I fell in love with

him, so of course I thought he was hot. Do you think he's hot?"

Chris wasn't sure how to answer this. Go with honesty? Deny it? "He's okay," he said neutrally.

"Okay? What does that mean—yes, or no?"

"Yes, I guess. I mean—I guess I don't use the word 'hot' very often, to describe people. But he's good-looking, of course he is."

Jazz finished combing his hair and put the comb back down on the table slowly. "You think he's hot!"

"What? Didn't I just answer this?" Chris could feel his face getting red.

"You do! You like him!"

"Jazz," Chris said, trying to sound calm and reasonable. "I love *you*."

"I know that," said Jazz. He waved his hand in front of his face for emphasis, as if waving away the smoke screen that Chris was trying to create. "But you *like* him."

"We are *not* talking about this. It doesn't matter." Chris turned to go back downstairs, and immediately Jazz's arms were wrapped around his waist.

"I'm sorry," Jazz said quickly. "I was just ... it's okay. We don't have to talk about it."

"Good." Chris didn't want to get into some careful analysis of his feelings on this topic—it was too hard to admit how much he genuinely liked Richard, let alone the fact that he did, indeed, find him attractive.

They went downstairs and unloaded the dishwasher, and then Jazz swept the kitchen floor, which was constantly dirty

in the winter despite the fact that they took their shoes off on the porch. Jazz liked to claim that it was elves tracking in the dirt.

Fifteen minutes later, they were watching TV when Richard arrived, his arms full of bags of food from the Italian takeout place they all liked. Chris and Jazz relieved him of his burden and they spread the food out on the dining room table.

"We should just eat these every day," Jazz said, moaning slightly as he bit into a cheese stick.

"I'd bring them over every day if I meant I got to listen to you make noises like that," said Richard, his voice mild.

"You're such a flirt." Jazz reached over and punched him on the arm.

Richard looked sheepish. "Sorry."

Chris knew Jazz wouldn't say it, so he did. "It's okay."

"So where are the pictures?" asked Jazz, bouncing a little bit in his seat even as he crammed another mozzarella stick into his mouth. "I want to see them." His voice was muffled, but it was still clear enough what he was saying.

"They're in my coat pocket. Hang on, I'll get them." Richard went into the other room, then came back with a fat envelope. He handed it over to Jazz, who looked at his already soiled napkin in dismay and then shrugged and wiped his hands on his pants.

Jazz immediately started smiling at the photos and passing them one by one to Chris, with running commentary. "Ooh! Look at how young Sunny looks!"

"Who's this guy?"

"That's Daniel, she was dating him at the time. They split up about six times before it finally stuck, and then she met Greg." Jazz grinned at the next one. "Look, here's me and Richard at the beach."

Chris stared at the picture for a long moment. Jazz looked younger in the photo, although maybe not quite as young as Chris would have expected, but Richard ... every muscle was delineated, his skin tanned and smooth, his hair mussed and everything about him looking ... well, luscious. Damn. Chris couldn't help but wonder if Richard still looked this good underneath his clothes—of course he was older, now, but if the cut of his arms was any indication, he was still built. "You guys look good together." There, that was smooth, right?

"Didn't Richard look hot?" Jazz said teasingly, and then immediately looked repentant as if remembering their earlier conversation. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Chris admitted slowly. "He does. I mean ... did. I mean—oh crap, just shoot me now, will you?"

Richard and Jazz exchanged wry smiles and shook their heads.

"This one's me during the skateboarding phase." Jazz handed him another photo.

"Oh, my God! Look at your pants."

"I know—wasn't I a goob?"

"I think anyone who uses the word 'goob' automatically qualifies as a goob, pants or no," Chris said.

"Join the club, then," Jazz pointed out. "And what does not wearing pants have to do with being a goob?"

It was Chris and Richard's turn to exchange a look. "I take it the skateboarding phase passed?" Chris asked.

"Yeah. I was riding the boardwalk, and I turned my head to look at some guy with a cute ass and hit a bump. Landed on my face. They said I was lucky I didn't break my nose, but I sure as hell thought I had."

"His whole face was black and blue," offered Richard. "His eyes were so swollen he could barely see for three days."

"Any pictures of that?" asked Chris. He was only kidding; he wasn't really interested in seeing a picture of Jazz when he was all bruised up.

Jazz shook his head. "Nope. At the time I didn't want anyone recording my stupidity, but now that I think of it I should have. Would have been interesting. Oh, look, here's all of us dressed up for Halloween."

Chris blinked. All of the men were dressed as women, and the women were dressed as men. There was something inherently disturbing about seeing a man as large as Richard in a dress. Jazz, on the other hand, in his fishnet stockings and short skirt, looked—well, okay, still disturbing. "Were you drunk?"

Jazz whipped the photo back out of his hand. "No! We just thought it would be funny."

"Yeah, that's one word for it." Chris held his hand out for the next picture, and was surprised when it was a large black and white.

"I still have a copy of that one somewhere," Jazz said gently.

Richard and Jazz sitting together on a fallen tree, neither of them looking at the camera. Richard's arm was thrown casually over Jazz's shoulder, his nose almost but not quite nuzzling Jazz's hair. Jazz looked ... not quite of earth, somehow, as if he belonged someplace entirely more beautiful.

Chris took a deep breath, feeling like maybe there wasn't enough air. "Who took it?"

"A friend of ours," Richard said. "He was pretty good with a camera."

"That just might be the understatement of the year," said Chris. "It's ... wow." He handed the picture over to Richard and, feeling a bit shaken, took a bite of the garlic toast that had already gone cold some time before. He wasn't hungry; he just needed the distraction. He'd never seen Richard with quite that expression on his face: whole, content.

Jazz was trying to pass him another picture, so he quickly wiped his hands free of greasy crumbs and took it. There was a small collection of semi-erotic photos of the pair of them, which they said had been taken by the same friend who had snapped the black and white picture.

By the time they got to the end of the pile, Chris was all stirred up inside with disturbing thoughts about what Richard would look like naked, of what Richard's arms would feel like around him, of what Jazz would look like beneath Richard. He tried to erase the images from his mind, feeling wrong and mixed-up and bad.

"Chris?" Jazz said.

He looked up, answered a little too quickly. "Mmm?"

"I'm sorry about ... those," he said, gesturing at the last of the pictures.

"Me, too," said Richard. "I'd totally forgotten they were in there."

"No, it's okay. Really. You guys were together—you're entitled to your past. It's not like it can just be erased." He winced inwardly and went on. "And I wouldn't want you to. Besides..." Chris felt himself flush. "They're really beautiful. The pictures, I mean. Okay, I'm going to go make some coffee."

He fled to the kitchen to hide amongst the kettle and the French press. Jazz and Richard must have realized that he really needed a few minutes to himself, because he could hear them talking quietly about the photos and neither one of them came into the kitchen to check on him.

The water finally came to a boil and he busied himself making the coffee, finding spoons and sugar and a cup each for Jazz and Richard. He went back into the dining room with everything balanced in his arms and stopped dead when he saw the matching smiles on Richard's and Jazz's faces.

"What?" he said, and then put everything down onto the table.

"We were just talking," said Jazz, taking a coffee cup without bothering to look down at it.

"About what?"

Jazz glanced at Richard, and they both grinned again. "Well ... Richard was saying he thinks you're hot."

Chris didn't know what to say to that.

"And he was saying that if you were single, he'd be asking you out. And I said, just because you're not single doesn't mean he can't ask you out." Jazz's eyes were on Chris', his expression torn between desire and hope.

"Are you ... do you want me to go out with him?" Chris was confused.

"Not if you don't want to." Jazz got up and came over to wrap his arms around Chris. "And don't get any stupid ideas in your head that it's because I don't love you—it's because I do. God, the thought of the two of you together ... it blows my mind."

"I don't think I understand."

Richard spoke softly, in the tone of voice he seemed to reserve for calming Chris down when he started to get worked up. "It's pretty simple. I like you. I'd like to be able to spend some time with you, get to know you better on a one-on-one basis."

"But I'm with Jazz," Chris said, and it sounded like a question even to his own ears.

Jazz's arms tightened around him. "Going out with Richard wouldn't change that. Nothing will change that."

"But I—"

"Chris. It's not as complicated as you seem to think." Richard smiled encouragingly.

"It's okay. Whatever you want is okay. You can say yes, or no. Neither answer is going to change things between us," said Jazz.

"I still don't understand. Why?" This was directed at Richard.

"I'd like to. Would you?"

Chris thought for a long moment. Jazz's arm was around his waist loosely, a comforting warmth, and it was hard to concentrate on what he was supposed to be concentrating on. "Would I like to go out with you? Like, on a date?"

"Yes. I, Richard, am asking you, Chris, if you would like to go out on a date. With me."

The real question here, probably, was: what was there to be afraid of? He wasn't concerned about his physical safety around Richard—he knew the man pretty well by now, and didn't feel threatened by him. Was he worried that he'd fall for Richard and lose interest in Jazz? No, that was the furthest thing from his mind. Did he think Jazz would end up getting jealous? If he did, which Chris didn't think was going to happen, he wouldn't go out with Richard again. Assuming, of course, that things went well enough the first time that either one of them wanted a repeat performance.

It struck him finally that his long silence was probably far from flattering. "Um ... yes. I mean, if it's okay with Jazz, which it seems to be. And if you both really think it's a good idea. And if Richard really wants to." He took a deep breath. "Yes."

Chapter 14

Richard has turned into a homebody. He almost never leaves the house—fortunately, he can conduct most of his work from home—and he's figured out how to cook, some. He's also figured out how to clean, and he does this with a carefulness that screams to Chris of obsessive-compulsive disorder. A schedule, lists of cleaning products, endless packages of paper towels.

Dirty dishes don't sit in the sink. The tub is cleaned on a daily basis. The broom is rarely put away because Richard uses it so often. The mail is sorted as soon as it comes into the house, divided into piles—bills, recycling, catalogues.

Chris isn't sure how Jazz would feel about living in a place that feels more like a museum than a home. But he doesn't tell Richard to stop.

"No, wear the blue shirt, it looks better on you."

Chris sighed in exasperation. "Jazz, he already knows what I look like. It's not like this is a blind date."

"But I like the blue shirt much better than the beige one."

"I was kind of thinking that if I wore a less attractive shirt, he'd be more likely to want to take it off me," said Chris, grinning while his back was still turned.

"Hey!" Jazz came over and slid his arm under the edge of the untucked shirt and then down into the front of Chris' jeans. "You'd better not be getting undressed for him unless I'm around."

Chris shivered at Jazz's touch and withdrew his hand gently. "Not fair," he said. "This is going to be a totally innocent first date."

"But you're gonna kiss him goodnight, right? I mean, assuming everything goes well and he drops you off at the front door and all?"

"We'll see." The thought of kissing Richard was more pleasant than he liked to admit, even to himself, but he wasn't going to jump the man. If it was right, he'd know. He hoped.

"I'm starting to get jealous," said Jazz, with a little pout.

"Are you kidding, or are you serious? Because the second you aren't comfortable with this, it's over."

Jazz smiled. "I'm kidding. But jeez, it's nice to see you all overprotective."

"I'm not kidding—about that, you know?"

"I know. But don't worry—as long as I'm included in whatever goes on, I'll be okay with it."

The doorbell rang, and Chris felt his shoulders tense. Jazz patted him soothingly.

"Relax—you're gonna have fun."

They went downstairs and let Richard in. He was dressed pretty much the same as Chris—although his jeans were tighter than Chris ever wore his—and he looked ... well, good. Really good, truth be told. His thin silky shirt clung to his chest and arms and even to the flat of his stomach, and Chris wondered what he'd look like with the shirt off. Okay, clearly time to start focusing on the here and now.

"Hi, Richard."

"Hi, Chris. You ready to go?"

"Sure." Chris looked uncertainly at Jazz, who was standing there with a huge grin on his face.

"Go on, have fun. Take notes so you can tell me all about it when you get home." Jazz came over and planted a long, careful kiss on him. "Think about me," he said.

"Don't I always?" asked Chris, and then they were out the door and in the car. It hadn't snowed for a few days so the roads were pretty dry, and the restaurant was small and not too intimate, and before he knew it dinner was over and they were walking in the front door of a club.

The music sounded good to him—not too loud, but with a good beat—and Richard looked fantastic. It was hard to know what to concentrate on. That Jazz, who he loved, was at home waiting for him? That Richard, who he was starting to lust after, was here smiling at him?

Richard said something that he couldn't quite hear.

"What?"

Leaning in closer, Richard raised his voice. "I said, do you want a beer?"

"Sure!"

Beers in hand, they found a table not far from the dance floor and sat. There were an awful lot of couples dancing—women with men, men with men, women with women. Some women who looked like they might actually be men, which was a little bit strange to Chris, but hey ... who was he to judge? He was on a date. With his boyfriend's ex-boyfriend.

A man in very, very tight black leather pants was gyrating up against another man. Chris wondered how the hell he could even bend like that without hurting himself.

"Sexy," Richard said almost in his ear, shifting his chair over closer so they could hear each other.

"The word I was considering was 'uncomfortable,' actually."

Richard smirked. "That, too. But he looks good, don't you think?"

Chris thought that thinking about another man on top of—oh, God, in addition to—the two he was already dealing with might short-circuit his brain. He shrugged, aiming for casual. "I guess."

"Do you want to dance?"

"Oh, I'm ... I'm not much of a dancer. You go ahead, if you want to."

Richard was already standing up, reaching for Chris' hand. "Come on," he said. "Just one."

Chris hastily slid his beer back onto the table and let himself be dragged out onto the dance floor. Once you were out there it wasn't quite as crowded as it had looked, but things were still pretty tight. Richard didn't waste any time, though, moving right up close to him; close enough that they were brushing against each other as they danced.

As usual, dancing made Chris feel like an idiot. He'd had friends in college tell him that he was a good dancer, but he always felt uncoordinated and on display.

Richard moved closer. "Relax," he said loudly over the music. "You look like you're nervous."

"Yeah, well ... like I said, I'm not much of a dancer."

"Oh, come on! I can tell just by the way you move that you're a good dancer. You just need to ... you know, loosen up. Can I—?" And without finishing the question or waiting for an answer, Richard put his hands on Chris' hips and tried to demonstrate.

Chris stiffened up for a minute, then forced himself to relax. Richard was moving smoothly, the two of them shifting to accommodate each other as they danced. And for the first time in years, Chris thought he could see how dancing might be kind of fun. With Richard, it was; the bigger man's hands were on his waist now, just lightly, and it felt good.

Okay, maybe a little too good. Yeah, this was supposed to be a date, but ... he loved Jazz. What the hell was he doing here?

"I'm going to go back and get my beer," Chris said, pulling away from Richard abruptly and returning to the table. He sat down quickly, trying to ignore the way his cock was telling him to stop being so uptight, and took a big swig of beer. It occurred to him belatedly that it was pretty stupid to drink from a bottle he'd left abandoned for ten minutes—someone could have slipped something into it, or spit into it—but it was probably too late to worry about that now.

Richard came back and sat next to him. "What's up?"

"I'm thinking maybe this wasn't such a good idea."

"The dancing? Or the whole thing?" Richard sighed. "You want to go?"

"Yeah."

Back in the car, with the heater turned up and warm air being forced over both of them, the conversation that had seemed so easy for the first half of the night dried up.

"So what is it?" Richard asked finally.

"I don't know."

"You don't like me."

Chris let out a little strangled sound that he hoped conveyed how stupid that was. "Of course I like you."

"Okay, you're not attracted to me."

He wasn't going to lie, not to Richard. He deserved better than that. "No. I mean, yes, I'm attracted to you. I just don't like it."

Richard looked over his shoulder and changed lanes, turned the heater down a notch. "You don't like that you're attracted to me?"

"Pretty much, yes."

"Why not?" Richard asked.

"Because I feel guilty? Because I'm in love with Jazz, and I don't know what it says that I think I might like *you* just a little too much? Because I'm freaked out half the time that he's not going to want to be with me long-term, and he keeps reassuring me like I'm some stupid kid who needs it—and I do, and I hate that—and now I'm the one interested in someone else?" Chris felt like a disgusting example of a human being, like he'd just done the equivalent of puking in Richard's front seat.

After a minute or so of silence, Richard asked quietly, "Would you leave Jazz for me? I mean, hypothetically—if you and I really fell for each other, say—would you leave him?"

"No!" Chris didn't have to think to answer the question.
"No. I won't ever ... I'd never leave him."

"Then what are you so afraid of? Why do you feel guilty, if you're not going to leave him and he practically pushed us out the door tonight?"

The car was way too hot all of a sudden. Without asking, Chris reached out and shut the heat off. "I just feel like a jerk."

"Because if he asked you if he could go out with someone else, you wouldn't want him to?"

"Maybe." The insides of the windows were slightly fogged over, so Chris traced a little pattern on the passenger door one, like a tic-tac-toe board. "I mean, of course I wouldn't want him to go out with anyone else. Even you. So yeah, maybe that's my problem."

"But he doesn't mind. You do. Shouldn't be a problem, should it?"

"I guess not."

"Well." Richard sounded disappointed. "I'm sorry this didn't work out better."

Chris felt like a first-class idiot. "Me, too," he said. "I guess I should have thought this through a little more carefully before I agreed to it. Because—it's not that I don't like you. I just ... wasn't ready, maybe."

Richard pulled onto their street, slowing down as he passed the quiet houses in the darkness. "You want me to just drop you off?"

"No, come in and have some coffee or something. I cut the date part short, but that doesn't mean you can't come in and hang out, right?"

"All right."

Richard parked behind Chris' car and they went in. The kitchen was still and quiet, but Chris thought he could hear a faint sound from the living room. Jazz was probably watching TV. They took off their coats and hung them up, then walked through the house, Richard following Chris like a large menacing shadow.

Chris went around the corner into the living room and froze.

Jazz was stretched out on the couch, feet up, looking at the TV.

Where two naked men were sucking each other's dicks.

And Jazz's jeans were unfastened and pushed down, and one hand was wrapped around his cock.

Richard bumped into Chris' back and stopped dead in his tracks, both of them staring at Jazz.

"Um ... hi, guys," Jazz said, looking up. "You're back early."

* * * *

The middle of the night, when it's completely dark and the house is as quiet as old houses get, is when Richard talks about Jazz. He doesn't say much—he's not telling Chris old stories of their glory days or anything—but he asks about Jazz. How Jazz looks, what the doctors say, if there's any change.

He asks Chris to talk to Jazz for him. When Chris points out, perfectly reasonably, he thinks, that Richard could just come into the hospital and talk to Jazz himself, Richard clams up.

And Chris doesn't mind passing on the messages. He does it quietly, bent low near to Jazz's ear.

"Richard says he loves you."

"Richard says to tell you that he wants you to wake up."

"Richard says he's sorry."

Jazz was half-sitting, half-lying on the couch, his hand still on his cock, not moving. Waiting.

"Jazz," Chris said finally, and then words failed him. He turned to look at Richard, who was standing there with a funny half-grin on his face and his eyes on Jazz.

"Sorry," Richard said, not looking at all sorry, and looked over at the wall instead of at Jazz. "Hey, Jazz. Um ... how's it going?" His smirk widened.

Shifting his position, Jazz tucked himself back into his jeans and smiled apologetically at Chris, who must have still had a look of utter surprise on his face. "Fine. Well, it was going fine until you guys decided to come home early. I didn't expect you for another couple of hours."

Chris moved over to the coffee table and shut the TV off with a click of the remote control. "Yeah. Well, here we are."

Jazz grabbed onto his hand before he could step away, and pulled him over to the couch. "Didn't you have fun?"

"Maybe a little too much," Chris muttered.

"Did you—" Jazz's eyes widened. "Please tell me you guys weren't making out when I wasn't around to watch."

Richard finally looked back at Jazz, and when he saw that he was more or less decent, took a few steps into the room.

"No, no making out."

"Then what's 'too much fun' about?"

Waiting for Chris to answer, Richard perched himself on the arm of a chair and crossed his arms casually.

"I like him," Chris said, as if this made everything perfectly clear.

"Isn't that the point?"

"No, the point is, I love *you*."

Jazz brought a hand up to play with the back of Chris' hair. "There's nothing that says you can't like Richard and love me at the same time."

"But it's..." What was the word he was looking for? Wrong? That one wouldn't go over well. "Confusing," he said finally.

"Actually," said Jazz conversationally, throwing one leg up and over Chris', "It's very, very simple. If you let it be." From his vantage point, almost in Chris' lap, he lowered his face enough to be able to brush his lips over Chris'.

Chris let himself be kissed, trying not to focus on the feel of Jazz's erection pressing up against him.

He shifted his weight a little and Jazz let out a sudden hiss. "Zipper!"

"Sorry," Chris said.

"Um ... do you guys want me to go?" asked Richard.

Jazz leaned in to kiss Chris again, his tongue darting out to taste the corner of Chris' mouth. When he moved back his eyes were dark and pleading.

So again, because Jazz wanted to but wouldn't, Chris said it. "No, it's okay. Stay."

Jazz's hands were already busy at Chris' shirtfront, undoing his buttons, slipping his hands inside to rub Chris' neck and shoulders. He kissed Chris harder, clutching at him, and Chris' arms went automatically around Jazz's waist, pulling him closer.

"Erk! Zipper," squeaked Jazz.

"If you had zipped it up, or if you wore underwear, it wouldn't be a problem," Chris pointed out.

"Too late now."

"You could ... take them off," said Chris slowly, almost unable to believe that he was suggesting it.

"I could." Jazz sounded cautious.

"Do it."

That was all of the urging Jazz required—he jumped to his feet, stripped off his jeans, and climbed back onto Chris' lap in less than a minute. Chris was painfully aware of Richard sitting across the room, presumably watching them, presumably getting a good look at Jazz's naked ass.

But Jazz's mouth was on his, Jazz's hands on his body, so distracting ... Jazz tasted sweet and a little bit salty, and Chris couldn't help but remember the many weeks of wanting so badly to kiss Jazz and not being able to. He'd vowed never to take this for granted, and he wouldn't. It was too good.

Somehow Jazz had gotten Chris' shirt unbuttoned to the waist, and he was pushing it back to bare his shoulders, Jazz's lips tracing a warm moist path that followed his hands.

"You taste fantastic," Jazz said softly into his ear, words meant just for him.

Chris concentrated on how Jazz's skin felt against his fingers, trying to let his awareness of Richard fade into the background, because if he didn't, he didn't think he could do this. And he wanted to do it. Jazz definitely wanted to do it—his hard cock was rubbing against Chris' bare stomach and chest, his hands were eager on Chris' body.

"Love you," Jazz said, sliding back so that he could work at Chris' belt and pants. "Need to ... feel you against me. God, please, Chris..."

He had to cooperate—the sound of Jazz begging always went straight through him. Within minutes they were both naked on the couch, Jazz twisted around him, Jazz's hot mouth around his cock.

Chris threw his arm back over his eyes, both in an effort to control himself and to block any possible view of Richard watching him getting a blow job. Jazz's tongue was swirling around the head of his cock, and then he slid lower to the base, nipping at it gently with his teeth. Chris bit his lip to keep from making any noise, but he couldn't help but thrust upward against Jazz's mouth.

There was a noise from the chair where Richard was, but Chris couldn't look because all of a sudden Jazz moved again and swallowed him whole, Jazz's lips sliding down to the base of his cock. Chris could feel muscles in his legs all the way down to his calves tightening up at the rightness of it.

Jazz straightened back up to kiss Chris, and Chris could taste the faint tinge of his own pre-come on Jazz's tongue.

Jazz shifted, his legs on either side of Chris', their cocks bumping and rubbing together in a way that made Chris shudder.

"Poor Richard," Jazz whispered. "Look at him, all lonely over there."

Chris peered past the relative safety of Jazz's shoulder to where Richard was sitting. Richard didn't look lonely so much as turned on—there was a definite bulge in the front of his very tight jeans. In fact, it looked pretty uncomfortable, and Richard looked even more uncomfortable at the two of them watching him.

"This is getting weird," Richard said. "Okay, scratch that, this is already weird. I think maybe it might be time for me to go."

"Or he could come over here and help me take care of you," Jazz said, very softly, to Chris. He was clearly giving him the chance to say no if he wanted to, without hurting Richard's feelings.

Chris felt his cock harden and twitch where it was trapped between him and Jazz. The thought of Richard touching him was ... more than good. "Okay," he said hoarsely, hoping he wouldn't regret it even as his erection throbbed gratefully at his answer.

"Richard?" Jazz said sweetly. "Chris and I were thinking it might be nice if you wanted to come over here and help me take care of him."

Richard sat up straighter in the chair but didn't stand up. "You sure? Chris?"

"Yes, we're sure. If you want to..."

"Don't wonder about that," Richard said, getting up and stalking over in a few long strides. "I want to." He stood over them, and he looked uncomfortable again. "What should I—?"

Jazz slid off Chris' lap to one side, and pulled Richard down onto the couch on the other side. "Why don't you kiss him?"

Apparently Richard didn't need a second invitation, because he immediately leaned in, slid his fingers into Chris' hair, and kissed him.

It wasn't like kissing Jazz, not at all. Richard was a lot bigger, for one thing—his hands were bigger and so was his mouth—and after so many months of being with someone smaller than he was, kissing someone larger was different. More powerful, somehow, in a purely physical sense.

Richard tasted like the beer they'd had at the club, and a little bit like potato chips, which was weird because Chris couldn't remember him having eaten any. He kissed like someone with plenty of experience—dove right in, his tongue plundering Chris' mouth, and God, he was good with that tongue. Chris had enough brain function left to wonder briefly at the fact that he might have missed out on this altogether if Jazz hadn't been so smart, and then all thought fled.

Jazz's familiar hand was on his cock, stroking gently, and Richard's mouth was kissing him, kissing him as if Richard wanted to do it forever. Not slow and gentle, but hungry, and at the same time as if just doing this would feed the hunger without anything more being necessary.

Richard pulled back, his hand still cradling Chris' head. "God, Jazz," he said. "I can see why ... holy hell, he's amazing."

"Told you," said Jazz, rather smugly. His hand was still on Chris' cock, but he was looking at Richard.

Caught between the two of them, Chris made a little needy sound and shifted his lower body against Jazz. Jazz immediately began moving his hand again, soft smooth strokes that made Chris' eyes want to roll back into his head.

"Sorry," said Jazz. "Was I neglecting you?"

Richard leaned in for another kiss, which turned into two and then three. This time when he pulled back they were both gasping for breath, and Chris could see the raw desire in Richard's eyes. Jazz's hand on his erection was doing glorious, maddening things and Chris was getting so close.

"Please," he said desperately, knowing that Jazz would know what he meant even if Richard didn't.

Jazz moved in and kissed him, licking the inside of his mouth as if he could taste Richard there. "Do you want to come, baby?" His hand didn't falter.

Chris whimpered and didn't care that Richard could hear him. "Please," he said again.

Richard's hand slid down to Chris' shoulder, rubbing it in time with Jazz's strokes. He leaned in again as if to kiss Chris, but instead bit at his ear gently and then moaned softly. "God, I want to touch you," he said. "I want to feel you when you come. Can I touch you, Chris?"

"Yes," Chris managed to say, his voice small.

"Can I, Jazz? Is it okay?"

Jazz smiled at Richard. "Of course it's okay."

And then, despite the fact that he had just agreed to it, Chris was stunned to feel a second hand, Richard's hand, join

Jazz's. Richard's fingers were smoother and larger and warmer than Jazz's, and for a second Chris thought that just the touch of a hand that wasn't Jazz's or his own was going to be enough to make him come. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, hoping that this might last just a little bit longer.

"You're so gorgeous," Richard breathed. "God, I'd love to fuck you."

His fingers slid lower to explore the sensitive skin that surrounded Chris' balls, tugged at them gently while Jazz's hand continued to stroke Chris, up and over the head of his cock which was leaking everywhere, dripping down his length and probably onto Richard's hand as well.

"Oh ... I'm so close," Chris managed to gasp.

Immediately Richard's hand moved up again, replacing Jazz's and doing a remarkable job of imitating what Jazz had just been doing. The sight of Richard's hand on him, along with the stroking, would have been enough, but that was when Jazz leaned back in and kissed him.

Jazz bit at his lower lip and then whispered into his mouth, "Come on, Chris. You're right there, you're so close ... come on."

Richard's fingers swept up and over, up and over, and Chris felt his balls tighten like they were trying to crawl back into his body and then he just exploded. He could feel his cock pulsing in Richard's hand, and the pleasure overwhelmed him as Jazz continued to kiss him and whisper to him and lick at his mouth. The pulses rose to a peak and then gradually faded.

Chris was panting for air by the time it was through, covered with his own sticky come and completely wiped out. Jazz was kissing his neck and then Richard was kissing his mouth again and he couldn't even *think*.

When Chris opened his eyes a minute or so later, Jazz's hand was lazily stroking his own cock. Richard was staring at Jazz and making obvious and valiant attempts every few seconds to drag his eyes away. He actually looked fairly miserable and Chris felt a surge of guilt and sympathy.

"Richard?"

Richard's eyes flew to his, his expression wary.

"It's okay," Chris said gently. "If you want to look at Jazz—that's fine. Don't—you shouldn't feel bad about it." He reached out for Richard, touched his arm lightly.

"Thanks," said Richard. Chris noticed that he didn't argue, just went back to looking at Jazz.

Jazz stretched backward, letting his cock jut out even more noticeably, running his fingers down to its base and then back up to circle the head.

Richard swallowed audibly and shifted on the couch, making a little sound as if he were in pain. Chris glanced down and could practically see the outline of Richard's cock beneath the denim of his tight jeans. It did look painful, and that was probably why guys shouldn't wear jeans that were that tight.

Chris wasn't sure if Jazz was just putting on a show, or if he wanted Chris to touch him, or what. He sure looked like he was having a good time all by himself, whereas Chris was starting to feel kind of exposed, sitting here naked on the

couch next to Richard. Finally unable to stand it anymore, he grabbed the blanket that was thrown over the back of the couch and pulled it down over his lap. There, that was better.

"Chris?" Jazz said, his breathing coming a little faster now.

"Yeah?"

"If you wanted to touch Richard, that would be okay with me. You know that, right?"

"Uh-huh." Chris glanced over at Richard, who looked right back at him.

Jazz moaned softly, his fingers sliding slickly over the head of his cock. "Chris? Please? I want to ... I want to see you with him. Touch him. Please? For me?"

Richard slid his hand down against his own cock over the heavy denim and moaned, the sound an echo of Jazz's. He looked up at Chris again, and the expression on his face was so heavy with need that Chris couldn't refuse. Richard wanted it, Jazz wanted it, and he knew that if he'd let himself admit it, he wanted it, too.

Chris threw off the blanket, moved Richard's hand out of his way, and dropped to his knees on the floor beside the couch, pulling Richard toward him so that the bigger man was slouched on the sofa. He unbuttoned the front of Richard's jeans, and with hands that were just slightly trembling with excitement slid the zipper down as well.

Richard lifted his hips cooperatively as Chris worked his jeans and boxers down far enough to expose his erection. Chris paused for just a second, very aware that he was actually looking at Richard's cock. Which was pretty darned huge for one thing, and obviously desperate for another.

"Are you just gonna look?" Jazz asked.

"No," Chris said, flashing him a smile. He got back onto the couch between them and wrapped his hand around Richard's straining flesh, moving his fingers slowly as he explored the differences in size and shape. "You're not circumcised," he observed, and then flushed. Yeah, Richard probably already knew that.

"No," Richard managed to agree between the noises he was making. They were just little sounds that seemed to come from the back of his throat. "Christ," he gasped. "It's been ... oh fuck."

Chris tightened his grip and stroked, and couldn't help but grin at the way Richard's vocalizations doubled.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," Richard chanted, in a voice that didn't quite sound like his own.

Glancing over at Jazz, Chris saw that his love was watching them intently, squeezing hard on his own erection in what looked like an attempt to hold off his orgasm.

"Go on, Chris," Jazz urged him. "Make him come."

It didn't seem like it was going to take much, because Richard was groaning and swearing and panting and writhing on the couch like Chris was giving him the hand job of his life, when in reality Chris was barely trying.

Pausing to concentrate, Chris really focused on what he was doing, moving Richard's foreskin up and down over the head of his cock as he stroked, and then reached down with his other hand to fondle Richard's balls. Richard's cries rose a notch, and then another.

"Oh, Chris, yes, oh, God, that's so good, don't stop, please don't stop..."

And Chris had no intention of stopping because Richard's noises were just so sweet, and he could feel him rising up and he knew that any second now, any second Richard was going to come into his hand. His friend, Richard, who he really liked and now thought maybe he was more attracted to than he realized, because Chris was very, very tempted to lean down and take Richard's cock into his mouth.

It didn't matter, though, because it was already too late. Richard gave a hoarse shout as he came, pumping up into Chris' hand, eyes shut tight as he spilled all over Chris' fist and his own shirt. Jazz made a little sound next to them, and Chris looked over just in time to see Jazz coming, too. Richard's cock throbbed in his hand and Jazz groaned and pumped himself a few more times for good measure before stopping, panting.

Richard reached up and drew Chris down for one last kiss. "Thank you," he said. "It's been ... a long time, since anyone's hand touched me but my own, and that was ... God."

Jazz's arm snaked around Chris' waist. "You two looked amazing together. Just amazing."

"It felt pretty amazing," Richard said.

"Chris?"

"Yes, Jazz?"

"Do you think ... would it be okay if I kissed Richard? Just once? It's okay if you don't want me to—I won't be mad. And ... you know what it means."

Chris did. He thought to himself that he would be a complete jerk for minding, and then realized that he actually didn't. "Yeah—it's okay."

"You sure?"

"Jazz. Kiss him."

And with Chris sitting between them, Richard and Jazz leaned over and kissed each other, just once, their mouths less than six inches from Chris'.

"Thanks," they both breathed at the same time.

Chris wasn't sure if they were talking to him, or to each other.

He was in the middle, and it was okay.

* * * *

Chris sits at his desk all morning and thinks of Jazz lying there on the hospital bed until it's almost more than he can bear. It makes him want to pace and throw things and there are definite moments in which he can understand why Richard broke the TV. He has to force himself to concentrate on his work, to painstakingly go over every line of code until everything is perfect. Usually, by the time he finishes a project, he's in control again.

On the days that doesn't happen, when his control slips and the urge to tip the computer monitor off the desk onto the floor or smash the coffee machine is too strong, he goes into the bathroom and cries silently behind a locked door, his hands clenched into fists. Even the taste of his tears reminds him of Jazz.

Chris woke with Jazz curled up in his arms, Jazz's breath warm against his chest. The room was light enough that he could tell it was later than they usually slept, and he had a brief moment of panic in which he thought the alarm hadn't gone off and he was late for work. This was immediately followed by the blissful realization that it was Saturday, and they didn't have to be anywhere at any time. They could lie here in bed all day if they wanted to.

Jazz murmured and shifted against him, so Chris forced himself to relax and breathe more slowly. Within a minute Jazz was sleeping deeply again. Chris didn't often have the chance to hold Jazz as long as he'd like to—Jazz just didn't stay still long enough for it—so these early morning snuggles were the ones he treasured the most.

Besides, it was nice to be able to think uninterrupted, and he intended to enjoy it. He was remembering the night before—what Richard had said, the way Richard had sounded when he'd come, the way Richard had smelled. And thinking about those things was making him wake up just a little more than he wanted to, so he changed tracks and thought about how he felt about all of this, instead.

In retrospect, it was strange how it had all happened so naturally. If someone had asked Chris twenty-four hours ago how he thought he'd react to a situation like the one that had developed, he suspected that he'd be at least moderately freaked out. But that hadn't happened—there had been moments when he'd been uncomfortable, sure. But not so uncomfortable that he'd stopped what had been happening,

which he definitely could have done. At no time had he felt like he didn't have a choice in the matter.

Jazz murmured again, something that sounded like words this time.

"What?" Chris whispered softly, into his hair.

"S'cold," Jazz said.

"You're cold?" he whispered again. He wasn't sure Jazz was actually awake—sometimes he talked in his sleep.

Jazz put his arm over Chris' waist and snuggled even closer, but didn't say anything.

Chris tried to think about Jazz and Richard together without getting a pain in his gut. He'd managed it fine last night—he'd encouraged Jazz to kiss Richard knowing full well that Jazz wouldn't have wanted to unless he was in love with him. And it wasn't like that was any big surprise—Jazz had been nothing but honest about his feelings for Richard, even when it might have been simpler to lie and reassure Chris.

Snuffling in his sleep, Jazz rolled over away from Chris, burrowing under the blankets like he was trying to dig to China. Experience told Chris that trying to cuddle back up to Jazz would just wake him up, so he decided to take the opportunity that had presented itself and grab a shower.

He crept out of bed and into the bathroom. Standing under the hot spray, feeling alone in a way that was peaceful instead of lonely, he finally allowed himself to think about Richard in the way that his body wanted him to.

Imagining the sounds that had come from Richard when he'd touched the man, hearing the repeated strings of syllables, Chris touched himself with soapy hands. He stroked

slowly, enjoying it in a way that he rarely did by himself. One hand on his cock, the other cupped his balls, rolling them between his fingers, picturing Richard's face.

It was so good that he didn't even feel guilty, and anyway he knew Jazz didn't want him to feel guilty. Jazz wanted him to enjoy it. Well, it was possible that Jazz hadn't pictured him jerking off in the shower while thinking about Richard, but if Jazz had thought about it, he'd have wanted Chris to enjoy it.

With one shoulder leaning against the tile wall, Chris brought himself off slowly, taking his time until it felt like every cell in his body was screaming for release. One hand slid under his balls to let a finger probe at his opening, just lightly. His other hand stroked his cock from base to tip, firmly and without rushing.

He moaned and bit his lip as he came, hips jerking as he shot into his hand. It rolled through him with a force that made his eyes roll up into his head. By the time he'd recovered enough to do something more than shudder, the water was fading from hot to warm.

He shut it off and got out, toweling himself dry, and then peeked around the corner to see if Jazz was awake. He didn't seem to be, but he looked so good lying there, all snuggled up and comfortable, that Chris went over and slid back in under the covers. Jazz actually felt a little bit cooler than he did—he was still reddened and warm from the shower—and as soon as they touched, Jazz murmured and stirred against him.

"Morning," Jazz muttered.

"I'm sorry," Chris said softly into his hair. "I didn't mean to wake you up."

"S'okay." Jazz wriggled against him, pushing his morning erection into Chris' thigh. "You don't usually get up before me."

"No." He'd been up in more ways than one, he thought, and smiled.

Jazz pushed against him more forcefully, ran a hand down Chris' side and then between his legs, fondling him. "Oh. You don't want to?"

"I already did," Chris admitted sheepishly. "In the shower."

"Mmm. Well, I'm glad it's not me."

"Please tell me you're kidding. You know that even if I couldn't ... it wouldn't be about you, right?"

"What about when I get old?" Jazz asked. "And my hair starts to fall out and I have to get false teeth?"

"I've heard that gum jobs can be pretty amazing. I think I'll have to keep you around long enough to find out." Chris leaned in and kissed Jazz, then moved his mouth lower to nip at Jazz's neck. "Not that there's anything wrong with teeth, now and then."

Jazz made a little happy sound and pushed himself against Chris' thigh again. "No, teeth can be..." He gasped as he was nipped again. "Teeth can be good."

"Let's see where they can best be put to use, shall we?" asked Chris, moving down to bite gently at the spot near Jazz's tattoo where the faint scar was. He licked at it, feeling the ghostly unevenness of the skin there. He let his tongue trail lower, the taste of Jazz mildly spicy just above his navel.

"Oh, God," Jazz moaned softly as Chris flicked his tongue over the head of Jazz's cock, and then his breath hitched when Chris applied his teeth gently. "Oh! Fuck. Do that again..."

Chris did, grinning. "I don't care how much you like it, I'm not going to scar you down here."

Jazz was gasping, his hands clutched in the sheets. "Okay, just ... oh, God, do something."

"Something ... hmm..." Chris pretended to ponder this while licking Jazz's inner thigh.

"Chris, *please*. What do you want; do you want me to beg?"

"Sure, that'd be—"

Jazz broke in immediately, "Chris, please, please suck me. I'm begging you, I'll do anything you want if you'll just suck my cock, please, pretty please with—oh ... yeah, oh, babe, I love you so much and you're so good to me and don't stop, don't stop."

Chris smiled around his mouthful of cock, loving the sound of Jazz's babbling as it spilled over him like rain. He concentrated his attention on the tip, letting his tongue dip into the little slit and taste the fluid that concentrated everything about Jazz into a few clear drops. Jazz was pushing urgently against his mouth, wordlessly encouraging him to get on with it.

And then Jazz gasped and panted as Chris took him in deep, as deep as he could, sucking so vigorously that within seconds Jazz shook and cried out, coming in waves that left him shuddering and wrung out like a limp towel.

Sleeping Stone
by Alexa Snow

Chris continued to suck and lick at Jazz for long minutes, taking his time. He could feel Jazz's hands in his hair; they wriggled in and gripped tight, pulled him up the length of his body for a kiss.

"Love you," Jazz said.

Chris pushed his face into the hollow of Jazz's shoulder and sighed. "Love you, too."

Chapter 15

On the way home from the hospital, there's a song on the radio that Chris knows very well, even though he doesn't know who sings it. It's about the days of the week—not the Beatles' song, though, there are only seven days in this week, not eight—and all the ways they can suck, and how it doesn't matter in the end because Friday, Friday is the day people are in love.

Sometimes it's true, Chris thinks.

Saturday (That Night, plus one):

Saturday night they went over to Sunny and Greg's, as usual. The five of them had dinner and gave up on the movie that Jazz had rented because even he admitted that it was just abysmal. They tried to play Pictionary and had to give up on that, too, because Jazz was in a mood and kept insisting that every picture anyone drew was a penis, and laughing hysterically until he was eventually a limp tear-stained lump on the floor.

Richard stepped over him casually as he got up to leave.

The three of them exchanged a number of pointed glances over the course of the evening, but Chris told himself that it just wasn't the right time or place to say anything.

* * * *

Sunday (That Night, plus two):

Richard came over for dinner. They had a Mexican casserole that Jazz was fond of, and cornbread, and beer. They watched a rerun of Friends on TV and laughed about

Tom Selleck's character Richard reminding them of their Richard, and after nine Richard went home, which was really back to his hotel because he still hadn't found an apartment.

None of them mentioned what had happened on Friday.

* * * *

Monday (That Night, plus three):

Jazz and Chris had sex on the dining room table before they'd even finished dinner, and then sheepishly cleaned up the mess and went upstairs. They had sex in the shower, and then laid out their clothes for work the next morning and turned off the lights and had sex again, and then, when that still wasn't enough for Chris, Jazz sucked him off under the covers in the dark.

Neither of them said Richard's name the entire evening.

* * * *

Tuesday (That Night, plus four):

Chris and Jazz met Richard at his friend Marcus' house, where they ordered in pizza and hung out and talked about books and the state of the country and a particular celebrity who'd just been arrested for shoplifting.

"Is she insane?" asked Jazz. "She must have, like, millions of dollars."

"It's not about the money," Marcus said.

Jazz shook his head. "How can it not be about the money?"

Richard pulled the crust from his last slice of pizza into little pieces on his plate. "Sometimes it's about taking what

you want," he said, and when Chris glanced up their eyes met.

The three of them left Marcus' house at the same time, driving away in two different directions.

* * * *

Wednesday (That Night, plus five):

Chris came home later than usual from the gym—there'd been long lines for the Nautilus equipment that he wanted to use, and once he was already there he hated to go home without completing the circuit.

Jazz had tried to make dinner. Chris never understood why Jazz felt the need to keep trying, but he just sighed and the two of them cleaned up the mess together and had sandwiches instead.

The phone rang as they were loading up the dishwasher, and Jazz answered it. The side of the conversation that Chris heard went like this:

"Hello?"

"Oh, hey, Richard."

"Good, good, how are you?"

"Yeah, he's fine, too."

"No, not much. Just hanging out, I guess. You?"

"Oh, that sounds good. Have fun."

"Yeah."

"Yeah, I know."

"Yeah, Richard, I *know*."

"Okay. Yeah, sure, sounds good."

"You, too."

"Bye."

Chris didn't want to ask about the call, but he couldn't help himself. "What's up?"

"Not much. He wants to take us out to dinner Friday night."

"Oh. Okay, that sounds good."

"Yeah, that's what I said."

They went to bed early, but Chris didn't sleep well.

* * * *

Thursday (That Night, plus six):

Over the course of their evening, Chris told Jazz that he loved him no less than a dozen times. Each time Jazz said "I love you, too," back to him, although somewhere around the eighth time he started giving Chris funny looks.

Chris was restless. He didn't know whether he wanted to go out or stay in. He didn't want to watch TV, he was disgusted by the state of the kitchen, but didn't want to clean it, and he wasn't capable of sitting still any longer than Jazz was on an ordinary day.

"What's got you so freaked out?" Jazz asked finally.

"Nothing."

Jazz raised an eyebrow. "Really."

"I'm fine."

"Yeah, you seem fine."

"Jazz—seriously. It's just—" He let all the air in his lungs out in a rush and sat down on the couch. "I don't know," he said. "It's like something's wrong, but I don't know what it is."

"Is it me?" Jazz didn't seem worried.

"No, of course it's not you. I haven't been sleeping real well, maybe that has something to do with it. Maybe I'm just overtired."

"Maybe." Jazz came over and wrapped Chris up in his arms.

* * * *

Friday (That Night, plus seven):

They met Richard at the little Greek place across town that was one of Chris' favorites. Jazz and Richard spent half an hour arguing good-naturedly about some politician that Jazz hated and Richard sort of liked and Chris knew nothing about. He tried to follow their conversation for a while, but eventually gave up in favor of poking at his uneaten roasted potatoes.

"You're quiet tonight," Richard said finally.

Chris shrugged.

Jazz slid his chair closer to Chris' and nudged him with his knee. "You okay?"

"Yeah, I'm fine. Just ... thinking."

"What about?" asked Richard.

"You ... this..." Chris gestured with his hand, a sweeping movement that encompassed more than just the three of them sitting at the table. "Us."

"Are you having regrets about what happened last weekend?" Richard's voice was low and serious.

"Regrets? No." Chris looked up at the two men sitting next to him. "I actually kind of thought you were."

Richard shook his head. "No, not me. Jazz?"

"Are you insane? Why would I have regrets? But Chris, if you weren't all freaked out, why didn't you ... say anything?"

"Neither of you said anything," Chris pointed out. "I thought maybe, you know, things hadn't worked out the way you'd hoped they would."

"Are *you* insane?" Jazz said. "It was amazing, Chris—seeing you and Richard together was—well, even hotter than you are by yourself, and that's saying a lot."

"Chris?" Richard asked.

"Yeah?"

Richard looked supremely uncomfortable, which wasn't a look Chris was used to seeing on him. "Can I tell you something?"

"Sure. Yes, of course you can."

"From the time Jazz left me," Richard glanced at Jazz apologetically, "until the other night, I've been ... well, celibate."

Chris blinked. And then blinked again. "That's a long time," he said slowly.

"You're telling me," said Richard, his mouth twisting into a grin that seemed sad somehow. Chris wanted to kiss it off him, imagining all of those years without anyone.

"Didn't you want anyone...?"

Richard was looking down at his hands, his thumb rubbing against his palm. "I didn't. I didn't think I'd ever want anyone but Jazz again. Until I met you."

There was a pain low in Chris' stomach, a feeling of desire and sorrow. He knew he wanted to kiss Richard and take some of that sadness away. But he didn't know what to say.

Thankfully, as usual, Jazz did.

"Come on," he said. "Let's get out of here."

* * * *

The happy moments are worse than the sad ones. The split seconds when Chris actually forgets, and becomes so fully absorbed in something—the taste of Richard, the way the world looks when the sun is first rising in the morning—that Jazz ceases to exist. It never lasts more than a few seconds, and the crash as it ends is earth-shattering.

So he can't decide whether it's better to remember, or forget.

He gets up in the mornings. He eats breakfast, goes to work, sits at his desk. He answers the phone and attends meetings and goes to the gym. He works out. He takes showers and shaves—but he doesn't need to clean the bathroom anymore because of Richard's little obsession—and he takes the car through the car wash so the salt on the roads doesn't deteriorate the underside of the frame. He goes to the grocery store and he cooks meals and they talk around Jazz's empty seat at the dining room table.

They'd barely made it in the front door of the house before Chris had Richard pushed up against the wall and was kissing him, hoping in some dim back corner of his mind that Jazz would say it was okay. It was intense and a little bit terrifying

to think of what would happen if Jazz hadn't been okay with it, but Chris didn't really have any control over it.

Richard was muttering his name in between kisses, and trying to shove his coat off over his shoulders. "Fuck, Chris, need to touch you," he managed to get out before shoving his tongue back into Chris' mouth.

Jazz's hands were on Chris from behind, helping him shrug out of the coat, and then Jazz wrapped an arm around his waist and held on while Chris kissed Richard. A Richard who was pressed with his back to the wall with his hands on Chris' head as they kissed, a Richard who made low sounds of need and want and the sorrow that Chris had seen earlier.

"Need to," Richard said, and pulled at Chris' shirt. "Jazz, help me."

Jazz seemed more than happy to oblige, untucking the shirt from Chris' pants and pulling it up and over his head. Richard's palms flew to Chris' chest, sliding and rubbing. "God, you're so warm. I'd forgotten..." And then his fingers were working at Chris' pants in desperation, unbuttoning and yanking the zipper down and slipping his hand inside.

Chris groaned as Richard's hand closed over him, pushing into the grasping fingers urgently. He was so hard he ached, and Richard's mouth was just as greedy as his own, both of them licking and sucking as if they were starved for each other.

Richard shoved Chris' pants past his hips, letting them slide to the floor, and then Jazz's arm was around his waist again, steadying him. "I need to taste you," Richard said in a low voice, and dropped to his knees.

Condom? Chris thought, and then the thought was gone like an arrow as Richard's mouth closed around him, hot and wet. "Oh, God," he whimpered.

Jazz's fingers played with Chris' nipples as Jazz's hardness pressed against his ass cheeks. "Is that good, love?"

"Oh, God," he said again, trying urgently to think of something boring and everyday so that he wouldn't come in Richard's mouth before a minute had even passed. Richard's tongue was swirling around his shaft, at the same time managing to continue sucking firmly.

Jazz pulled back a little bit and let his own hand travel down Chris' back, slide lower between his legs and then tease at Chris' opening with the tip of one finger. Richard chose that exact moment to deep throat Chris, taking him all the way down, and Chris shouted and came so hard that he couldn't breathe, his hips rocking forward against Richard's mouth.

He was trembling and shuddering and he could feel Richard swallowing around him, and the end of Jazz's finger pushed inside of him and even though he didn't think it was possible he might have come a second time starting then. Either that, or this was the longest orgasm of his life—he was still pulsing and shooting and Richard's mouth was so warm and wet.

Richard moved back then, slowly, letting Chris' still-hard cock slide out between his lips with a moist, slick noise. He pressed his lips to Chris' thigh, nuzzling the skin there. "I want you so much," he said as he got to his feet. "Chris, I want you."

Still trembling, Chris moved forward and pressed Richard against the wall again, realizing belatedly that his pants were around his ankles and he still had his shoes on. "Upstairs?" he asked, and really he was talking to Jazz more than to Richard. "Can we?"

"Of course," said Jazz, coming around to kiss him and fondle his softening cock. "God, Chris ... you're so hot. Both of you. I want you both."

Chris pulled his pants back up without fastening them and kicked off his shoes, and then the three of them were moving up the staircase, kissing and touching each other as they went. Jazz and Richard were both hard and straining, pushing into each other and Chris, hands clutching.

They yanked the sheets to the foot of the bed and fell down onto it, undressing each other as they rolled back and forth, switching positions. Chris was on top of Jazz, their cocks sliding together. He couldn't believe he was hard again already, but he was so needy. He wanted everything. Richard's hands were around his waist, his fingers probing where Jazz had so recently been touching him.

Richard's eyes were full of something dark and deep. He kissed Jazz, hard, and Chris could see their tongues slipping around each other wetly. Fuck, he could hear their tongues together.

"God," Richard moaned. "I need to ... Jazz, I want to fuck him. I need to. Can I? Please?" He moaned again as though he couldn't stop himself.

"Yeah, of course," said Jazz. "Here, hang on..." He slid away from Chris and reached for the bedside table drawer, pulling out a bottle of lubricant.

"Um ... condom?" Chris managed to ask.

Jazz shook his head. "He's clean. He got tested last week—I saw the results already."

Chris wanted to ask more about this, but Richard was shoving him over onto his back, fingers that were already slick with lube probing at him. Richard's cock looked enormous, pointing forward and dripping onto Chris' belly, and then Richard's fingers stroked forward inside of him and Chris gasped. "Oh! Yes, there."

"Can I?" Richard asked again, and his eyes were on Chris' face this time. "Say it. I can't, unless you say it." The tension on his face was plain—he was clearly holding on by a thread.

"Yes," Chris said, and then, because he knew it was what Richard wanted, "Fuck me."

Richard groaned and guided himself forward, and fuck, he was big, the stretch and burn worse than any time Chris could remember. He knew it would be better if he relaxed, so he focused and bore down a little bit and Richard slipped in another inch or so.

His arms trembling, Richard fought to stay still above Chris, giving him the time he needed to adjust. "Oh God oh God oh God," Richard chanted under his breath.

Jazz made a soothing sound and kissed Richard gently. "Breathe. It's okay, there's plenty of time."

"Maybe not," said Richard from between gritted teeth. "God, I'm so close."

Finally able to relax, Chris shifted and then rocked his hips up against Richard who, aided by the lubricant, slid balls-deep into him with one smooth movement.

Richard's eyes were so wide Chris was a little afraid they might drop out of his head. "Oh, God."

Chris drew in a sharp breath as Richard tried tentatively to pull out and slide back in. "You keep ... saying that," said Chris. "Is it ... helping?"

"I have no idea," Richard gasped, moving backward and forward again. "I have to ... say *something*."

A familiar hand wrapped itself around Chris' cock, and he looked over to see Jazz on his knees, pulling on his own cock with his right hand while he stroked Chris' with his left. Chris was rapidly hardening again now after the brief wilting that had occurred with Richard's entrance, and the sensation of Richard filling him was slight pain mixed with undeniable pleasure.

"Fuck," said Chris.

"I think he is," Jazz said helpfully.

"Shut up," chorused Richard and Chris together.

There was a short pause, and then all three of them burst out laughing.

"He thinks ... I'm..." Richard choked, and slid out and away from Chris, leaning on one hand as he tried to catch his breath.

Chris struggled to stop laughing long enough to speak. "Jazz ... that's..." He broke off into peals of laughter again.

"Sorry," Jazz said. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..." Tears were running down his face and he swiped at them with the

back of his hand. He seemed to get himself under control for a minute, and then collapsed back onto the mattress in another fit of giggles. "Sorry," he said again.

Richard had managed to stop laughing and was looking at Jazz fondly. "Are you trying to ruin this for me?"

Jazz must have heard his teasing tone, but he still sobered immediately and moved forward to kiss Richard. "No," he said. "I really am sorry."

"I know."

Chris chuckled a few more times and then quieted as he watched the two of them kissing. Richard looked as if he'd like to devour Jazz, kissing him with a hand on either side of his face, and Jazz looked ... well, like he'd happily be devoured. Jazz's hand traced down Richard's chest and then lower to brush against the head of his cock, which was still slick with lubricant, and Chris heard Richard's sudden sharp intake of breath.

Richard turned to look at Chris, and beckoned to him with one finger. "Get over here."

Swallowing hard, Chris obeyed, and then allowed himself to be turned around so that his back was to Richard's chest. Both on their knees, with Jazz next to Richard, fingers still teasing the tip of Richard's cock. Richard sank down lower and then, with Jazz's hand to guide him, positioned himself and slowly pulled Chris back onto his cock.

Chris could feel his thigh muscles trembling, and it wasn't that the position was awkward as much as it was the feel of Richard's cock stretching him again. The way was easier this time, and Richard's hands were on his hips holding him very

still, not letting him move back or away except as Richard dictated.

Frozen in place, Chris let out a moan as Richard began to move behind him. He needed something to hold on to, and blindly reached out for the wall, bracing one palm against it. He felt like he was *this close* to being split open, but somehow it didn't happen—Richard was moving, but slowly, carefully, as if he was aware of how delicate the balance was.

"God," Richard growled, and Chris couldn't suppress a smile that Richard was back to that again.

Jazz moved up next to Chris and kissed him, and the taste of Jazz's mouth coupled with everything else was pretty close to overwhelming. He dug his fingers into the wall like he could break through the plaster and have something to grab onto that way, and his other hand came up and curled itself around the back of Jazz's neck, keeping him there.

"Love you," Jazz whispered into his mouth. "Love you so fucking much, Chris."

Richard was still thrusting slowly, and then he sped up a little bit and suddenly he groaned and leaned forward, pressing his face against Chris' back. Chris could feel his hips jerking upward, could feel Richard pulsing inside him as he came in a warm flood, Richard's harsh groans sending shocks like electricity across his skin and down his spine.

Then Jazz's fingers wrapped around his cock, squeezed, gave one quick pull, and Chris tried his best not to shout as he spilled out into Jazz's hand. He could still feel Richard moving inside him, slowly and gently now, just little pushes that strung his orgasm out, making it last longer.

Jazz was kissing him again, and now Chris could taste the hunger that Jazz was projecting.

With a long shuddering sigh, Richard pulled out and away, collapsing very gracefully—especially for a man of his size—down onto the bed beside them. "Chris? Come here?"

Chris was reluctant to move away from Jazz, now, but Jazz pushed him gently down to lie next to Richard.

"I just wanted," said Richard, before he kissed him, "to say thank you. You're amazing and ... well, thanks."

"I hope you two aren't going to forget about me," Jazz said teasingly. "Just because you both got off—in Chris' case, twice—doesn't mean we're finished here." He shoved himself against Chris' back, letting his hard cock slide near Chris' ass.

Chris leaned in and kissed Richard quickly, raised his eyebrows in what he hoped would be a meaningful expression, and rolled backward up and over Jazz, ending up on his other side. And Richard must have gotten the hint because his hands were already on Jazz, stroking him, and Chris was kissing Jazz and for once Jazz was in the middle, being played.

"Fuck," Jazz said, his voice sounding unusually high-pitched. "Somebody ... I need ... come on..."

Richard glanced down at Jazz's weeping cock and then back up at Chris questioningly. He must have been able to read the assent in Chris' eyes because he slid down and carefully took the tip of Jazz into his mouth, and Jazz made an even higher-pitched squeak against Chris' lips.

Chris had to stop kissing Jazz then—he wanted to watch. He let his fingers slide down to play idly with one of Jazz's

nipples, and he felt Jazz shudder as Richard took him in deep. He could imagine so easily how Jazz tasted, the way Jazz's skin would feel on Richard's tongue. He could imagine it easily, and then with a surge of near-jealousy he wanted it for himself.

He slid down next to Richard. "My turn," he said hoarsely.

Richard pulled away, letting Jazz's cock fall back onto his belly with a little slap. Jazz moaned in disappointment, and then squealed again as Chris took over Richard's job, sucking and licking him for all he was worth.

Grabbing Jazz's cock in his hand, Chris let his mouth slide back up to the head, licking around the crown with the flat of his tongue. He closed his eyes for a second and when he opened them Richard's face was very close to his own.

"Could you use a hand, there?" Richard asked.

"No, a tongue," Jazz said in a garbled voice.

None of them laughed this time. Chris and Richard's mouths were already otherwise occupied, and Jazz was too busy gasping for air.

Chris wasn't sure if he and Richard were licking Jazz or each other. Their tongues slid together, and Chris could taste the lingering flavor of himself in Richard's mouth. Jazz's tender skin was suffused a dark pink, and the noises he was making were inspiring.

"Let's really drive him crazy," Richard suggested in a whisper, and moved down between Jazz's legs to take his balls into his mouth.

Jazz just about went crazy, wriggling all over the place and tangling his fingers in Chris' hair and moaning like he was

going to die. Chris turned his own attention back to Jazz's cock.

"Oh, God that's so good, oh, shit, oh..." Jazz was babbling incoherently as their two mouths worked at him, alternately licking and sucking.

Richard glanced at Chris at again, and Chris could see the smile in his eyes. Inside, he was smiling, too. Jazz was loving this.

"God, I'm so close, Chris, Richard, I'm gonna ... oh God..." Jazz locked up, every muscle tense and delineated, and shot into Chris' mouth. Richard backed off enough to be able to watch, his fingers stroking Jazz's balls in place of his tongue. Chris swallowed everything Jazz had to offer and then moved up to kiss him tenderly.

"Love you," Jazz sighed, and Chris knew it wasn't directed only at him, even if Richard hadn't been able to hear it.

The three of them settled down, Chris in the middle of the bed between them by unspoken agreement. Hands smoothed and petted over skin, breathing slowed down, eyes fought a valiant battle to stay open despite the call of sleep.

The sheets were cool and Richard and Jazz were warm on either side of him. Chris closed his eyes and drifted off to the sound of their breathing.

* * * *

Chris' dreams are ridiculous, absurd, insane things. He doesn't share them with anyone, not even Richard, and not only because Richard would be hurt to listen. He wonders, some mornings, if they're a sign that he's losing his mind.

Jazz looks like a modern-day Jesus, arms outstretched to the animals that cavort around him in the grass. Deer, rabbits, cats, dogs. Lots of puppies, and even in the dream Chris knows what a big laugh that is. Jesus' car has fuzzy dice hanging from the rearview mirror, apparently, and the back seat is full of paper cups of coffee with the Starbucks label on them.

Religious epiphanies about the Son of God's caffeine habit notwithstanding, Chris thinks he might be going crazy.

In the end, of course, it was Chris who had to do the asking.

The idea sprouted the night Richard starting talking about getting an apartment. He'd been staying in the hotel for months, and he didn't like it. Despite how nice the place was, he claimed he could always hear people in the rooms on either side of him, and he didn't like the water pressure in the shower, and the tub was too small. He was sick of room service and salads with unripe tomato and ice buckets full of already-melted cubes. He wanted a place of his own.

Which didn't make much sense to Chris—Richard was hardly ever at the hotel anymore. He spent most nights with them, and had even appropriated a shelf in the closet for some of his clothes. He did go back to the hotel most days to work, saying that it was easier to concentrate there, and somehow a couple of the hotel towels were now living in their bathroom.

Why Richard would consider renting an apartment when he spent so much time at their house was totally beyond Chris' ability to understand. It wasn't like Richard even cared about

stuff. Well, other than clothes and shoes, which were more like a part of him than something separate. But Richard didn't care about furniture, or decorating, and he wasn't that interested in cooking. So Chris didn't see why he cared about having a place other than the hotel.

"Have you looked at anything yet?" Chris asked, days later, as they made their way through the grocery store.

Richard shook his head. "I glanced through the paper, but I didn't see anything that really caught my eye."

"We can help you look," Jazz offered. "You want something close by, right?"

"Yeah." Richard took a box of crackers off the shelf and lobbed them into the cart. "Close would be good."

Chris moved the crackers so they weren't squishing the bread, and then sighed when Jazz dropped a bag of rice right back into the same spot. "Is there something wrong with the hotel? I mean, other than the room service thing? Because you won't even get room service in an apartment, and, green tomatoes aside, you're still going to have people in the apartments on either side of you."

"I know," said Richard. "I'm just sick of it. It feels too ... temporary. It's making me crabby."

Jazz rubbed a hand across Richard's forearm. "Well, we don't want you crabby," he said.

Chris put a box of new water filters in the cart, and then a couple of bottles of Coke. Jazz's fondness for caffeine didn't stop at coffee. "What do you want? Something small, something big?" They went around and into the next aisle.

Richard shrugged. "I don't know. I guess I haven't really thought about it enough, yet. I was just picturing something more, you know, homey." He passed Chris some canned soup, obviously having gotten the hint that the bread was to be protected at all costs.

"Thanks," Chris smiled at him.

"Oh, crap," said Richard. "I meant to get some of that other bread from the deli. You guys go ahead, I'm going to go back and get it before I forget again."

As soon as he had disappeared around the corner, Chris asked the question. "Do you think we should just ask him to move in with us?"

"What?" Jazz's eyes were wide and round with surprise.

"I mean, I know it's your house," Chris capitulated quickly. "Sorry, I shouldn't assume..."

"No! It *is* your house, too. I've told you that enough times, haven't I? You just surprised me."

"Yes, I kind of got that by the way your mouth was hanging open. But, seriously ... what do you think?"

Jazz slowly put a bag of carrots and a package of broccoli into the cart. "It makes sense to me. He's spent practically every night for the past month with us anyway ... But what do you think?"

"Didn't I just suggest it?"

"Yeah, but *why*?"

Chris shrugged. "I don't know. Because it's stupid for him to pay for an apartment when he's here all the time?"

"I don't think money's a big issue here," Jazz pointed out. "There's got to be a better reason than that."

"Because we—I—like him? I didn't think you were going to have such a problem with this."

"Oh, I don't have a problem with it. I think it's a great idea. I just want to know why *you* think it's a good idea."

"I like having him around," Chris admitted quietly. "I wouldn't mind if he were around more often, and I like waking up with him in our bed." He turned to the apple display and picked a few of them up, checking for bruises. "Is that what you were looking for?"

"Yeah," Jazz said. "I guess so. I don't want you—us—doing this unless we're sure. It wouldn't be fair."

He put the apples in the cart. "No, of course not."

"Maybe we should just think about it some more..." Jazz trailed off as Richard came up the aisle toward them, a package of bread in his hand.

"Okay," Chris said.

"Did you get carrots?" asked Richard, putting the package into the cart. "Oh yeah, here they are."

Chris pointed to the frozen food cases at the end of the row. "Jazz, can you go grab a couple of bags of strawberries?"

"Sure."

Richard poked at a wedge of melon with one finger. "Why do they cut these up to sell them when they're not even ripe yet? It doesn't make any sense."

"I didn't realize that was what they were trying to make," Chris said. "I thought they were trying to make money."

"Mmm. Well, there is that."

All the food barely fit into the trunk of Chris' car—they hadn't been to the store for a week and a half though, so

they'd pretty much needed to restock the cabinets. As they were passing each other on the back and forth trips into the house with the bags, Jazz said casually, "I was thinking about ... Chris, what would you think about getting a dog?" He disappeared onto the porch and Richard shook his head frantically at Chris.

"What?" Chris stage-whispered.

"He's never told you about the puppy thing?"

Chris thought back. "He did say something about a dog dying, I think, but no. Not in detail."

"He shouldn't—" Richard broke off as Jazz came back around the corner.

Jazz crossed his arms and frowned at them. "Get a move-on here, guys. Time's a-wasting."

"Are we in some big hurry?" Chris and Richard both made for the house with their armfuls of loaded bags.

"No, but I don't want to spend all day dealing with the groceries." Jazz called from near the trunk of the car.

"So what happened with the dog?" Chris asked quietly.

"Died. He forgot about water and it got sick and he didn't notice. He was—"

Jazz came into the kitchen and stopped at the sight of them frozen there. "Is there some kind of conspiracy going on here?"

"No, no," Chris said. "We're just going out to get more bags."

They shot out of the kitchen and on the way to the car Richard finished his explanation. "I've never seen him the way he was after that dog died. He was a wreck."

"If he wants a dog, I don't mind taking care of it," Chris protested.

Richard sighed and handed Chris one of the last two bags of groceries. "Yeah, I know. I can't refuse him anything, either."

Jazz was already opening cabinets and throwing stuff in haphazardly. No wonder Chris could never find anything he was looking for.

"So about that dog..." Jazz said.

"You want a puppy?" Chris asked. "A baby?"

Jazz turned around and his eyes were all lit up. "Really? We can get one?"

"If you want one, then sure."

"Really?"

Chris found himself with an armful of Jazz—much better than grocery bags—and Richard smiled at him from over Jazz's shoulder.

"I don't really want one," Jazz said.

"Um ... what?"

"I just wanted to see what you'd say. I shouldn't have dogs, though. We don't really ... get along."

"So I've heard."

Jazz looked suspicious. "So that's what you guys were talking about. Richard, are you spreading vicious rumors about me?"

Richard grinned. "Only true vicious rumors."

"That's okay, then." Jazz leaned in and kissed Chris, hard. "Thanks," he said softly. "For wanting me to have one."

"There's something else I want you to have," Chris said.

"What?"

"Richard," Chris said, to Jazz and the room in general.

Richard looked up from the box of pasta he was holding.

"What?"

"Jazz and I were thinking that maybe you'd like to move in with us."

Nova-like, Jazz's smile lit up the room.

Chapter 16

Chris and Richard still go to Sunny and Greg's on Saturday nights. At first Chris refused to have dinner with them and ate at the hospital with Jazz, but eventually Sunny managed to "make him see reason" (which was really "browbeat him until he gave in") and now he visits Jazz earlier in the evening and then the four of them have dinner together.

It's not the same, but it's something.

"I think there was more than punch in that punch," Richard said.

Chris could feel Jazz's hands on him, and then Jazz was pulling his arm up over Jazz's shoulders and supporting him. He couldn't feel his feet. He had a brief moment's surge of anxiety that maybe his feet were lost.

"Are my feet still there?" he asked, or tried to ask. It didn't sound the way he'd imagined it in his head.

"Sure they are," Jazz's voice said, somewhere near his ear.

Richard stepped in front of him, and then Richard's hands were cool on his face, tilting his head as Richard looked at him with obvious concern. "Jazz, look at his eyes. I don't think that was just alcohol in there, either."

Now Jazz was looking at him, too, and the two of them wavering in front of him all googley-eyed was enough to make Chris want to laugh. He would have if he'd had the energy, but he was all loose and heavy.

Jazz was saying something, and then Richard was saying something else, and none of it made any sense except that Chris thought that Richard sounded angry.

He was being walked around, and then pushed to sit on a lumpy couch that probably needed to be replaced. Richard's voice was fading but Jazz's hands were on him, petting him. Nice.

"Are you okay?" Jazz said, and then repeated it before Chris realized that he was supposed to answer.

"Funny."

The petting stopped for a moment, and then started up again. "You feel funny? Or I'm being funny?"

"Everything's funny." And his own voice still sounded wrong. Someone was yelling in another room and it hurt his stomach instead of his ears. Why was someone yelling? Where was Richard? "Aren't we going home?"

"Yeah, baby, hang on just a minute, okay? Richard just went to ... um, talk to some people."

Everything was warm and kind of fuzzy. After a few minutes the yelling stopped, and the people who had mostly been standing around quietly started to move again. There was music and people were swaying and it was kind of pretty and then a little nauseating, and Chris closed his eyes. The insides of his eyelids were soothing even though he felt dizzy.

The couch sank down on his other side and Richard's hands were on his arm and the back of his neck. "Chris? You okay?"

"Mm-hmm."

"Come on, let's get him out of here," Richard said. He kept talking to Jazz as the two of them walked Chris out to the car between them, something about Marcus waiting for the police to come and no one leaving alone and eventually Chris' brain

figured out that someone had put something into the punch that was much worse than some Bacardi 151 or whatever.

Jazz's hand was on his head, pushing on him, and he couldn't figure out what he was supposed to do until he realized that Jazz was trying to get him into the back seat of the car.

"I don't want to sit in back by myself," Chris whined, and oh that sounded ... whiney. Like he was about six years old.

"It's okay, babe, I'm going to sit in back with you," Jazz said, so Chris let himself be pushed into the car and when Jazz was sitting next to him, he sort of leaned over and rested his head on Jazz's lap.

"There you go," said Jazz encouragingly. "That's fine. You just rest right there, sweetheart. You okay?"

Chris made a muffled sound against Jazz's thigh, and then turned his head. "What's going on?"

Richard spoke from the front seat. "Someone slipped something into the punch," and Chris realized he'd known that a minute ago. "We're just lucky we didn't all drink it—I don't know what the hell they were thinking."

"What was it?" Chris felt slow and stupid.

"I don't know, but they're going to find out. It was probably GHB, or maybe Rohypnol, that's my guess ... do you remember how much punch you drank?"

Jazz's hand was rubbing at his temple and it felt so good that he almost forgot he'd been asked a question. "Um ... half a glass, maybe?" Chris remembered how cloying it had been, and how he'd ditched the cup as soon as he'd realized that the sweetness was making his teeth ache.

"That's good—hopefully you didn't get too much. How do you feel?"

Chris considered this question carefully. "Weird. Hot and cold at the same time. Dizzy."

"Let me know if you think you need to be sick—you might—and I'll pull over as fast as I can, okay?" Richard said.

"Mmmph." Chris got lost in his own breathing, in the rhythms and patterns it made, and then discovered that the more attention he paid to how he was breathing, the more screwed up it got.

Jazz was still stroking his hair, rubbing his shoulder. "We'll be home soon, love, and you can go to bed."

"I'm tired. And cold." He couldn't even summon up the energy to be embarrassed at how stupid he sounded anymore. "I'm cold."

"Richard, turn up the heat," Jazz said. "It's okay, babe. We'll get you into our nice warm bed and you can sleep and sleep until you feel better. It won't be long now."

Still, it seemed like a long time before Richard turned the car into their driveway, and the walk from the car into the house and up the stairs seemed just as long. He was shaking with cold and at the same time his face felt like it was on fire, and someone was taking off his shoes and then his pants and shirt, and he was being pressed down onto the mattress that felt so good underneath him. The pillow was soft and cool against his cheek.

Jazz slipped in next to him and snuggled close, wrapping his arms around him to warm him. He was still shivering and

he was convinced that his feet really *were* lost and maybe Richard and Jazz just didn't want to tell him.

Chris looked up and Richard was standing next to the bed, that same expression of concern on his face.

"Get in," Jazz encouraged him. "Help me get him warmed up."

"I'm okay," said Chris, and he meant it as reassurance but not discouragement.

"I know you are," Jazz said. "You're fine. Just close your eyes, try to sleep."

Then Richard was pressing up against his other side, and the bigger man was even warmer than Jazz was and after a few minutes the shivering finally began to subside. Richard's hand was sliding up and down over his ribcage comfortably.

"Are you guys sure my feet are still there?"

"We're sure," said Jazz, and kissed him on the mouth, long and slow and delicious. "Close your eyes, Chris."

He obeyed, listening to Richard's breathing, which wasn't screwed up, and to Jazz's, which wasn't either, and to his own, which was confusing and sounded funny to his ears.

Later, when he woke up, it was still very dark, and the shapes on either side of him had shifted and metamorphosed into one shape next to him, a shape that was rocking and moaning. He blinked, and his eyes adjusted to the darkness.

Richard was on top of Jazz, slowly pushing into him, Jazz's legs hooked up over his shoulders. Chris' breath—which admittedly had been a problem all night—caught in his throat, and his cock throbbed jealously.

The two froze when they realized Chris was awake.

"You okay?" Richard asked.

"Yeah. I'm better."

Jazz made a little noise under Richard and Richard responded by sliding back into him. "We can stop," Jazz said. "Do you want us to stop?"

Chris shook his head, unable to draw his eyes away from the sight of the two of them together. "No," he said, and his mouth was dry. "Don't stop."

Richard groaned and thrust into Jazz again, rocking against him.

"Oh, fuck," Chris whispered, and he knew that they'd both heard him because they froze again.

"Chris?" Richard said. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure. If you stop, I won't get to watch."

The look on Richard's face was like magic, like he'd been given everything he'd ever asked for. He shifted his weight to his opposite arm, which made Jazz squeak, and reached out to touch Chris' face. Chris didn't close his eyes, even when Richard's fingers brushed almost against his eyelid—he didn't want to lose the chance to look at Richard.

Because the reality was, Richard looked like a fucking Greek God. Okay, maybe it was just the drugs talking, but there were days when looking at Richard's ear or ... or knee or something got Chris all hot and bothered. Okay, this was probably the drugs talking.

Chris shifted his position slightly and realized he'd been watching Richard for maybe a minute or more. Even though his eyes were on Richard, he was totally lost in his own head,

zoning out and thinking about Richard's ears ... even though his ears *were* really hot.

"He's not okay," someone said, and it must have been Jazz because he hadn't seen Richard's lips move.

"No," Richard agreed. And see? Lips moving.

They were changing positions somehow, and the mattress dipped, and Chris felt a little dizzy so he closed his eyes again. A warm hand was on his shoulder, and then he felt lips touching his own gently.

After a minute or so Chris managed to figure out that they were on either side of him. It seemed familiar somehow. He hadn't realized that he was cold until the warmth of their bodies started to seep into his, and then he started shivering again and couldn't stop.

"We don't have an electric blanket or anything, do we, Jazz?" Richard asked from behind Chris.

"Are you kidding? Those things give you cancer."

Richard sighed. "Right, of course. What was I thinking?"

"We'll just have to use good old-fashioned body heat." Jazz was pressing up against him, wriggling, and Chris could feel Jazz's erection poking him.

Richard was poking him on the other side and suddenly he wanted nothing more than to be kissing someone, anyone. Chris grabbed onto Jazz single-mindedly, pulled him closer, and kissed him. Long and open-mouthed, tongues dancing together and then apart again.

Jazz responded eagerly, shoving himself more firmly against Chris. "Do you want to do this? Are you sure?" he asked, when he was able to pull back a little.

"I need to," Chris said tightly, his cock a painful ache that begged to be soothed. "I need..."

"He's not right in the head, Jazz." Richard's voice was quiet.

"I know," Jazz answered. "But he wants to. I won't let him get hurt; you should know that by now."

Richard's arm slid over Chris' hip. "I do know. Just ... okay. I don't want him to..."

"Stop talking about me like I'm not here," Chris said, and his voice still had that funny tight quality to it. "I'm not going to be mad in the morning."

"Shh, okay," Richard said, close to his ear.

His cock was so hard he thought it might kill him, and Jazz pushed a little closer and Jazz's pelvic bone bumped him and a wave of desperation flooded over him. "Please," he begged, and he sounded pitiful. "Somebody touch me, I can't..."

"Come here." Jazz rolled over onto his back and pulled Chris up on top of him, giving Chris the delicious contact that he needed.

Chris moaned and thrust down into the soft flesh of Jazz's lower belly, his cock leaving a thin slippery trail that intensified the sensations and made him dig his fingers down into the corner of the pillow that was under his hand. "God ... I want it so bad," he whispered, and he meant the thrusting and an orgasm and Jazz and Richard and possibly a dozen other things, all of which were somehow crowding into his cock.

"Take it," Jazz said, lying beneath him willingly, not straining, just giving. "Whatever it is you want, take it."

Stretching to kiss him, Chris bit at Jazz's lower lip, reining himself in so that he didn't draw blood. He thought that maybe he and Jazz both whimpered at the same time, and he was moving and there was no way he could have stopped. He wasn't really even aware of the effort, only of the result, which was that amazing feeling building, building, and at that point he'd forgotten all about coming. It was the journey, not the destination, each movement exquisite in itself.

"Oh, God," he gasped, and the babble that poured from him then didn't seem to belong to him, but to someone else. "Oh, Jazz, God, you feel so good ... oh, God, I love you..."

And then he felt Richard's hands on him, one on his back and the other on his ass, warm and caressing and it was too much. He let out what could only be described as a shriek and came so hard that he couldn't hear, the sound of the blood pounding in his ears blotting out everything else.

He was shaking and he didn't think it mattered. There were warm voices soothing him and warm bodies comforting him and he just closed his eyes and let the warmth swallow him up. He could sleep.

* * * *

The motorcycle, which is twisted and damaged but still easily recognizable, turns up at the house without warning. Chris comes home from the hospital in a fog, exhausted and so hungry that he's gone past the point of feeling it, and almost hits it, not because it's in the driveway but because he's so shocked to see it that he forgets, for a few long

seconds, that he's driving. He remembers and applies the brakes just in time.

He storms into the house, shaking. Richard is sitting at the dining room table, staring blankly at his hands.

"Why is that here?" Chris demands.

"Some kind of mix-up with the insurance," Richard says, not looking up. His voice is flat. "Someone's going to pick it up tomorrow."

Chris sinks down into a chair; the tiny burst of energy that had been fueled by outrage is gone, leaving him weak again. "Oh."

They sit there. The house is quiet around them, and neither of them says anything. Their hands are inches apart on the table, but they don't touch.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Jazz asked anxiously for about the eighth time.

"Yes, I'm fine," Chris said, still patiently but feeling like it was starting to wear thin.

He'd woken up feeling like he had a particularly bad hangover—headache, sensitive stomach—but a long shower and three glasses of water had resolved most of the problem. Two of the people who'd had the Rohypnol-spiked punch at the party had ended up in the hospital for observation, but otherwise everyone was fine. The police were still trying to figure out who had done the spiking, but it had been one of those parties where friends invited their friends. Half the people there had been strangers to Marcus, the host, so tracking down the guilty individual was going to be challenging if not impossible.

"Hey, look!" Jazz said abruptly, and pulled the car quickly over to the curb.

"What?" Chris looked out the window but he didn't see anything except houses and driveways and green grass that wasn't manicured enough to be considered mowed.

"*There*," said Jazz. "The bike."

"Oh." Chris looked. It was a motorcycle—nice enough as far as motorcycles went, he supposed, although personally he wasn't that interested. Dark blue, shiny. It had an old sort of look about it, even though it had clearly been done over. It looked new and old at the same time.

Jazz was already out of the car and standing at the end of the people's driveway, on his knees next to the bike. "Isn't it cool?" he asked as Chris joined him.

"I guess. It's just a motorcycle, right?"

"Are you kidding? There's no such thing as 'just a motorcycle.' Of course, in this case we're talking about a Honda, which is so far from 'just a motorcycle' that there's no way I could even begin to describe how cool it is, thought I could try if you wanted me to—"

Chris couldn't help but laugh. "Jazz. Breathe. I get it. It's a *cool* motorcycle." He'd never heard Jazz go on about motorcycles before, so he wondered how big a deal it could really be to Jazz. "Anyway, I thought you wanted to get to the store."

"Yeah, in a minute." Jazz ran reverent fingers over the shiny chrome of the bike. "Wow. Wow."

The front door of the house opened, and a guy came out. "Hey."

"Hi," Jazz said, barely sparing the man a glance. "What a great bike."

"Yeah, she is." The guy patted the seat of the motorcycle. "She was my first one. Got a bonus at work and bought another one, and we've only got room for one in the garage. What with the snow we get here ... I need to keep her under cover during the winter."

"Yeah, I guess you'd have to," Jazz said, getting to his feet.

The man, who was easily six inches taller than Jazz and twice his weight—about Richard's size actually, but built differently—looked Jazz up and down. "You ride?"

"No, but I've always wanted to." Jazz was in that zone that Chris was so used to seeing him in, where he didn't care what anyone thought of him, didn't hear any implied criticism. "I've been meaning to take a class and get my license, but since I didn't have a bike, I never really got around to it."

"You might want to start out with something smaller," the guy said.

Chris didn't like the implication that Jazz was going to be riding a motorcycle at all. They were dangerous enough without someone who could barely keep his eyes on the road behind the wheel of a car. "We were just looking," he said, trying to let the guy know that he didn't have to waste a lot of time on them.

"Gotcha," the man said. "Well..."

That seemed to be a hint that they should stop standing there staring at the bike, and Jazz actually got it for once, glancing up at the man and nodding. "Thanks."

In the car again, Chris slumped down in the passenger seat, determined not to spoil Jazz's little fantasy of his new life as a motorcycle rider.

"It shouldn't take that long to get my license," Jazz was saying. "I could be riding in a couple of months."

"Uh-huh," Chris said.

"There's so many things I want to do," Jazz said. He sounded almost apologetic. "I don't want to turn around at fifty and suddenly realize that it's too late to learn how to ride a motorcycle, or take flying lessons, or whatever."

Chris softened. "I know. But that's not going to happen." Jazz would probably be one of those seventy-year-olds who decided to take up snowboarding.

They drove to the grocery store and did some shopping; by the time they'd reached the checkout, Chris was tired and wishing he'd stayed home like Richard had suggested. Jazz was going on and on about the motorcycle, with Chris managing to ask the occasional question here and there—it wasn't that he wasn't interested, because listening to Jazz when Jazz was excited was one of his favorite things to do usually. He was just tired, he told himself.

He helped Jazz put the bags into the trunk and sank wearily down into the passenger seat. Jazz got behind the wheel, put the keys in the ignition, and reached a hand over to rest on his thigh. "Hey. Are you okay?"

"Yeah," Chris said. "Just tired."

Jazz's hand stroked over Chris' thigh in a way Chris usually would have found arousing. "Well, let's get you home and into bed."

"I'm fine. Really," Chris said, but he wouldn't have denied that he was relieved to be heading home. By the time they got there, Chris was starting to feel weak and nauseated again, his hands trembling when he opened the car door.

Richard was in the driveway before Jazz had even shut off the car, obviously worried as soon as he got a good look at Chris. "What's wrong?"

"He looks like hell, that's what's wrong," Jazz said, getting out of the car. "Help me get him into the house."

"I'm fine," Chris said again.

"You're not as bad as you were last night, but you're not fine," Richard said, putting an arm around him and glancing into the car. "Leave the groceries; I'll get them later."

"We stopped to look at a bike," Jazz explained. It was a dismissive sentence considering how excited he'd been about it, but all Chris wanted to do was lie down, so he didn't think about it too much right then. It wasn't until he'd been settled into bed, Jazz unloading the car on his own and Richard sitting beside Chris waiting for the thermometer to beep that Chris wondered if Jazz was going to let it go as easily as that.

The thermometer made its high-pitched chirping sound and Richard took it out from under Chris' tongue and looked at it. "Normal," Richard said. Chris had thought so, but hadn't argued when Richard wanted to check. Arguing seemed like too much effort. "You just need to take it easy for a couple of days. Maybe you should stay home tomorrow."

Chris shook his head. Just lying down was making him feel better. "Work's not that much of a strain." He caught at Richard's hand, rubbing his thumb across the knuckles, taking

comfort in the touch. "Listen, about Jazz and that motorcycle..." He licked his dry lips just as Jazz came into the bedroom with a glass of juice, cutting the conversation short.

"What's wrong?" Jazz asked, concern written all over his face. "Do you have a fever?"

"No, he's fine," Richard said. "He just needs to get some rest."

Jazz sat down on the bed behind Chris and handed the glass of apple juice over Chris' shoulder. "You should take a couple of days off," he said. "Stay home, sleep all day. Watch bad daytime TV."

"As far as you're concerned, there's no such thing as bad daytime TV," Chris said, because Jazz liked everything.

"But as far as you're concerned there is," Jazz said. He lay down behind Chris and snuggled up close, one arm around Chris' waist, his breath warm against the back of Chris' neck. "I could go to the video store and rent some movies for you."

Chris closed his eyes and relaxed into the pillow. "That would be nice. You don't mind?"

"Of course not," Jazz said. He kissed Chris' hair. "What do you want me to get?"

"I don't care. You know what I like."

When Jazz had gone and Chris heard the kitchen door close, he sighed and tucked his chin, pressing his forehead against Richard's hand. He was sleepy and he knew there was something he'd wanted to talk to Richard about, but he couldn't remember what it was.

"Maybe you should try to get some sleep," Richard said. "You'll feel better when you're not so tired."

"Mmm-hmm," Chris mumbled. He heard Richard leave the room, shutting the door quietly on his way out.

He must have been more tired than he'd realized because the next thing he knew he was opening his eyes to a room that was much darker than it had been previously. The sun had practically set and Jazz was sitting on the side of the bed with a hand on Chris' hip.

"I fell asleep," Chris said, yawning and rolling over. He smiled at Jazz. "Hi."

"Hi. Richard sent me up to check on you." Jazz stroked his hair. "Are you okay?"

Chris stretched. He was still sore in a vague sort of way. "Yes. Well, I think so. Mostly."

"Good." Jazz's hand on his forehead was reassuring. "You want me to bring up some dinner for you? Richard cooked."

And Chris just nodded. "Okay," he said. "That'd be nice."

Chapter 17

Chris tries, again, to talk Richard into coming to the hospital to see Jazz, and Richard, again, refuses. These are the only arguments they have these days, the ones about Jazz and what Jazz would have wanted, and Chris knows that they have them because Richard can't admit that he's right.

"Why?" Chris asks, for the millionth time.

"Because I don't want to!" Richard says, slamming a kitchen drawer with more force than he needs to. "God, do we have to go over this again? I don't want to see him like that! Why can't you just let it go?"

Chris feels as if the bottom has dropped out of his world. "Because I can't," he says, fighting back tears. "I can't let him go."

It's not what Richard meant, but that doesn't really matter.

Chris was sitting at his desk when the phone rang. "Chris Turner."

"Hi, it's me." Jazz sounded excited enough to burst. "Do you have a second?" It was nice of Jazz to ask, Chris thought; there'd been a time when Jazz would have just launched into the conversation without giving him a chance to tell Jazz that his boss was standing right next to him.

"Sure," Chris said.

"Guess what Richard bought me!" Jazz didn't wait for Chris to guess, though. "The bike!"

Chris' heart sank; he knew he should have made time to talk to Richard about the motorcycle. "Please tell me you mean a new ten-speed. You don't even have a license."

"That's the best part," Jazz said. "Guess what else he bought? Classes, and when they're over I get to take the test for my license."

"A test that you'll have to pass," Chris pointed out. He felt sick just thinking about it.

Jazz got quiet. "I thought you'd be happy for me."

For once, Chris said what he was thinking without beating around the bush, his voice sharp. "No, you didn't. You knew I wouldn't be happy about this."

"Chris..." Jazz didn't seem to know what to say. "Come on. Don't be like this."

Chris didn't say anything.

"Please?" Jazz said. "Talk to me."

"Look, I'm in the middle of something here," Chris said. "We can talk about it tonight." And without waiting to hear Jazz's reply, he hung up.

Getting through the rest of the afternoon was pure torture, but Chris had to do it. He wanted to call Jazz and make up, but he wasn't sure the conversation wouldn't end in pretty much the same way and he didn't think he could bear that. By the time he was in the parking lot outside the office and unlocking his car, his hands were shaking.

Richard's car wasn't in the driveway when he got home, but there were lights on in the kitchen. Jazz was sitting at the table and looked up at him with a guarded expression as he walked in. "I sent Richard to the store for milk," Jazz said.

Chris went to the refrigerator and opened the door. "We don't need milk." He shut the door again, but didn't take off his coat.

"I know," Jazz said. "So does Richard." That sounded ominous enough that Chris was afraid to sit down, but Jazz gestured at the chair next to him and he did it automatically anyway.

Heart in his throat, Chris clenched his hands into fists underneath the table where Jazz couldn't see them. He couldn't bring himself to say anything.

"I'm sorry," Jazz said gently; it surprised Chris enough that he looked up. "I shouldn't have surprised you with it like that."

"It's okay," Chris said.

Jazz knew a lie when he heard it, though. "No, it's not. That wasn't fair to you."

Chris shrugged helplessly, and Jazz got up and came over, gesturing again, so Chris slid his chair back away from the table and Jazz sat down in his lap, putting both arms around him.

"I'm sorry," Jazz whispered against Chris' hair, and Chris hugged Jazz tightly, burying his face in Jazz's neck and feeling the familiar warmth of him seeping in.

"I just don't want anything bad to happen to you," Chris muttered.

"I know. But you can't stop bad stuff from happening." Jazz stroked Chris' hair comfortingly.

Chris shook his head. "You can make it a little less likely by avoiding dangerous things," he said. "Like motorcycles."

Jazz pulled back and looked at Chris. "I could be walking to my car tomorrow and get hit by a motorcycle."

"There, see?" Chris said, smiling in a strained way. His chest ached with the need to protect Jazz, to know that he'd always be okay. "Proof right there that motorcycles are dangerous."

"So are cars," Jazz said. "We're surrounded by danger all the time. It's part of life. I'm not going to stop living because I'm afraid."

Chris held Jazz more tightly. Deep down, he knew that he wouldn't have wanted Jazz to live like that—scared to try new things, worried and anxious. "I know," he said.

Jazz sighed in the way that Chris still hadn't figured out how to not let get to him, the way that sounded like Jazz was disappointed in him. "I really am sorry."

Chris sighed and closed his eyes. "Me, too."

They sat like that for a few minutes, with the house quiet around them. Chris heard Richard's car pull up in the driveway, then the sound of the car door opening and closing. Neither of them moved as Richard came in, and Chris' back was to the door so he couldn't see the look on Richard's face, but he stayed where he was, holding Jazz.

He was surprised when Richard walked over and laid a hand on his back. "You okay?" Richard asked. Chris wasn't sure which of them he was asking.

"I think so," Jazz answered. His hand patted the small of Chris' back. "Are you okay?"

Chris gave a shuddering sigh. "Yeah." It wasn't that easy, obviously. When he turned to look at Richard, the other man was watching him.

"I'd understand if you were mad at me," Richard said. He was still holding the gallon of milk he'd bought at the store, but went over to the refrigerator and put it away while Chris thought about that.

"I don't know if I am," Chris said. He didn't. He'd been so focused on Jazz that he hadn't really thought about the fact that Richard was the one who'd bought him the motorcycle.

"I didn't know until this afternoon," Richard said. "That you were so against the idea."

"He did try to talk me out of buying it," Jazz said, honest even when it made him look bad. "At first, I mean."

"Yeah, I did," Richard said. "But then Jazz pointed out that I was being overprotective."

"I didn't mean it like that!" Jazz protested. "I wasn't trying to make you buy it for me or anything. It's just, I didn't want us falling back into old patterns."

"Neither did I," Richard said. He looked at Chris again. "He was so excited about it, and I wanted to surprise him. I wanted to make him happy. And ... yeah, I wanted him to know that things are different now. You know?"

Chris nodded. "I know." Put into that perspective, he couldn't really be mad at Richard for wanting to do something to make Jazz happy, because if it had been anything else, Chris would have been first in line to fill that role. "I don't think—"

The phone rang suddenly, and Richard moved to answer it. "Hello? Oh, yes, he's right here." He covered the mouthpiece with his other hand and looked at Chris. "It's your father."

Chris' stomach dropped, and he got up, setting Jazz gently on his feet, without really realizing what he was doing. He went over to the phone and took it from Richard. "Thanks," he said. "Dad?"

"Christian," his father said. "Your mother asked me to call."

Of course she did, Chris thought. There was no way his father would have called on his own initiative. He moved over to the window and looked out at the garden, imagining Judy puttering around, pulling up weeds, repeatedly flipping her braid back over her shoulder. "What's wrong?"

"She's been having a problem with high blood pressure and she wanted you to know." His father sounded distant, cold, just like he always did. "You know how she is; she'd expect someone to tell you but she wouldn't do it herself." It was a dismissive thing to say, but not unexpected, not when it was the kind of thing his father had been saying for years—heck, all of Chris' life.

"Is she okay?" Chris asked, leaning against the countertop.

"She's fine. She's on some medication." His father didn't seem interested in the conversation. "What about you? I take it you still have a job?"

"Yes, I do." Chris couldn't help the way his irritation crept into his voice.

"And you're obviously still living with your ... friend," his father said with distaste. "I hope you're being careful,

Christian. I've warned you before about what people might think, a man of your age living with another man. You don't want them to get the wrong idea."

Chris just ... snapped. There wasn't really another word for it. "What if they were getting the right idea?"

"What are you talking about?" his father asked.

"I'm gay, Dad," Chris said, closing his eyes and letting the counter prop him up. "My 'friends' that I've been living with are my partners, okay?"

His father was silent for so long that Chris started to wonder if he'd actually dropped dead of shock. Then came, "I'm very disappointed in you, Christian," and the surprisingly loud tone of the dial in his ear.

Chris set the phone down on the counter even though that wasn't the same as hanging it up. He could still hear the dial tone on the other end, along with the rapid beating of his own heart. Jazz's hand was suddenly on his hip. "Baby?" Jazz said worriedly. Another hand on his back—Richard's.

"Chris?" Richard said, and he sounded worried, too.

It was like the other night all over again, except that now Chris knew that he hadn't been drugged. It felt the same, though; he was detached, and everything sounded strange, and the air smelled funny, like salt, and he couldn't see right, and it wasn't until he heard the choked sob that Chris realized he was crying.

Richard's arms were around him immediately. "Hey. Hey, it's okay."

"No, it's not," Jazz said, holding him from the other side. "What did he say?"

"He ... I..." Chris couldn't find any words; there were plenty of them swirling around in his head, but he couldn't seem to make sense of them.

"It's okay," Richard said again. "We're both here. We love you." It was exactly what Chris needed to hear, and he pressed his face against Richard's shoulder, trying to get control of himself.

"We love you," Jazz echoed. "No matter what. None of the other stuff is important." Jazz's hand stroked Chris' side. "I'm so sorry about the stupid bike. I'll get rid of it if you want me to."

Chris shook his head against Richard's shoulder. "It's not that," he said; right then, it wasn't. Right then, the motorcycle didn't matter. He turned and hugged Jazz tightly. "I just want you to be happy, okay?"

"Baby?" Jazz said, confused, still worried. "I am happy. You make me happy." Then, more gently, "What did he say?"

Pulling away, Chris picked the phone up off the counter and stepped around Richard to hang it up. "That he's ... that he's disappointed in me."

Richard swore under his breath. "Bastard."

"Yeah," Chris said. "He kind of is."

"He's always been like that," Jazz said, moving closer and touching him, hugging him. "Chris."

Chris buried his face in the curve between Jazz's neck and shoulder, inhaling the smell of him. "I should have told him a long time ago."

"That's not important now," Richard said gently. "You told him. Give him a little bit of time and he might come around."

Jazz laughed, but he didn't sound amused. "You don't know him."

"Neither do you," Chris said, then he laughed, too. "Neither do I. Maybe it's better that way."

"Will he tell your mom?" Jazz asked.

"I don't know." Chris tried to think. "Not at first. He won't mean to. But he'll be miserable and angry, and she'll ask what's wrong until he tells her."

"How do you think she'll react?" Richard asked.

Chris shrugged helplessly. "I don't know. She'll ... I want to think she'll be okay with it." He'd thought about it way too much—imagined telling her and what she'd say. It was a scene with a hundred different endings, but his favorites had all been ones where she'd hugged him and told him that she was glad he'd trusted her. His very favorite was the one in which she reassured him that she'd talk to his father and make him understand. But Chris had never, ever imagined his father being the one he'd tell, and he was still reeling with the realization that he had been.

"You could call now and talk to her?" Jazz suggested.

Shaking his head, Chris said, "No. I don't ... I don't know what she's thinking right now." He groaned. "They just found out she has high blood pressure."

"This should help," Richard said, and Chris looked up at him, horrified, and laughed. "It's going to be okay," Richard said. "Don't worry."

"At least you've got us," Jazz added. "And we're not going anywhere."

"Of course we're not." Richard managed to guide Chris over toward the table, then pushed him down into a chair.

"I should send her flowers or something," Chris said.

Richard raised an eyebrow. "Because you're gay?"

Chris reached out and smacked him. "No, because she's sick. And she likes flowers." Actually, it was hard to know if that was true or not; Chris had a memory of a hospital room full of flowers when his mother had broken her ankle falling down a flight of stairs. But people always brought flowers when someone was in the hospital.

"Maybe you should call her," Jazz suggested.

"Maybe." He didn't think he'd have to; he thought she'd probably call him, and probably within the next twenty-four hours.

It turned out he was wrong, but not by much.

* * * *

Chris goes home for the first time three days later. Judy'd brought some things from the house, including changes of clothes for him and Richard, but he hasn't left Jazz's side long enough to take a shower. He drops his keys twice trying to unlock the door, his hands are shaking so much, and the house smells stale and funny when he finally gets inside. Dead. That thought devastates him so completely that he sits down on the floor and cries.

By the time he has nothing left—again, it's certainly not the first time—his hands are resting at his sides. Chris blinks, tears clinging to his lashes and making his eyes sting, and

sees a spot where the floor and the cupboard meet that has a little bit of what looks like flour paste stuck to it.

If he had anything left to cry, he would. Instead, he sits there for another five minutes before he hauls himself to his feet and goes upstairs to take a shower.

He's still wet, dripping onto the floor and not caring, when the phone rings. He answers it and hears his mother's voice. "Chris? Are you all right?"

"No," Chris says. He spent enough years lying to this woman; why bother now?

"I called yesterday and you didn't call back," his mother goes on, almost as if she hadn't heard him. "You always call back if I leave you a message." She's hesitant, and he knows that she wants to talk about what he told his father the other night. God, that had only been a couple of nights ago. It feels like forever.

"Jazz is in the hospital," Chris says. "He had a motorcycle accident and he's in a coma. They don't know if he'll ever wake up." It's surprisingly easy to say it, because it doesn't feel real. It's happening to someone else.

His mother gasps. "Christian! Oh, honey, I'm so sorry. What can I do?"

"He's at Mass General," Chris says, sitting down on the bed even though all he has on is a towel wrapped around his waist. "I just came home to change my clothes. Can ... do you think you could..."

"We'll be there in a couple of hours," his mother says. "And if your father doesn't think he can behave himself, I'll come on my own. It'll be okay, honey. I love you."

Chris doesn't tell her he loves her back, even though he thinks maybe he does, which surprises him. He hangs up the phone and gets dressed.

Everything was normal that morning. The motorcycle, which had been delivered the afternoon before, was sitting at the front of the driveway closest to the house. Jazz was up at the crack of dawn washing it, and when Chris left to go to work he was crouched in the driveway polishing it with a soft cloth and a bottle of Turtle Wax. His hair was tied back and pulled over one shoulder; the back of his neck seemed surprisingly pale and vulnerable, and Chris bent to kiss the soft skin there as he said goodbye.

"Don't be late for work," he said, wincing inwardly at how parental he sounded.

"Don't worry," Jazz said. He turned and beamed up at Chris, and in that moment he looked so happy that Chris felt like a jerk for having been such a spoilsport the day before. "I'm just going to finish this and then I'll go."

"After he has breakfast," Richard said from the doorway.

"After I have breakfast." Jazz gave the glowing, shiny surface of the bike a few last swipes of the cloth and stood up, hands on his hips. His knuckles were dirty with polish (*they are still dirty hours later, in the hospital*) but he radiated pleasure and satisfaction to the point where Chris had no choice but to pull him close and kiss him.

"I love you," Chris said. (*Later, that night, when the hospital is dark and quiet, the beeping of the machines somehow reassuring, he's glad he'd said it then, glad that their last moments weren't fighting.*)

Jazz pressed his nose to Chris', eyes wide and smiling, somehow smiling, free, just like he'd always been, and that was what Chris loved most about him. "I love you, too. Have a good day at work."

"You, too." Chris smacked Jazz's ass on principle, waved to Richard, and went to his car. He glanced at Jazz once more before he left the driveway; Jazz was laughing, his hand in Richard's as the taller man tugged him into the house.

Chris didn't know then that would be the last moment (*not last, never last, please no, but with Jazz laughing, talking, living*) he'd see him like that. He drove to work not knowing (*that Jazz doesn't go to work that day.*) He sat at his desk (*while Jazz stands in the driveway looking thoughtfully at the motorcycle.*) He made changes to html and rolled his chair back to stretch every thirty minutes on the dot (*while Jazz sits on the motorcycle in the driveway and starts it up.*)

* * * *

Chris was sitting at his desk when the phone call came.

"Chris Turner," he said automatically, cradling the headset between his ear and his shoulder so he could keep typing.

The voice at the other end of the line was official, crisp in a way that telemarketers weren't. That got his attention.

"Christian Turner?"

"Yes?"

"This is Officer Paul Grady—I'm calling from the Trauma Center at Mass General. You're the contact person for Jason Stone?"

For a few numb seconds, Chris wanted to say, I don't know anyone named Jason Stone. Because he didn't; he knew Jazz. But he managed to get out, "Yes. What is it? Is he ... is he hurt?" He couldn't even begin to contemplate the alternative.

"He's been in a very serious accident. You're going to want to get down here as quickly as you can."

It felt like he couldn't breathe. His chest was tight, the edges of his vision dark. He didn't know what to say. "All right. I'll be right there. Thank you."

Chris didn't say anything to anyone on his way out of the building. He was on autopilot, barely able to remember, after (*and everything is before or after Jazz got hurt,*) getting into the car and driving to the hospital. The part that he'd remember (*that haunts him until the day he dies*) was walking through the doors into the emergency room. The way everything looked sharp to the point of being grainy, like someone had gone overboard in Photoshop. The way things sounded. The way no one would tell him exactly what was going on until he shouted at a nurse and then, finally, a man in a white coat appeared and told Chris that Jazz had been riding his motorcycle without a helmet and lost control, driving off the road and into a telephone pole. Jazz had a serious head injury and they'd taken him into surgery to relieve the pressure in his brain.

He sat down. Standing up just wasn't an option. This wasn't happening; it couldn't be happening. He answered a few questions without really hearing them, and then the nurse and doctor went away and left him alone. This wasn't real.

Chris didn't believe it was until Richard came through the doors, looking huge and terrifying with his face white and his hands clenched into fists. "Where is he?" Richard said, and Chris realized he was on his feet.

"In surgery." Someone must have called Richard. Chris vaguely remembered that being one of the things he'd been asked. "They have to ... drill. His skull. They said ... brain injury. He might..." He didn't say anything else, because his face was pressed to Richard's chest.

Some time later Judy arrived, thin-lipped, her fingers strong when she gripped Chris' hands. "You know how strong he is," she told them firmly. "He'll pull through this." She was there with them when the doctor came to say that Jazz had survived the surgery. He was finally wheeled into a bed in the ICU, where they were only allowed in one at a time.

Chris went first and cried the whole time he was in the room, horrified at the sight of Jazz's hair, clipped short in some places and shaved in others—well, the places he could see, the ones that weren't covered with bandages. He only stayed for about five minutes, because he knew how much Richard and Judy wanted their turns, but even in that short time his tears left damp spots on the sheets. He kissed Jazz's arm on one of the few spots that was unbruised and unbandaged, and told him he loved him and would be back soon.

* * * *

He's washing dishes in the kitchen, and Richard is putting away leftovers—Chris still cooks too much, he hasn't even

tried to train himself out of it because to do so would be admitting something he won't, can't, will never—when the phone rings. They don't get a lot of calls these days. Chris figures it will be Judy, or maybe Sunny. Richard sets down the big spoon he's been using to ladle beef stew into glass storage containers destined for the freezer and answers the phone.

It's quiet for a little too long, and Chris glances over at Richard.

He's only seen Richard look that way once before, and the sight of it makes him freeze.

"Jazz woke up," Richard says, as their eyes meet. "Chris, he's awake."

They drove to the hospital at the speed limit. Chris dug little, bloody half-moons into his palms with his fingernails trying to keep from snapping at Richard to fucking hurry up already, but he managed because he knew what Richard was thinking. The last thing they wanted to do now was have an accident.

He didn't even punch the guy who yelled at them to hold the elevator at the last minute, no matter how much he'd wanted to. He held Richard's hand instead, so tightly that it had to have hurt, but Richard didn't complain.

One of the newer nurses was waiting for the elevator when the doors opened on Jazz's floor; Chris couldn't remember her name. She smiled brilliantly at them as they pushed past the other guy and jogged past her.

Inside, Chris was terrified that it wasn't real, or that it wouldn't last. He paused just outside Jazz's room to take a

deep breath. Richard gave him a funny look. "Come on," he said.

"I am." And they stepped into Jazz's room, the room Jazz had never been awake in ... until now.

He was pale, and his eyes were closed, but the feeding tube was gone, and there was an extra pillow propping him up that hadn't been there before, and Stacey, the little red-headed nurse, was sitting in a chair next to his bed. She looked at them and grinned. "Hey, Jazz," she said softly.

"Someone's here to see you."

And Jazz opened his eyes.

Chris felt weak-kneed and knew that he was hyperventilating, but Richard propelled him toward the bed and then pushed him into the chair that Stacey surrendered willingly.

"Hi, baby," Jazz said. His voice sounded like shit—it was rough and quiet and it cracked on the first word. It was the most beautiful thing Chris had ever heard in his life.

He took Jazz's hand and kissed it, then turned it so he could kiss the palm, too. It wasn't until then that he realized he was crying, tears just pouring down his face. "Jazz," he said, and couldn't think of anything else. He looked up at Richard, who was crying, too.

"Somebody'd better give me a hug," Jazz grumbled. "Or I'll think you didn't miss me." Richard leaned down to give him an awkward one, and by the time he straightened up, Jazz's eyes were closed again.

"It's okay," Stacey said reassuringly. "He's been in and out. It's totally normal. He just doesn't have the stamina to stay awake longer."

Doctor Wallis was in the doorway. "He's passed the preliminary tests with flying colors."

"What does that mean?" Chris asked.

"It means he knows who he is, he remembers details up until just before the accident. He's oriented and able to answer questions." Wallis looked pleased. "I don't want to get your hopes up, but it looks very good."

Hospital speak. Chris knew it well enough to know that doctors didn't say stuff like that unless they were pretty damned sure.

"Jazz?" Richard had moved around to the other side of the bed and was touching Jazz's face. His hand was huge against Jazz's cheek. He looked, Chris discovered, absurdly out of place. Which he was, what with not having been to the hospital in months.

Jazz made a muffled sound of protest and licked his chapped lips. "Mm?"

"Open your eyes for me. Come on." Richard was encouraging.

"M'tired." But Jazz opened his eyes and blinked, then smiled. "Hi."

"Hi. It's okay—you can rest. I just wanted to make sure you knew I was here." Richard sounded worried suddenly, and Chris would have hugged him if the bed hadn't been between them, and if it wouldn't have meant letting go of Jazz's hand.

"I know." Jazz fought to keep his eyes open. "Stay, okay?"

"I will," Richard promised.

It looked like a Herculean effort, but Jazz rolled his head toward Chris and twitched his hand in Chris'—it was probably meant to be a squeeze. "Don't go."

"I won't," Chris said, making no attempt to wipe his eyes. He met Richard's red-rimmed gaze. "We won't. We'll be right here."

Jazz was asleep again, relaxed. Chris hitched his chair closer and stroked his fingers through Jazz's short hair; it was softer now than it had been just after they'd cut it.

"I'll see if I can steal a couple of those foldout chairs from the maternity ward," Stacey said, then glanced guiltily at the doorway, but Doctor Wallis had already left. "He'll probably be like this for a couple of days, but you'll see improvement pretty quickly. And we'll need to get him up and moving around as soon as possible. They'll want to send him to a rehab facility for a few weeks, too, so he can build up his strength before he goes home."

It was all so hard to believe; one minute Jazz had been asleep, maybe forever, and now he was awake and okay and ... Chris looked up at Richard again; Richard was uncharacteristically pale, like he was going to pass out. He swayed, and Chris jumped up and moved around the foot of the bed to grab onto him. Richard clutched at him. Chris walked him backwards three steps and sat him down on the low windowsill.

"Easy," he said. "It's okay. Breathe."

"I just ... can't believe it." Richard turned his face to Chris' hip. He was trembling.

"Shh. I know." Chris stroked Richard's hair the same way he'd been touching Jazz's a minute before.

"Here, give him this." Stacey was pressing a paper cup of ice water into Chris' hand.

Chris smiled at her distractedly. "Thanks. Richard. Here. Come on, take it."

"I'm just going to give you guys a few minutes alone," Stacey said. "You can press the call button if you need anything." She disappeared, leaving Chris to comfort Richard without an audience.

He tilted Richard's face up to his and bent to kiss him. Richard's lips were cold from the water, and he clung to Chris in a way he rarely, if ever, had. "It's okay," Chris said again, sitting down and pulling him closer. "We're gonna be okay."

Richard was crying again—maybe he'd never stopped. He slid an arm around Chris' waist and held tight, and Chris did what he could to soothe him: kissed his temple, rubbed his shoulder, murmured nonsense words. After a good five minutes or so, Richard drew a shuddering breath and pulled back, wiping at his face. "Sorry."

"Don't be." Chris' eyes were none too dry themselves. "It's kind of a shock. We didn't have any warning." He'd always thought they would, somehow, if the day ever came. That Jazz would start to stir days before waking up, that they'd all be able to be waiting around his bedside when he opened his eyes for the first time.

The door to the room opened and Judy came in. The grey hair in front of her ears had escaped her long braid and stuck out like she'd been recently electrocuted. She made a beeline for Jazz's bed, looking from Jazz to Richard and Chris where they sat on the windowsill. "It's true?" she asked, then touched Jazz's face. "Honey? Honey, it's Mom."

Jazz mumbled and turned away from her hand. His eyes opened and focused on her. "Hi, Mom."

Judy's eyes were full of tears, but her smile was as wide as Chris had ever seen it. "Hi, honey. Oh..."

"Don't cry," Jazz said, eyelids slipping down again. "Just ... gonna sleep..." He was out again.

Letting go of Richard, Chris stood and moved back to Jazz's bedside. "The doctor said this is normal," he reassured Judy.

She nodded. "I know. I talked to him in the hallway. Oh, boys..." She blinked away tears and came over to hug them both in turn. "I just knew we were going to get a miracle."

Chris didn't know what to say to that. There'd been times he'd managed to keep his hopes up, but others when he'd been sure Jazz would never wake up again. Was he supposed to feel guilty for thinking that? He'd never been sure, and right now he was feeling so confused that he couldn't have made a reasonable judgment one way or the other.

"Don't worry; I'm not converting or anything," Judy said. "Something in the universe knew Jazz has more to do on this earth, though. And he's too stubborn to lie down and give up."

"Been lying down for months," Jazz grumbled from the bed.

Judy turned and lowered the bed rail, sitting on the narrow strip of mattress that was available. She rubbed Jazz's arm gently. "Don't you give your mother a hard time," she told him.

"M'not." Jazz tried to shift on the bed to give her more room. "Ow. 'm so stiff."

"Well, what do you expect, lazy bones? Sleeping for so long. Of course you're stiff. But don't worry, it'll all come back," Judy said.

Richard and Chris moved around to the other side of the bed where they could see Jazz's face. "The doctors said it was a good thing you were so athletic," Richard said, brushing his fingers over Jazz's wrist. Jazz turned his hand and caught at Richard's weakly. "You won't have lost as much muscle tone as someone less fit. A little physical therapy and you'll be as good as new."

"Hope you've been taking notes while I was asleep," Jazz said.

"Notes?" Chris asked.

"Of everything I missed." Jazz licked his lips. "Thirsty. Nurse said I could have ginger ale?"

"I'll go check," Chris said, grateful to have something helpful to do.

By the time he'd found Stacey, Doctor Wallis was back with two other doctors, and then Judy said she'd missed lunch and asked if Chris would go down to the cafeteria and get her something to eat, anything, really. The room was crowded

enough that it didn't feel too weird, leaving Jazz there, so Chris went without complaint, reminding himself that this wasn't temporary—Jazz was awake and okay, and he was going to stay that way.

The afternoon passed in a flurry of tests and medical people parading in and out of Jazz's room. It wasn't until well after dinnertime that things settled down, and just as Chris realized that his own stomach was so empty it hurt there was a soft knock on the half-open door and his mother peeked her head around cautiously. "I hope I'm not interrupting..."

"Mom," Chris said, surprised. "No, come on in. What are you doing here?" That sounded a lot ruder than he'd meant it to, but his mother didn't seem to take offense.

"I left my number at the nurse's station a while back and asked them to call if anything happened," she said. She was holding two large paper bags with sturdy handles and the Boston Market logo on the sides. "I brought dinner. I thought you might have all been excited to remember to eat. Hello, Judy."

"Hi, Lillian." Judy stood up and came to give Chris' mother a hug. "Oh, it was so nice of you to come."

"You look as if you haven't eaten in days," Chris' mother said reprovingly to Chris. "Sit down and have something."

He took the bags from her and went over to set them on the windowsill. Inside there were plastic takeout containers full of food; Chris' stomach contracted painfully at the sight of cranberry walnut salad and meat loaf. He handed that container and a fork over to Richard, who had an almost

unnatural fondness for ground beef, and removed two more containers from the bag. "Judy? White or dark meat?"

"I'll wait a while," Judy said, smiling at him. "You just take whatever you want; I'm going to borrow your mom for a few minutes, okay?"

"Okay." Chris watched as she herded his mother out into the hallway, thinking that he knew Judy well enough to figure she was going to fill his mom in out of earshot of them, just to give them a break from hearing it. After the fifteenth time, the medical explanations made you feel tired.

Richard was watching him. "I'm pretty sure she meant it when she told you to eat," he said.

"I know." That was all the encouragement Chris needed—he pried the lid off the container with the white meat chicken and rummaged in the bag for another fork, then shoveled a huge bite of green beans into his mouth and chewed blissfully. "Oh, wow."

"Good, huh?" Richard checked in the other bag, taking out a smaller paper bag that had been balanced inside before he found drinks. He gave one cup to Chris; the outside of it was damp with moisture, and the soda was a little bit watered down with melted ice, but it still tasted fantastic.

Jazz stirred on the bed and opened his eyes, then closed them again. "Smells good."

"It is," Chris said, before he realized that might be a little bit cruel considering Jazz wouldn't be eating solid food for another day or two. "Don't worry—as soon as you're eating real food again, we'll get you whatever you want."

"Pizza," Jazz said. "Ice cream. In the freezer. Nine cartons." He sounded out of it.

Chris set his food down and moved over to the bed. "Jazz?" he said worriedly.

Opening his eyes again, Jazz looked at him. "Mm. Sorry. Kind of fuzzy."

Richard was behind him, one arm around his waist, solid and reassuring. "Your memory's bound to be a little messed up here and there, considering. The doctors said it's surprising you're as clear as you are." Jazz didn't respond, but he was breathing peacefully. "It's okay," Richard said, obviously just to Chris now. "He's half asleep. If he were talking in his sleep, you wouldn't expect him to make sense, would you?"

"No," Chris admitted. He leaned back against Richard, letting the larger man support some of his weight. His heart was pounding. Richard's lips brushed the back of his ear softly.

"Relax," Richard whispered. "And go eat your dinner before it gets cold."

They were both almost finished eating before Judy and Chris' mother came back in. "I won't stay long," his mother said. "You must all be exhausted. But I wanted to see you." She walked quietly up to the head of Jazz's bed and stood looking down at him.

"Thanks," Chris said, and she lifted her face. "Thanks for coming, Mom." She looked tired, he thought.

"And for the food," Richard added, snapping the lid back onto his now-empty container and putting it into the trash bin. "It was really nice of you."

"Well. I just needed to know you were all right. All of you." Chris' mother frowned in the way that meant she was going to say something she wished she didn't have to. "I'm sorry your father wouldn't come with me. I tried to convince him."

"If he needed convincing, he's best left at home," Judy said firmly.

Chris' mother nodded. "You're right. He's entitled to his opinion." She looked at Richard and then Chris. "But that doesn't mean I have to agree with him." Which didn't mean, Chris knew, that she didn't. Still, he'd gotten to a place where he was grateful for what she was able to give him even if it wasn't always what he would have wanted. "Here, give your mother a kiss." She came over and presented her cheek, which Chris kissed obediently. "You'll call me if you need anything?"

"Yeah. I will. Thanks, Mom." He felt surprisingly emotional watching her leave and told himself that it was because he was so wiped out to begin with.

"I think I'm going to go home for the night, too," Judy said, pushing her braid back over her shoulder. Her lips were reddened like she'd been biting them, and Chris wondered if she'd had to talk herself into leaving. "I'll be back in the morning. You two try to get some sleep. I know that one will." She glanced fondly at her son.

They both kissed her goodbye and insisted that she take some of the food with her. The room seemed peaceful once she'd gone; it was just the three of them.

"You still have food to eat," Richard pointed out.

"Right." Chris wasn't really hungry anymore, but he did his best to finish it up because he knew he probably needed it.

Richard was unfolding one of the cushioned chair-beds that Stacey had managed to find for them. "These don't look very comfortable," he said, poking it.

"They probably aren't. But I'm sure they're better than sitting up." Chris was suddenly tired enough that he didn't think he'd care, and he knew that they'd have had to force him out at gunpoint to get him to leave, what with Jazz being okay again.

"Here—try it out and see if you still say that," Richard suggested, patting the chair

"Okay, fine." Chris went over and sat, then swung his legs up onto it. He shifted into a comfortable position. "It's not so bad." In fact, right then it felt pretty damned good. He turned so that he could see Jazz from where he was and just lay there, watching Jazz with Richard's hand on his shoulder, and he felt more peaceful than he had in a long, long time.

* * * *

Chris woke up to the sound of someone talking softly. Disoriented, he turned and almost fell off the edge of the surface he was lying on. "What?" he said, and even his voice sounded weird. He sat up; Richard was asleep to his left, and the night nurse—something with a K, either Karen or Kelly—

was bending over Jazz's bed. Alarmed, Chris staggered to his feet, barely remembering to whisper. "Is something wrong?"

Kelly, who had a name tag pinned to the curvaceous chest of her scrubs, glanced at him and shook her head. She was holding a straw to Jazz's lips. "He just needed a drink."

"Throat's really dry," Jazz whispered, smiling at the nurse.

"You should have woken me up," Chris said.

Kelly shook her head. "That's what we're here for. If we don't have enough to do, we're in danger of dropping off to sleep ourselves." She winked at Jazz and patted his shoulder before leaving.

"Put this down," Jazz said, plucking at the bed rail.

Chris glanced at Richard, who seemed to be sleeping deeply, then eased the railing down. "Do you need anything else?"

"You," Jazz said. He shifted and winced.

"Hey, don't do that." Chris tried to help, but it was hard to figure out what Jazz wanted. "Where do you want to be?"

"I want to move over so you can lie down with me." Jazz hadn't, Chris noticed, lost his ability to pout.

"Okay. We can do that." Chris helped Jazz move over and then lay down, holding Jazz carefully. "How's this? Are you comfortable?"

"Mm. I'm fine." Jazz whispered it, warm breath across Chris' skin making him immediately, inexplicably, and embarrassingly hard.

"I missed you so much," Chris told him, hugging him closer and glad that they weren't in a position where Jazz could tell that he was aroused.

"As far as I know, I was here the whole time." Jazz's fingers twitched slightly against Chris' arm.

"You weren't," Chris said stiffly. "I mean, you were, but you weren't." His voice quivered.

"Shh, baby," Jazz murmured. "It's okay. I'm back."

They stayed like that until they both fell asleep again; when Chris woke up, sunshine was streaming into the room and Jazz was awake, too, looking at him.

"Hi," Chris said, caught up in the wonder of the moment—Jazz's eyes, his amazingly blue eyes, open. "Was I snoring?"

Jazz grinned. It looked tired and like it took a lot of effort, but it was still beautiful. "No. You make a nice pillow." Jazz's head was cushioned on Chris' shoulder, which he doubted was really all that comfortable; still, right then, he was perfectly happy where he was.

"It's not fair," Richard complained good-naturedly from his chair-bed. The lower part of his legs hung off it. "The bed's not big enough for three."

"Tonight you can both go home and sleep there," Jazz said, in a no-nonsense kind of voice. "Not that I don't love having you here, but we have to draw the line somewhere." It was hard to tell what he was thinking, and before Chris could ask, a nurse came into the room and kicked off another day of tests and doctors' visits.

Somehow, he and Richard did end up back at home that night, after half an hour of arguing with Jazz about it that ended with Jazz feigning exhaustion and insisting that fighting about it was going to set him back in his recovery. There wasn't much debating with that.

Richard groaned wordlessly as he stretched out in bed, his hair still damp from the shower they'd just taken.

"You okay?" Chris asked, scrubbing his towel over his chest one more time before hanging it up.

Another wordless mumble; Richard's face was buried in his pillow, the slope of his bare shoulders familiar and comforting.

Chris got into bed and snuggled up close, needing the physical contact. He brushed his lips over Richard's upper arm, and Richard turned and slipped an arm around his waist.

"What about you?" Richard murmured.

"Me?" Chris was surprised. "Tired, but fine. Good. Great." Of course he was great; Jazz had woken up. Jazz knew who they were, remembered them. How else could he possibly be?

"Really?" Richard moved back and looked at him, and Chris could see the worry lines on his face.

"Really. Why? What's wrong?" Chris rubbed the back of Richard's neck, waiting.

Richard shrugged and pressed closer, cock soft and warm where it nestled against Chris' hip bone. He buried his face in Chris' neck and mumbled something.

"What?" Chris said.

"Nothing."

Uh-huh. There was no way Chris was buying that.

"Richard." The other man didn't move. "*Richard.*"

"He knows," Richard said again, still mumbled but clear enough to be understood this time.

No question who Richard was talking about, at least. "Jazz knows what?"

"That I wasn't there. That I couldn't..." Richard was tense now. "I couldn't go see him. All this time."

"First of all, you don't know for sure that he knows." Chris rubbed his freshly shaved jaw against Richard's ear. "And even if he does, you know he's not going to hold it against you. He won't be mad. He'll understand."

"How can he?" Richard asked bitterly. "How can he understand when I don't even understand it myself? You went." He pulled back and looked at Chris again. "You went every day. After the first week I couldn't even go back. Not once."

"Everyone's different," Chris told him.

"Everyone else would be able to go, if the person they loved was lying there in the hospital."

"Maybe some people would. You weren't. It's okay." Chris wanted to make Richard feel better, even though he was secretly relieved to know that Richard felt guilty. He slid a hand around to the back of Richard's neck and pulled him in for a kiss. "Really. It's okay."

"I just couldn't," Richard said miserably. "Seeing him like that ... it was like he was already dead."

"Shh." Chris kissed Richard again, more deeply. "Stop. Don't."

"I can't help it." Richard shivered and clutched at him, then let go and turned, fumbling for the phone. "I have to call him. I need to hear—"

"I know." One hand caressing Richard's hip, Chris marveled that Richard had already memorized the number of

the phone they'd had reinstalled in Jazz's room that afternoon.

"Judy? It's Richard. Can I—is Jazz awake? I just need to..." A pause, and then so much relief in Richard's voice that Chris feels tears spring to his eyes. "Jazz. I'm sorry; I—" Richard was crying, soft little sobs. "I just ... I needed..."

Chris took the phone when Richard offered it over his shoulder, held it to his ear in time to hear Jazz saying, "It's okay. Everything's fine. We can talk. Whatever you need."

"It's me," Chris said. "I'm right here."

"Is he okay?" Jazz sounded worried.

"I think it's just starting to hit him," Chris said. It was hard to know what words to use—ones that would reassure Jazz without hurting Richard.

Richard drew a shuddering breath and took the phone again. "It's my fault," he told Jazz. "I'm ... I'm the one that bought you the bike. I just ... I wanted you to be happy. I didn't know—I never would have bought it if I'd known." Chris could faintly hear Jazz saying something soothing on the other end of the line, and a few seconds later Richard shook his head and gave the phone to Chris again.

"He can't talk right now," Chris said, rolling onto his back so that the hand not holding the phone could pet Richard comfortingly.

"Tell him it's not his fault, Chris. Tell him."

"It's not your fault, Richard," Chris said, obedient until the end. "Jazz says so, and so do I." There had been a part of him that had felt differently for a while, but now all of that was gone as if it had never existed.

Jazz was still worried. "Tell him I love him. Wait, will he take the phone? I need to tell him. Wait!" Chris did. "I love you, Chris. You know that."

"Yeah, I do," Chris said. "I love you, too."

"Okay. Put Richard back on."

Chris gave the phone back to Richard. "He wants to talk to you. No, come on."

Richard swallowed heavily. "I'm here." He listened, voice barely above a whisper when he spoke. "I know. I know. I never would have—I know. Okay. I will. Mmm-hmm. I love you." He hung up the phone, turned back to Chris, and hugged him. "He said to tell you to take care of me." It wasn't the kind of thing Richard would have admitted, Chris thought, under any other circumstances.

"I will." Chris held him tightly, kissed his tousled, still-damp hair. "I will."

They lay like that for a while, the early fall evening breeze drifting in through the open window, Chris' fingers carding through Richard's slowly drying hair.

"I—" Richard started after a while, then shook his head.

"No, what?"

"I don't know." Richard sighed. "Nothing that would be any different."

"None of this was your fault," Chris told him. "You wanted him to be happy; you had no idea he was going to take the bike out like that, without a license or a helmet. It was stupid of him, and once he's stronger we're going to make sure he knows it."

"And he can never have a motorcycle again," Richard said.

"Never," Chris agreed, even though in his heart of hearts he suspected that Jazz would have one, and do lots of other things that made Chris and Richard cringe besides.

"We have to take care of him." Richard pulled Chris closer and kissed him, a deep, probing kiss that seemed to encompass a lot of want and need in ways that their earlier kisses that night hadn't. "He needs us."

Chris felt his cock stir and begin to harden. "He does. And we need him." Richard's hand slid down to grip his ass firmly and he groaned.

Richard rocked against him, both of them half-hard now. "I need *you*, Chris."

One hand gripping the pillow beneath his head as Richard moved down along his body, kissing and licking all the way, Chris shut his eyes and let sensation overtake him. Richard lingered just below his navel, knowing how sensitive the skin there was, until Chris was gasping, hips shifting restlessly. Richard's hand caressed his inner thigh, and when his mouth closed around Chris' cock it startled a moan out of him.

"Oh. Oh, that's so good." Chris' balls were tight, his cock throbbing and hard as Richard sucked at it. "Richard. Please." He needed more; needed Richard inside him, fucking him.

He was sure that Richard knew what he was asking for, but the other man continued to tease him for what felt like half an hour—licking and scraping his teeth along Chris' shaft when Chris got too close, then bringing him back to the edge with firm sucking and a hand massaging his balls before easing off. By the time Richard moved up over Chris and pushed his lube-slick cock inside, Chris was sobbing with

need; his hands grabbed onto Richard's ass and pulled him deeper and they both groaned.

Propping himself up, Richard withdrew and then thrust slowly in again. Chris writhed underneath him, desperate for more. "God, you're incredible like this," Richard said, shifting his weight and reaching for Chris' erection.

Chris cried out at the feel of Richard's hand around him, of Richard's thick cock stretching him open. "Please." He panted for air, rocking his hips. "Please. Richard, please, God..."

"Love this. Love you." Richard picked up speed a little bit, changed the angle of his thrusts slightly, and when Chris opened his eyes he could see Richard staring at him, lips parted. "I love you, Chris."

Shuddering, Chris felt his whole body tighten. "Love—oh, I'm—" He came, wracked by the intensity of the spasms and the knowledge that things were okay, that Jazz was okay, that they were all going to be okay. As he gasped, heart pounding, Richard pulled out and turned him over, ass in the air and his face in the pillows, and pushed inside him again, fucking him hard and fast. There was a desperation to it, but not one that Chris couldn't understand; Richard wanted that reassurance, too, of knowing that everything was all right.

He did what he could to help, which wasn't much, and it wasn't long before Richard groaned and trembled and Chris felt Richard come in long pulses deep inside him, one hand clutching at Chris' hip.

Richard withdrew and collapsed down beside Chris, who nestled in close, ignoring the fact that they were both sweaty and sticky in favor of being held.

"I know I haven't said that enough." Richard rubbed the small of Chris' back. "Told you that I loved you. I do."

"I like hearing it," Chris admitted. "But I know you do. You don't have to say it all the time."

"I should. I should say it more." Richard kissed him, tongue sliding deliciously between Chris' lips for a second or two. "I love you."

Chris smiled. "I thought I was the one who was supposed to be taking care of you," he said.

"We'll take care of each other," Richard said. "And Jazz."

"Always," Chris agreed, and they rested there for a long time, arms around each other, peaceful and happy and, most of all, loved.

Epilogue

"Guys! I can walk. I've been walking for weeks. Take it easy." Jazz sounded more amused than annoyed as Chris and Richard both moved to help him from the car to the house.

"You do realize how long we've been waiting to do this, don't you?" Richard stepped back and let Chris support Jazz, who to be fair was walking just fine on his own, if a bit slowly. He was still weak and couldn't go far without needing to rest, but overall the doctors were pleased with the progress he'd made, attributing Jazz's level of physical fitness before the accident with his conservation of muscle mass in the months following.

Jazz paused at the foot of the stairs and reached out to grip the handrail. "Okay, this is new."

"Richard put it in last week," Chris said. "We should have had one before, anyway."

Surprisingly, Jazz seemed fine with it. Chris and Richard had been warned to anticipate sour moods from Jazz at all the things that had changed—and all the things that would need to change in the upcoming weeks and months as they figured out what Jazz could and couldn't manage—became apparent, but at this point Jazz just seemed happy to be home.

"I could carry you over the threshold?" Chris suggested, mostly joking, as Jazz started up the steps.

"We're not getting married," Jazz said. He grinned, though. "There's no way I'd agree to that until my hair's grown back in. I'd need to look pretty for the pictures." He'd refused to

have it so much as trimmed while he'd been at the rehab hospital, with a degree of stubbornness that had seemed unusual.

"Even if it was legal here, polygamy's not." Richard was close behind them. "I could hold the door, if you wanted to."

"Get married?" Chris asked, confused.

"Carry him over the threshold."

"I don't need to be carried," Jazz said, with more than a touch of irritability.

"Maybe I *want* to carry you," Chris said.

"Oh." Jazz sounded contrite, like the idea hadn't even occurred to him. "Well, okay. If you really want to."

"I do."

Richard slipped past Chris and got the door, and Chris scooped Jazz—who was still lighter than he remembered, even though he'd put on almost ten pounds since he'd woken up—into his arms and carried Jazz inside, careful not to bump any of him. "Mm, you smell nice," Jazz murmured against the side of Chris' neck, lips brushing the skin there. Unable to resist the temptation, Chris turned his head and kissed Jazz full on the mouth, and Jazz made an appreciative noise and kissed back, clinging to him. "Take me up to bed?"

Chris had had plans, plans that included cooking Jazz a really nice dinner—in fact, most of the ingredients were prepared and ready in the fridge—and giving Jazz a long massage, because his muscles were still adjusting to being moved around again and he complained that they ached. But just then taking Jazz up to bed, the bed he'd been absent

from so notably and for so long, sounded like the best idea ever.

The stairs were easy to navigate, and Richard was right behind them, one hand hovering near Chris' back in case he stumbled. There were clean sheets on the bed, and brand-new pillows, and Chris kicked off his shoes without setting Jazz down and then lowered him to the bed and kissed him for so long that Chris forgot if there was anything else he was supposed to be doing. It wasn't until Jazz started to unbutton his shirt that Chris came back to himself and looked up.

"Hope you're planning to share," Richard said, smiling and moving to help Jazz undo Chris' shirt.

There hadn't been any question in Chris' mind. He moaned as Jazz's fingers tweaked both nipples at the same time. They hadn't been able to anything but kiss until now; there were always too many people around, and a lot of the time Jazz had been exhausted from physical therapy and the sheer amount of effort it took to stay awake. But over the past week he'd gradually been more like himself, stronger, and when he'd been told he could be released if he promised to continue to apply himself on an outpatient basis he'd been over the moon, so excited that he hadn't stopped smiling for hours.

"I want both of you," Jazz said, sliding his fingertips down to lightly trace the line of hair on Chris' lower belly. "Can we be naked? Please?"

"Like you even need to ask," Chris said.

In under a minute Chris and Richard were both undressed and turned their attention to easing Jazz's clothes off, too,

treating him like a precious, delicate thing that might break.
"You don't have to, you know," Jazz said, understanding.

"We want to," Richard told him, sliding down the sweatpants he'd taken to wearing and kissing his upper thigh.
"God, I've missed you."

"We both have. So much." Chris gave himself up to Jazz's throat, licking and sucking at the sensitive skin there and listening with immeasurable pleasure to Jazz's sighs and quiet moans.

"Feels so good," Jazz said. Chris glanced down and saw Richard's hand slowly stroking Jazz's cock. "I haven't come in so long." He'd admitted the week before that he hadn't jerked off even the few times he'd gotten an erection, wanting to 'save it' for when the three of them could be together again.

Richard agreed. "Much too long." He started to suck on Jazz's cock; Jazz groaned and Chris moved down to lavish attention on one small nipple.

"Tell us what you want," Chris said.

"This is good." Jazz whimpered and shifted his hips. "So good. Don't stop. Oh—" Another gasp and he tensed and came for what seemed to be a very long time, relaxing and panting when it was over. Chris shifted higher and kissed Jazz, taking each little sound into his mouth. "Need to touch," Jazz murmured, reaching for Chris' cock at the same time Richard moved up to join them. "Both of you. Can we...?"

"However you're comfortable," Richard told him.

"Could you kneel? Right—yeah, like that." Jazz's eyes were deep and dark with pleasure as Chris and Richard both got on

their knees on either side of him, Jazz with one hand on their erections. "Oh. Like this."

The wave of lust that washed over Chris at the sight of Jazz, so fucking beautiful and with a hand wrapped around both his and Richard's cocks, almost made him come right then. He reached down and pulled at his balls slightly, just enough to take the edge off.

"You can come whenever you want," Jazz said, licking his lower lip. "You don't have to—" Richard groaned and came, cock throbbing noticeably in Jazz's grip, fluid landing on Jazz's stomach. Eyes tightly shut, Richard shuddered and moaned again. He leaned down, supporting himself with one hand on the mattress as Jazz continued to stroke Chris.

"God," Richard said. He shuddered again, one last drop forming a bead at the tip of his cock, which was reddened and still twitching.

"Help me." Jazz reached for Richard's hand and brought it to Chris' cock, then swiped his own fingers through the come on his belly before slipping them back behind Chris' balls, teasing at him. Richard straightened up and kissed Chris, the taste of Jazz lingering on his tongue and making Chris groan just as Jazz's finger breached him, slipping inside. The scent of release was heavy in the air, which was cool in the late fall weather—they still hadn't turned on the furnace, but it wouldn't be long now.

Jazz pushed deeper, Richard's hand tightening around the tip of Chris' cock, squeezing, and Chris trembled.

"Oh, God. Oh. Close." It was meant as a warning, but probably more to himself than to either of his lovers.

"That's it," Richard encouraged, kissing him again. "Come on."

"We're both here," Jazz said. He pushed a second finger in to join the first, finding Chris' prostate easily; the pressure made Chris gasp. "I'm here, Chris. I love you."

Chris came, throwing his head back, completely silent. The sound of his pulse was a strong, rhythmic pounding in his ears, his balls tingling as he shot into Richard's hand with Jazz's fingers still up his ass. He didn't start to breathe again until it was over, and by then he needed the air badly enough that he whooped in a lungful, grateful for Richard's arm around him as Jazz slipped his fingers free.

"That's my baby," Jazz said with affection, stroking Chris' thigh. "You're so gorgeous. Isn't he, Richard?"

"He is." Richard's voice was a rumble in his chest. "And so are you."

"So are *you*," Chris and Jazz said at the same time, then laughed.

Richard lay down beside Jazz, pulling Chris down too into an embrace that had Jazz in the middle of it, protected, the way he should be. "You okay?" Richard asked Jazz. "That wasn't too much?"

"Are you kidding? All I did was lie here." Jazz smiled, and Chris ran a hand down along his body to find that he was hard again, or maybe still. "Yeah, I know. Hey, it's been a long time. I've been saving it up, I guess."

"I guess so." Chris fondled him, feeling soft, slightly sticky skin over the hardness of the tissue beneath. Jazz's eyes

closed, his lips parted, and Richard leaned in to kiss that flushed, perfect mouth.

"I think I can probably come again," Jazz whispered, concentrating, and Chris wanted to make him.

"Like this?" he asked.

Jazz frowned, lifted his chin a little. "I don't know. Maybe." He looked tired, though, so Chris slid down and licked at him.

"What about like this?"

"Oh." Jazz shivered, goose bumps rising on his thighs.

"Yes. Like that."

Richard kissed Jazz while Chris sucked his cock, slowly and gently, paying careful attention to how Jazz was reacting. When Jazz moaned and flooded his mouth with salty, familiar fluid, Chris blinked back tears that had everything to do with relief and joy.

"Mm," Jazz said five minutes later, face pressed to Chris' chest and Richard snuggled up close along his backside.

"Never moving again."

"Yes, you are," Richard said. "Lots."

Chris understood what he meant. "But not now, if you don't want to. Are you hungry? I could go start dinner."

"No, don't go. Stay." Jazz burrowed closer, but less than a minute later his stomach growled loudly and he changed his mind. "Okay. Dinner would be good."

"You want a hand?" Richard asked as Chris started to get up.

He shook his head. "Stay here. I'll give a shout when it's ready."

Going downstairs, wearing loose jeans and the first sweater he'd grabbed out of the drawer, Chris reminded himself that he needed to buy new socks. He was particularly hard on them, even the thick wool ones that he preferred for hanging around the house in the winter time, and the ones from last year were riddled with holes. It was starting to get pretty close to cold at night now; soon enough it would be cold all the time.

Chris broiled the filet mignons he'd mail ordered from a company that specialized in them, gave the potato salad a stir, and steamed the green beans. It was kind of late in the year for potato salad, but it was one of Jazz's favorite dishes and he'd mentioned, wistfully, that he'd missed out on it that summer. When the steaks were resting on the stovetop, Chris went to the foot of the stairs and called up. "Food!"

A few minutes later, Richard and Jazz were creaking their way down the stairs. Chris had set the table that afternoon, so it took only moments to get the food onto the table; he was there, waiting, to pull out Jazz's chair.

"Thanks," Jazz said, raising his face for a kiss that Chris was only too happy to bestow.

Jazz ate every bite of food on his plate, practically moaning with pleasure, while Chris and Richard picked at theirs and just watched him.

"I'm on display, aren't I?" Jazz asked, shoveling in another mouthful of potato salad.

"Pretty much," Chris agreed. "I'm more hungry for you than I am for food."

Jazz gazed at him lovingly. "Well, you'd better eat more than that," he said, pointing at Chris' plate. "Especially if you want to have the energy to fuck me tonight."

It was a good thing Chris didn't have any food in his mouth, because that would have made him choke. As it was, he gaped at Jazz. "Excuse me?" he said finally.

"You heard me." Jazz looked smug, glancing at Richard. "You, too."

"I don't think that's..." Richard didn't seem to know what to say. "That might not be such a good..."

"It's a very good idea," Jazz said seriously. "I asked the doctor yesterday. He said the only things I can't do are drive, operate heavy machinery, and run a marathon." He grinned. "Then he said I'm so stubborn that he might even be wrong about the marathon thing, if you gave me another couple of weeks. Sex is fine."

The thought of it dropped a weight into Chris' stomach; he pushed his plate away, then shoved his chair back and went into the kitchen, leaned against the counter. Touching Jazz, making him come, was one thing, but fucking him—that was something they'd do later, when he was stronger. Because as much as Chris wished he could just pretend like none of this had ever happened, it *had*, and the last thing he wanted was to chance hurting Jazz. It would be so easy to let desire and longing take over; he wouldn't do that.

The other room was quiet. He heard the sound of a chair scraping across the floor, then Jazz's voice say, "No. Let me."

Chris would have known which of them it was, of course, just by the sound of the footsteps. He didn't turn around, and

Jazz put both arms around his waist from behind and hugged him tightly, the side of his face pressed against Chris' back.

"Hey," Jazz said.

"Sorry." Chris said it stiffly, but he meant it.

"It's okay. *I'm* sorry. I forget how long it's been for you two." Jazz sighed. "But I'm fine. Really. And ... I miss you. Miss having you inside me." Chris' cock, traitor that it was, stirred. "I want you. I need you. Please don't say no."

"That's not fair," Richard said from the doorway, and they both turned to look at him.

"What? Saying please?" Jazz sounded confused.

"Asking him not to say no. Asking either of us." Richard was tense, his shoulders square. "Especially after what happened. You know we can't."

"Of course you can. But I wouldn't ask for anything that would be bad for me," Jazz said, then stopped, seeming to realize. "Oh." His voice was very small; Chris put both arms around him protectively and hugged him, even though he knew it wasn't possible to protect Jazz from himself.

"Come here," Richard said gently.

Jazz went, letting Richard hold him. "I didn't mean to," Jazz said. "I just wanted it."

"I know." Richard kissed the top of his head. "And I don't want to be like I was before—overprotective and driving you crazy. But you have to listen to us." He lifted his eyes to meet Chris'. "To Chris, when he says he doesn't want you to do something."

Jazz nodded, looking up at Richard almost like he was intimidating, even though Chris knew that wasn't how Jazz

felt about him. "I will," Jazz said. "I'll try. But ... sometimes you have to listen to me, too. And if I say it's fine, and the doctor says it's fine..."

"Then it's fine," Chris said, stepping over to join them, one arm around each waist. "It's okay. You're home, and you're getting better every day. That's what matters."

They went upstairs together, leaving the dishes where they were. They took turns removing each other's clothes—first Richard and Chris undressed Jazz, then Chris helped Jazz with Richard's, then, finally, Chris was naked, too, all three of them hard and eager.

Slowly, with careful hands and soft, wet mouths, they aroused each other. Chris sucked Jazz's cock for a long time as Richard stroked him open with slick fingers; Chris could tell by the way Jazz tensed and gasped that he was tight after months in the hospital, but Richard was patient, gentle, and the gasps sounded more like surprise than pain.

"I love you," Richard whispered, and leaned in and kissed the side of Chris' mouth as it lingered at the tip of Jazz's cock. Their tongues tangled briefly, Richard's hand still working between Jazz's thighs, and Chris felt his own cock give a slow, delicious throb where it lay trapped between the mattress and Jazz's ankle.

Chris closed his mouth on Jazz's erection again, sucking teasingly, and Jazz moaned and lifted his hips. "Been waiting so long," Jazz said. "Please. I don't wanna wait anymore."

"You don't have to," Richard told him. He stretched out beside Jazz, pulled him close, then rolled so that he was flat on his back with his knees up and Jazz on top of him; Jazz's

knees fell to either side of Richard's hips, spreading him wide open with Richard's body supporting him. "Here. Just like this."

With shaking hands Chris reached for the bottle of lube and slicked himself up. Kneeling, he guided the head of his cock to Jazz's glistening hole and pushed oh so gently, not even trying to get in.

Jazz wriggled and gasped. "Chris. Chris, God, please..."

"I know," Chris said. "I am." And he pressed forward, waiting, giving Jazz's body a chance to relax and adjust.

Panting, Jazz made little sounds against Richard's chest, Richard's hand stroking the back of his neck. "God. God."

"Easy," Richard told him. "Easy. He just doesn't want to hurt you."

"It doesn't hurt," Jazz whimpered. "I ... need..."

Chris eased in another inch, and then Jazz's ass relaxed around him, let him in, and he slid deep and froze. Right. There. He couldn't move, because if he moved, he'd come, and he was pretty sure that a two-second fuck wasn't what Jazz had been looking forward to all these weeks.

"Don't come. Don't come. Not yet." Jazz's voice was a velvet caress just like his ass, and Chris stroked Jazz's thigh to give himself something else to concentrate on. "Please, oh, God."

Biting his lip, Chris pulled back and slid forward again, and Jazz trembled, tightened around him, hot and soft and slick, and then Jazz cried out helplessly and came. Chris couldn't see it, but he could feel the squeezing rhythm of it, and it jerked his orgasm from him without any more warning than

that. He tried not to clutch at Jazz's hips too tightly as he rode it out in a series of thrusts, but it wasn't easy.

Jazz was lying sprawled across Richard's chest, apparently sated, but he made a pleased sound when Chris gave another slow thrust while he still could. "Oh," Jazz mumbled. "I needed that so much." He gave another squeeze around Chris, who was already softened to the point of needing to pull out. "Richard's turn."

"It can wait," Richard said, petting Jazz's ass.

"No," Jazz said. He pushed up on his arms and kissed Richard. "It really can't."

Unable to resist, Chris traced a fingertip over Jazz's sensitive flesh and heard him gasp. He stroked a finger inside—still plenty of lube there, not to mention his own come—and found Jazz's prostate, rubbed it until Jazz squirmed and moaned and shivered. "Go on," Chris told Richard.

He helped; supported Jazz's weight, got Jazz positioned so that he could sink down onto Richard's erection. Jazz made a sound like the air had been forced out of his lungs when Richard entered him, and for a moment they all stopped—none of them breathed, none of them moved, and no one said anything. Then Jazz breathed, "Yes," and Richard's hips rocked upward, lifting Jazz, and Chris' hands were on Jazz's waist because Jazz's legs were trembling, all the strength gone. He knelt up and wrapped an arm around Jazz's chest, held him that way, his other hand rubbing Jazz's cock until it was hard again, until Jazz was crying out with every thrust. And Chris felt it when Jazz came—the deep shudders, the

throbbing of the cock in his fist, warmth blooming across his knuckles—and he felt it when Richard came, arching underneath Jazz and groaning loudly.

Half an hour later they were all still lying there, awake, hands stroking over bare skin without passion but with more than enough affection to make up for it.

"Is there dessert?" Jazz asked sleepily. His head was resting on Chris' stomach, and when he talked Chris could feel his jaw move, could feel the soft hush of warm air over his skin. He would have laughed, but didn't because his stomach would move and he didn't want to chance having Jazz move, not yet.

"Of course. Chocolate cake. Your mom brought it by this morning."

"Oh, man. It's that one with the mousse in it, right?" Jazz rolled his head, turning his face toward the ceiling. "Hey. Where are the cobwebs?"

Richard, who was curled up on Jazz's other side, one hand stroking his chest, said, "What cobwebs?"

"Exactly my point," Jazz said. "There are always cobwebs in the corners."

"Hm, yeah. I might have ... developed a little bit of a fetish," Richard admitted.

"A fetish?" Jazz sat up and leaned against the headboard. "A fetish for cobwebs? What, are you collecting them in a jar or something?" He gave Richard a severe look. "That's kind of creepy."

Richard shook his head. "No, I meant a clean fetish."

Even frowning, Jazz was beautiful. "You mean like OCD?"

"I don't think it's that extreme, but yeah, kind of." Richard had relaxed lately, actually; neither of them had talked about it, but Chris had definitely noticed. "Anyway, that's where the cobwebs went." He shifted and looked up at Jazz. "If you really like them, though, I'll leave them alone from now on."

"I do like them," Jazz said. "They've kind of always been there." He was watching Richard's face.

"Still. That doesn't mean you like them. Maybe you're just used to them." It was very, very obvious that they weren't talking about cobwebs now.

"If it was just about being used to them, I'd be taking for granted that they were there," Jazz pointed out. "I wouldn't even bother to look. I wouldn't notice that they were gone."

"But you did." Richard's eyes were dark.

"I did. And I always will." Jazz moved, leaning down to kiss Richard. "Love you," he whispered, then turned to Chris.

"Love you, too. And I'm really, really glad to be home."

"We're really glad to have you home," Chris said, which was pretty much the understatement of his life.

Jazz's grin was wide and infectious. "I want cake," he said. "And ice cream. There's ice cream, right?"

"There is," Richard confirmed, getting up and bending to pick up a pair of cotton sleep pants. "Four kinds."

"And none of them are—" Jazz started, and Richard and Chris said the rest of the sentence with him. "Low fat," they all said. Jazz rubbed his nose against Chris' and shifted to the edge of the bed.

His body might still be in recovery, Chris thought, but his spirit shone as brightly as ever.

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