

STRAIGHT!?

Based on the Coming of Age Adult Visual Novel

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Prologue

I didn't always like guys.

It's funny. Looking back now, it seems the signs were always kinda there but the thoughts... those desires... sorta just snuck up on me. Some people might ask... when did you really know for sure you liked guys? My answer? Oh, you bet your ass I know...

It was in high school a couple of years ago. We just finished a swim meet and people were horsing around in the locker room. Ya know, guys, being guys. I remember the smell; like a dank, wet basement, the aroma of cheap deodorant and too much body spray. Slamming lockers, guys laughing, towels snapping on bare asses and that one guy that laughs way too loud in the shower for no apparent reason.

I remember it like it was yesterday... towel wrapped around my waist and my arms folded to hide my body. One of my friends comes walking out of those community showers. Wet feet slapping against the cement floor with water dripping behind him. As he runs a hand through his hair, the movement catches my eye and I look over. He looked like a fucking angel. One of those Greek Gods that would've made Michelangelo rock hard, drop his chisel and stare in awe at his beauty.

The water glistened off his skin as it ran down his natural curves. Down that V... his manhood swinging side to side as he walked. He had a nest of pubic hair and a happy trail that I just wanted to run my tongue through. I bit my lip, trying to remember basic sentence structure. My heart beat like thunder in my chest, the racing thumps deafening my senses. At that moment I couldn't have cared less about breathing.

You ask when I knew I liked guys? Like really liked guys? I'll tell you. It's when I bit my fucking lip.

Chapter 1 Beginnings, Part I

The monotonous sound of a small ball hitting against the hollow plaster wall echoed around the tiny dorm room. It bounced back in perfect rhythm, only to be thrown again. Three thuds, the floor, the wall, a pair of stiff hands. Three thuds and the sound of sobbing in the distance. A mother's cries that her baby bird was finally flying the nest. It was nothing new, Zack had heard the same sobs nearly all day now.

He arrived late last night and couldn't get a decent night's sleep. College was a big step, a huge step in fact; and it was an entirely different ball game. To say he was excited about it would be a lie. High school sucked and his grades were never stellar. Scraping through by the skin of teeth and all that proverbial nonsense...

By no means was he an idiot. He was quite intelligent; too intelligent for his own good actually. Take algebra, for example, he could do that shit with his eyes closed. He just hated it. What was the point? Teachers would say it was needed because they wouldn't always have a calculator, but low and behold everyone has a portable mini font of knowledge strapped to them at all times.

Zack knew when to be smart academically, he knew what needed his attention and what didn't. Socially, however, he was awkward... and internally, he was in a state of eternal confusion. There he was on his first day of college, throwing a stress ball against a wall while overthinking every little detail of his life. Meticulously going over the steps he took that brought him to college, that brought him here.

"I need to find something better than just sitting here being bitter at the world," he sighed, throwing the ball even harder. It bounced back and knocked over the pile of books on the desk beside him, *Imaginary Numbers* landing by his feet. "Really... fuck this," he said angrily, picking up the book and throwing it down on his bed.

A subtle click and simultaneous light knock at the door startled him. Turning around slowly, he watched as a hand curled around the door frame before a shy figure sidestepped into the room. The way the boy held himself was like a 40's movie bank robber, tiptoeing through a dark alley. Meek as fuck... almost like Zack had set traps or something.

The boy wobbled back and forth with the largest pile of precariously stacked shit Zack had ever seen. It looked like he'd taken every single item out of Mary Poppins' bag and carried them up to the fourth floor of the dormitory. It was an impressive sight.

But what was more impressive was Braden in general. Despite looking like a solid 14 years old, he was gorgeous. "Sup," Zack said, his voice a few octaves deeper than normal.

"Hey what's up? I think this is the right room, are you Zack?"

"Yep, you must be Braden," Zack replied, offering out a welcoming hand.

"Yeh, nice to meet you man," Braden said with a grin, shaking Zack's hand and quickly pulling it back once the pile of items began to wobble. "Where should I put all this shit? Oh shit, sorry about the language man... fuck."

"Dude. It's all good, I have a filthy mouth. You're not gonna offend me, trust," Zack said with a chuckle, taking some of the items from the top of the pile. "I slept on this side of the room last night. Honestly, it doesn't bother me how we set stuff up, I'm good either way."

"That's cool, I don't have any strong feelings either. I'll just take this side since you've probably already unpacked. You get here last night then?"

"Yeah, 'cause who doesn't want an extra day of college, right?" Zack snickered, placing down the items on Braden's bed.

"Heh. Right? I miss anything?" Braden asked, slumping down on the bed.

"Nah not much, I christened the room last night though... that was pretty clutch," Zack shrugged nonchalantly.

"Ha ha! I think we're gonna get along just fine..."

The room fell into a comfortable silence as Braden unpacked. Zack thought about offering to help him but figured that Braden wouldn't want a stranger routing through his personal belongings. Countless photographs appeared from one of the boxes and Zack watched intently as Braden examined each one of them, before choosing a select few to stick up on the wall beside his bed.

Zack looked up at his own wall realizing he hadn't brought any memorabilia from home. He didn't have many photographs of himself or his family, he never saw the point.

"Oh my God! All I've done is unpack and I'm fucking worn out..." Braden said through deep breaths. He held his hands on his hips admiring his side of the room. The array of photographs and posters on the wall formed a detailed collage of his life, from birth all the way through school up to graduation.

"Well, you brought enough shit with you to invade a small country," Zack replied, a cheeky grin curling his lips. "I feel like if we were ever in a plane crash, I'd look for your suitcase. You're at college man, not preparing for the zombie apocalypse."

"You never know, all it takes is for one rogue virus and then we're all infected and eating each other," Braden shrugged, slumping down on his bed.

"Aren't all viruses rogue? Like... isn't that their thing?" Zack asked, making Braden pause for a second with a face that looked like he was assessing his life choices.

"Heh, you've got an answer for everything don't ya?" he finally replied, looking back at Zack who was grinning. "And yes... I tend to overpack."

Silence fell between them, the awkwardness of having just met beginning to settle in. What do you talk about in situations like this? Asking what their favorite color is and what animal they'd be, just seems trivial as fuck. Sharing a room with someone for the next year was daunting. Where are the boundaries of conversation? How do you initiate general conversation without sounding like a mundane fucker?

Braden must have been thinking the same as Zack because he tapped his foot awkwardly against the floor while his eyes darted around. After five minutes of silence, he finally sighed and stood up from the bed stretching out his aching shoulders. "You hungry?" he asked, trying to stretch his arm out and crack his bones. "Wanna see what chow this tuition is paying for... be a chance for us to get to know each other a little better too."

"Sure, I'm in," Zack said, thankful that Braden was in the very least more willing to initiate a conversation than he was.

They walked down to the cafeteria together trying their best to avoid the army of crying mothers and **straight**-faced fathers. Fragile masculinity was in full effect, the hilarity of grown men not able to show emotion and give a genuine goodbye to their children was ludicrous.

Zack remembered back to the previous night, arriving alone with nothing but his suitcase in tow. His mother, in the very least, remembered to give a disinterested farewell before he caught the bus to the train station. This wasn't new, she would often stare blankly whilst Zack talked, too tired to pay attention to anything he said. Working the hours she does for barely minimum pay was draining, all-consuming and soul destroying. Since the passing of Zack's older brother, she'd completely shut down.

His father was just more of the same and to put it simply; he was a stone-faced, iron-hearted twat. It was no wonder Zack found it hard to express himself, children are just a product of their parents after all. A mother so caught up in her head that she's lost touch with reality and a father who couldn't see past the image of the perfect nuclear family... on some level Zack was happy they hadn't brought him here. This was a new start for him, he could be whoever he wanted to be.

The cafeteria was quite small considering how large the campus was. There was no way it was going to feed more than fifty people at a time. Standard tables and chairs, much like in high school, but a calmer atmosphere. Rather than countless judging eyes peering back, it was like the room was full of lost puppies. Wide-eyed college students hoping they were in the right place and trying their best to make friends so they didn't have to sit alone.

Grabbing two chicken burgers with fries, they sat down on one of the clean tables. Zack examined his burger and noticed it wasn't just regular fried chicken. Marinated in Cajun spices, the orange juices dripped out onto the tray when he took a bite. Spicy garlic chili sauce slathered on both sides of the bun and a fresh lettuce leaf holding two thin slices of tomato

made for one of the most delicious burgers Zack had ever tried, even the fries had been coated in paprika and Himalayan rock salt.

“Man, this food is fucking delicious,” Braden mumbled out, taking another bite of his burger.

“You’re telling me,” Zack agreed, demolishing his in mere seconds and using the chili garlic mayo to dip his fries into.

“Suppose we should get to know each other since we’ll be sleeping together for the next few years,” Braden said, finishing up his burger and wiping the mayo from his lips.

“Wow, you just met me and you’re already talking about sleeping with me? Damn boy, you move fast.”

“Ha-ha, shut up! I’m not talking about that!” Braden exclaimed, his cheeks flushing a crimson pink. “I mean sharing the room, you homo.”

“Come on then man, what do you wanna know?” Zack asked, shuffling in his seat getting comfortable.

“Where are you from? Anywhere local?” Braden asked, taking a sip from his iced drink.

“Nah, I’m from Chicago. Well, the suburbs actually. You?”

“Small-town boy here. Grew up in central Ohio, the typical small-town, nothing really special about it.”

“Other than the serial killers,” Zack snickered, making Braden raise a brow in confusion. “I’ve seen the movies man; small towns are breeding grounds for serial killers.”

“Well if there was one, I never bumped into them...” Braden said, with a smirk. “But maybe you just have,” he winked, taking another sip of his drink. Zack wasn’t sure how to respond to that, so just waited silently as Braden finished whatever sugary pop he was slurping. “So yeah, my dad does construction; owns his own business. My mom worked in retail for a while but has slowly been spending more time at home.”

“Any hobbies?” Zack asked, not really wanting to talk about his own family.

"Eh, there's not really much to do in a small-town. I did go to state for wrestling a few times. Never won," Braden shrugged, while Zack stared back at him with curiosity.

"A wrestler huh? I wouldn't have guessed that," he said, not intending for it to sound as blunt as it had.

"It's the size, right?" Braden asked, rolling his eyes like this was something he'd heard before.

"I didn't say that..." Zack quickly replied, feeling bad for his remark.

"Mhmm... but your ass was thinking it," Braden said with a pointed finger, before rocking back in his chair and folding his arms. "Nah, it's all good. In my case, the size works in my favor. Allows me to twist around into some crazy positions to maximize my ass-kickin."

"Fair enough," Zack shrugged, nodding his head at the reasonable response. "So... uh..." he trailed off, making Braden's eyes narrow once more.

"You're going to ask the age thing, aren't you?"

"No way... I totally had something else in mind," Zack quickly replied, holding his hands up defensively.

"Heh, you're fine, man. I would rather you be honest with me. I like real people, your bluntness is kinda refreshing. If we're going to spend the next few years together, we need to know each other and just be ourselves," Braden replied, smiling at Zack who seemed genuinely intrigued with everything he was saying.

"Well, since you put it that way, I really can't argue with you," Zack said with a shrug, thankful that Braden didn't take offense.

"Well, to answer your question, I'm eighteen. I know: taboo as fuck, right?" Braden chuckled, noticing Zack's eyes scan over him like he was trying to affirm what he'd just said. "I actually just look young, both my parents have really youthful features. I can't complain, really. I'm sure I will appreciate it when I'm thirty, right?"

"That's fair," Zack said simply, folding his arms pushing himself back awkwardly in his seat.

"Your turn," Braden said suddenly, making Zack sigh internally knowing that this was coming. As much as he appreciated how open Braden was, and how he wanted to get to know Zack... the thought of spilling his life out onto the table just made him feel uncomfortable.

"I'm nineteen," Zack said quietly, making sure nobody around them was listening.

"Grandpa, huh?" Braden chuckled out. Zack nearly fell right back out of his chair and barely managed to catch himself before glaring at Braden.

"Fuck off! I took a year off after high school and nothing much panned out is all," he said, explaining their age difference. "Fast food and grocery stores, not much out there unless I get my learn on. Employers don't really take you seriously unless you start the interview with a shit ton of debt and a fancy piece of paper with a sticker on it."

"You're telling me, man. We're gonna be paying this off for the rest of our lives," Braden joked.

"Let's not think about the crippling debt... how about relationships? You got anything serious going on at the moment?" Zack asked, seeing the slight hints of financial worry flash in Braden's eyes.

"Nah, to be honest, dude; I'm kinda shy. I mean, I see people I like and stuff but I totally suck at recognizing if they're interested," he replied honestly.

"So no relationships... like ever?" Zack asked, intrigued by the strange boy sat before him.

"Actually, not really. There was this girl I was involved with several years ago. We were going steady for a short time, never got very far though," Braden shrugged. His eyes seemed to be glancing between Zack and his drink that he'd neglected. Rolling his eyes, Zack pushed the lemonade over towards Braden, who instantly began to slurp it down.

"Not very far... like sex stuff?" Zack suddenly asked shocking Braden who gulped too much pop at once and began to choke and cough loudly. "Shit, sorry man. Didn't mean to catch you off guard like that," Zack quickly apologized, handing Braden a napkin so he could wipe away the lemonade that had dripped down his chin and shirt.

"You're good, man," Braden said, cleaning himself and letting out a few more quiet coughs. "I just... I wasn't feeling it I guess. Like I said, I'm shy and stuff. God this is weird, I'm usually not

even comfortable talking about this stuff with my closest friends... and here we are on day one!" he exclaimed, his voice still croaky from coughing.

"Hey, no worries. I'm a pretty open guy," Zack replied, but not entirely ready for Braden's response.

"What about you?" he asked back, making Zack fumble for a moment.

"Me? Relationship stuff?" he said, to which Braden just nodded and motioned for Zack to spill the beans. "I guess I may as well get this out of the way on day one... I'm pretty open when it comes to relationships."

"Open? Care to elaborate?" Braden asked with a cocked brow and curious pursed lips.

"Yeah, like I don't really discriminate on genders too much," Zack replied, the revelation making Braden's eyes widen.

"Oh shit! So you're like bi 'n shit?" Braden asked, making sure he hadn't misunderstood.

"I guess you could say that. I tend to lean more towards guys," Zack said, noticing Braden shift uncomfortably in his seat. He locked eyes with Zack for a moment, before trying his best to avoid eye contact. "You ok with that? Cause you look a little uncomfortable there... I freak you out or anything?"

"Nah man. I'm **straight**," he said, the words just fumbling out. "I mean... dammit," he stumbled, not sure what he really meant.

"Heh, you can stop now... you don't have to watch your mouth," Zack assured, assuming that Braden felt bad for the unintentional homophobia prior to this revelation.

"Yeah, I've just never been around anyone like that. You don't... yah know... seem to be the stereotype."

"Go figure," Zack chuckled, motioning to his baggy grey jeans and tattered black hoodie.

"People see me 'acting **straight**' so they typically have a billion questions after I tell them."

"I bet..." Braden said, still unsure as to whether Zack was just pulling his leg.

“Shit gets irritating. You’re excluded though... I’m open to whatever you wanna know. But if you seriously have a problem or have a question about something, let me know.”

“Dude, I’m ok. I just better not roll over in the middle of the night and see balls floppin’ and shit.”

“Seriously?” Zack chuckled, unsure if he could think of doing anything worse. “I’ll try to keep all the balls in check, I might be open but I’m pretty shy too,” he admitted, beginning to think over the logistics of getting changed, showering and other alternative activities while having a roommate.

“Zack...” Braden said softly, leaning over the table slightly. “I’m really glad you told me. It means a lot that you trusted me this early on. The ‘homo’ comments from earlier, I’m sorry if it offended you. I’ve just never been around gay people before; you might not be a stereotype but I guess I’m just the typical **straight** guy.”

“Honestly, be yourself, bro... remember? I have a filthy mouth too. Hell, some of us use terms like that regularly. I don’t put too much weight on slang and I especially don’t let words or labels define me,” Zack said openly, seeing how bad Braden felt. The table fell silent, the conversation dying out naturally. Talking to someone you just met can be awkward, the boundaries aren’t clear **straight** away and it can take some time to feel one another out.

“Wanna head back up to the room? There’s a few people standing over there that have been eyeing up our table for a while now,” Braden finally said, motioning to two wide-eyed girls holding trays of food.

“Sure, but you might have to carry me,” Zack chuckled, holding his stomach like it was about to burst. “That burger was dangerous; I hope that’s not on the menu every day otherwise I’ll be finishing this year twenty pounds heavier.”

“I could fireman carry you up the stairs but you’re taller than me so I can’t guarantee I won’t bang your head a few times on the railing,” Braden winked mischievously.

“Sure, sure,” Zack joked, groaning as he stood up holding his food baby. He offered the girls their table and waited for Braden to dump their trays before leaving the cafeteria. “So what are you planning on going to school for? With those little biceps, I hope not wrestling.”

“Hey! I could kick your ass anytime... just remember that,” Braden said with a childish scowl as they walked out into the grounds. “Honestly, I’m not really sure. I feel like most people show up here with something in mind. I’m kinda lost and will probably just take a few classes to test stuff out, ya know?”

“No shame in that. I’m probably going to do the same thing. I may look into psychology though or something like that,” Zack admitted.

“Shit, that’s heavy man,” Braden said, slightly taken aback by Zack’s choice.

“Nah, it’s something that speaks to me though, I guess. Parents are pretty conservative so the whole sexuality thing was kinda taboo. We didn’t talk about it much.”

“Do your parents know?” Braden asked curiously.

“That’s kinda difficult to answer...” Zack said, but Braden just stared at him silently allowing him the time to think for a moment. “We never really had the ‘talk’,” he said finally, seeing Braden nod his head understanding. “I still get a lot of macho talk from my dad. He’ll slap me on the back and ask if there’s ‘anyone special’. I usually give a lame answer like ‘not yet’ or ‘I’m waiting on the right one to come along.’”

“Leaving out the pronouns there, huh?” Braden asked, making Zack chuckle at his intuitive listening.

“You don’t miss anything do you?” he sighed but nodded his head nonetheless. “But yeah, you’re right. They either avoided asking further or never really caught on. Either way, that’s a fight I never really want to have.”

“I can understand that. Must be hard, man, I can’t even imagine having that talk with my parents,” Braden said, hoping that would bring some comfort to Zack.

“Takes time man. It took awhile for me to accept the whole thing myself. A lot of ups and downs, anger, questioning, the whole ‘why me’ thing... but then something just clicked one day. My ass just went fucking Zen with it. I don’t advertise it, that’s always seemed silly to me. Unless it impacts something or someone then it’s really not important.”

"I guess that makes sense," Braden said, pausing for a moment to glance around. The campus was much larger than either of them expected. Even in the dim glow of dawn the trees and open fields seemed to stretch out unnecessarily far between the buildings. "Do you remember the way back to the dorm? I think we've walked past this bench twice now."

"Oh damn we have, haven't we," Zack chuckled, looking around for a sign or campus map. All those carrots he was forced to eat as a child must have paid off because he spotted a wooden sign in the distance.

"You've thought about this shit a lot, haven't you?" Braden asked as Zack examined a large wooden sign that had a detailed map pinned to it.

"When you're trapped in your head, thinking you're the only person going through this shit... yeah, you kinda lose yourself a little. Can get lonely when you think the world's against you," Zack said, tracing his finger along the map before finally finding their dorm building. "Damn, this campus is huge..."

"Too big, we've barely seen anyone walking around," Braden agreed, following Zack as he led the way back to their dorm.

It didn't take them much longer than ten minutes to finally find their way back. Zack couldn't help but feel mischievous unlocking their door. It squeaked eerily like they were living in a haunted house. He opened it slowly just to be obnoxious, the squeaking irritating Braden. "Jesus Lord! Just open the fucking door already!" he exclaimed, throwing his arms about like one of those wacky inflatable warehouse figures.

"Dude, I'm fucking stuffed," Zack said, slumping down onto his bed with a thud once Braden had barged his way into the room. "Ouch..." he groaned out, the mattress not as soft as he thought it'd be.

“Right? I just wanna crash,” Braden agreed, kicking off his shoes and climbing onto his bed much slower than Zack. “I was on the road like all-day driving here, I feel gross. Might go for a shower before I call it a night.”

“That’s cool, I’m still making up my mind to what I’m gonna do. I’ll digest in the process,” Zack said, laying out flat with his hands holding his squirming stomach.

“Where’s the showers at anyway? I didn’t see anything on the way to the cafeteria. They do have bathrooms here, right?”

“Nah, shit costs extra,” Zack said, staring at the ceiling with the straightest of poker faces. Braden looked at him horrified, glancing between Zack and his bags questioning whether it was too late to go back home. “I’m kidding bro. Yeah, it’s out and to the left. Probably about four doors down on the right.”

“Do that to me again and I’ll drop your ass,” Braden said sarcastically, routing through the chest of drawers to find a towel. “You’ve got jokes for days huh?” he asked, pulling out a white beach towel and soap.

“It’ll grow on you,” Zack smirked as Braden left the room.

He laid flat out on the bed for a few minutes, just mulling over the evening’s events. Braden seemed to be a pretty open guy and Zack couldn’t help but find the short bastard endearing as fuck.

The musty smell of sweat began to work its way up to Zack’s nose, making him scrunch his face in disgust. “I fucking stink,” he said, the stench wafting around him like he was a skunk.

Swinging his legs over the bed frame, he grabbed his own towel and soap hoping that the showers weren’t too crowded this late at night.

He walked into the shower room and was instantly met by the warm steam inviting him in. At first, it was difficult to see anything. The lights flickered every few seconds making the room seem like one of those cheesy nightclubs. He stumbled through the steam until eventually, he saw him. “Holy fuck...” he breathed out, the words escaping his lips like a breath of fresh air as he noticed Braden already showering.

He fumbled to set his stuff down, completely taken aback. Although he was hidden behind a steamed up glass pane, Braden's naked body sent Zack's heart into a frenzy. It skipped a beat as he turned around, eyes closed and massaging shampoo into his blonde hair.

Frozen to the spot Zack had almost forgotten how to breathe, his eyes wide and his jaw swinging inches above the tiled floor. He didn't know what to do, so he stood in silence just admiring the view before him, completely forgetting that there was a world outside the shower room. He couldn't help it; his eyes were transfixed on Braden. Even though his body was obscured, the outline was enough to send waves of butterflies through Zack's body like never before.

He took a step forward, but the sudden sound of Braden humming echoed around him, pulling him out of his reverie. He paused for a second, on the cusp of entering the shower, before quietly stepping back and mentally kicking himself for losing control. He'd have only made a fool of himself if he got in the shower next to Braden, when it came down to it, he was extremely anxious and nervous when naked.

"Oh hey, Zack," Braden's voice said nervously, turning around and seeing Zack stood still staring at the wall. Within seconds, it was like rigamortis had set in and consumed Zack's body as the pure shock from Braden's voice had frozen him solid. "You decide to shower too?" Braden asked, peering over the glass wall noticing Zack had all but stopped functioning.

"Oh... uh... yeah, figured then I could sleep in a little later tomorrow," he said, quickly folding his arms and acting casual. He stumbled slightly, losing his balance but playing it off like he was just pacing about. "I... er, I always sleep better after a shower anyway," he said after a few moments of silence.

"Yeah, same here," Braden replied, turning back around and rinsing the shampoo from his hair. "I'm almost done," he said, all while Zack shuffled nervously trying to make his fawning seem less obvious.

Before long, Braden left the shower and wrapped a towel around his waist. "Not bad showers, I was expecting cold water and no pressure," he said, leaning against the glass and peering down at Zack.

“Yeah, they’re not bad if you’re into the whole ‘no privacy’ thing,” Zack said, discretion clearly not his strong suit. He was trying his best not to follow the trail of water as droplets slowly worked their way down Braden’s body before disappearing behind the tiny gap in the towel.

“Heh, yeah. There’s always that...” Braden agreed, suddenly aware that he was standing practically naked just inches from Zack. The realisation that it was just a precariously wrapped towel between him and Zack seemed to tip him over the edge of comfort. “Least it’s not crowded in here. Long as we take turns, it still feels kinda private.”

“You heading back to the room to get changed?” Zack asked, already knowing the answer.

“Yeah, that’ll give you some privacy too,” Braden said, unaware that that was exactly the opposite of what Zack wanted right now. “I’ll catch up with you if I’m still awake when you get back to the room. Classes start tomorrow and I feel like I could sleep for a week already,” he said, before leaving Zack to his thoughts.

Dropping his clothes to the floor he sighed and entered the shower, letting his mind drift as the warm water massaged his dark skin. Flashes of Braden’s naked body, what he saw of it, tormented Zack’s mind with thoughts of guilt. He’d barely known the guy for a day and he was objectifying him beyond all normal boundaries of friendship. He tried his best to push the thoughts to the back of his mind.

It was almost meditative, washing his stress away and the soothing warm water relaxing him. But no matter how much he tried, he couldn’t get Braden out of his head. He seemed like a genuinely great, every-day kinda guy. And they seemed to be clicking really well.

The image of soapy water running down Braden’s back and massaging into his ass cheeks sent Zack wild. He wasn’t sure why Braden was sending his hormones into overdrive, he might have to be sedated if he ever sees something like that again.

For now, Zack was just excited to spend more time together and getting used to one another’s company. There was a glint of hope in the back of his mind that they would eventually become more comfortable around one another, maybe even be willing to shower at the same time.

By the time Zack finished his shower and returned to the room Braden was already tucked up in bed. Fast asleep, dressed in a plain t-shirt and boxers. Zack sighed, flicking the light off and trudging over towards his bed.

He sat silently for a moment, just staring at Braden as he slept peacefully. Zack's eyes began to wonder, scanning Braden's body from head to toe. He closed his eyes, remembering how toned and smooth he looked from behind the glass wall. His olive skin and blonde locks dripping with soapy water that trailed down to his lower half.

Zack felt a twinge inside his boxers and snapped himself from his daze, glancing over Braden once more before laying back in bed and getting snug. He really liked Braden, dude was chill and open-minded, completely refreshing for someone like Zack.

He closed his eyes, allowing his thoughts of Braden and looking forward to tomorrow to consume him, drifting off to the sound of slamming doors and distant laughing.

Chapter 1 Beginnings - Part II

The dim glow of dusk began to creep its way into the dorm room through a single glazed window. Accompanying the light was a melody of songbirds greeting the morning with a symphony of tweets and chirps.

Suddenly, like a bomb, Zack's alarm creates an explosion of sound that shatters his solitude like a punch to the face. Shooting up in his bed, he glanced around in a state of confusion and panic, still not used to his surroundings. "Fuck," he groaned, slamming his head back down against his pillow and folding half of it over his face.

He relaxed into the warmth of his sheets, enjoying the quiet now that his alarm had stopped. Growing up in your parent's house, you get used to the sounds, the smells. Opening his eyes to a new environment after 19 years sent his complacent brain into an instant panic. Like waking up after a party and not really knowing where you are or what disgusting stuff you've just done with a really nasty person. The room eventually fades into focus, and his wits settle.

"Ugh..." Braden groaned arching his back out, trying to crack his stiff bones.

"You're quite the songbird in the morning," Zack chuckled, noticing the cracks and croaks coming from an oblivious Braden. It seemed as if he'd forgotten he wasn't alone in the room.

"It's first thing in the morning, and I hate you already," Braden glared, too tired for morning banter. "I hate this fucking sun even more though, these beds suck."

"Yeah, they're pretty hard. Definitely feel like they were donated by World War II." Zack chuckled, tapping his mattress as if it was a hard stone.

"I'm gonna ask you to refrain from using history jokes until at least after lunch; despite this being an educational institution," Braden said, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and stretching out his arms with the same cracking motion. "My brain is not awake yet, and I refuse to think about education stuff until I have to."

"I like how you've finally set a limit, and it deals with history. You're completely cool with the whole 'gay roommate' thing, but... man, those history jokes," Zack chuckled, prodding fun at Braden as he tried to peel his eyes open.

“Heh, maybe I’m more open than I think,” Braden yawned, stretching out his arms and sitting upright.

“Fuck, you look pretty rough, bro. You get mugged after I fell asleep?” Zack asked, noticing how drained and pale Braden looked.

“If I did, they didn’t get much. Broke college kid and all...” Braden shrugged groggily, grabbing his phone from the bedside table and flicking through the notifications. “Nah, I’m a pretty heavy sleeper and definitely not a morning person. Once I’m out... I’m fucking out. And honestly, I’m not a morning person at all.”

“I’m like that sometimes,” Zack agreed, all too familiar with the early morning blues before classes begin, “hell, maybe you did get mugged if you’re that heavy of a sleeper.”

“It’s entirely possible, bro. I’ll sleep through just about anything,” Braden sighed, swinging his legs over the side of the bed and rubbing the sleep from the corner of his eyes. “Fuck! I’ve got class in a few minutes, I’m gonna be late on the first day... great!”

“Shit, it’s that late already?” Zack asked, checking his own phone to confirm the time.

“Yeh, fucking shit. Where’s my freaking pants at?” Braden panicked, sweeping the floor beneath his bed searching for the faded jeans.

“Damn, it was a crazy night for you, huh?” Zack chuckled, before noticing a pair of jeans thrown carelessly over the desk at the foot of Braden’s bed. “Erm, I think they’re on the desk over there. Cause, ya know, that’s where everyone keeps their pants.”

“Oh shit... yeah... I must’ve thrown em down after the shower last night. Thanks, man...”

“My pleasure...” Zack replied as Braden hurried to pull on the trousers and rummage through his drawers for a matching shirt.

“I’m gonna head out, man. I’ll catch ya after class if you wanna hang out?” Braden asked, his head still pushing through the neck of his shirt that had ‘Slacker’ written across the middle.

“Yeah, let me see what’s going on tonight. God only knows what kind of workload I’ll have,” Zack said, leaning back on the bed with a placid, self-controlled expression that was hard to

read. He was used to acting aloof and disinterested, that was his default for any scenario that could make him feel socially awkward.

In reality, though, he really wanted to hang out with Braden. He really, really wanted to hang out with Braden. But he had to keep himself calm and composed, the last thing he wanted was to freak out his roommate on the second day.

“Ugh... Yeah, good point,” Braden replied simply, not questioning Zack’s sudden change of attitude. “Guess I’ll get going, see you later, man.”

“Yeah, see you,” Zack replied, watching as Braden fumbled out of the door pulling on his shoes and balancing a pile of books.

Once the sound of his footsteps vanished, Zack pushed himself out of bed and stretched out his arms with a groan. “Why can’t I just be fucking normal?” he sighed, hating how he always felt the need to hold all of his cards close to his chest. He begrudgingly got dressed and headed out for the day, grabbing a map of the campus, so he didn’t get lost again like the previous night.

The walk across campus was long, and Zack began to finally understand the logic behind the passing bicycles. Following the map like a tourist, he gazed around wide-eyed for the life-size version of the little cartoon buildings. The campus was a bizarre and harmonious maze of trees and buildings, like something out of one of those stupid Hollywood movies that have far too much budget. In time, it should get easier, he hoped...

Glancing at the map once more, Zack spotted what he hoped to be the location of his first-class. Through furrowed brows and apprehensive shivers, he made his way over to the large building.

The lecture hall inside was relatively large and somewhat intimidating with declining tiers of seating. It looked like a mini Coliseum, and he briefly entertained the sarcastic thought of students duelling at its core. Hitting each other with large, expensive textbooks and laptops brandished as shields...

It was much larger inside than Zack would have thought, the building must push quite far back into the wooded area behind it. He finds a seat in the back, the best place for people who aren’t quite sure what’s going on yet. The professor eventually appears beneath the spotlight, and Zack settles in with mild interest and guarded optimism.

After what felt like a draining 24 hours, the lecture ended, and it was time to make his way to the next class. It was rinse and repeat for the rest of the day, and Zack sighed with heavy relief once the last class ended, and he could finally make his way back to the dorms.

Braden sat at his desk with his head buried by the time Zack entered the room. He barely lifts his head, oblivious to Zack who was now peering over his shoulder to see what he was working on. "Dude, you good?"

"SHIT!" Braden screamed, rocking back on his chair and nearly flying back into Zack. "Holy crap, you scared me, man. I didn't hear you come in... my bad."

"It's all good," Zack chuckled, tapping the back of the chair making sure it's still sturdy. "What's up? You look swamped."

"Ugh, this stuff is kinda overwhelming, man. Like they gave me this massive syllabus on day one and I just can't... I didn't think I was signing up for this."

"I feel yah... I got the same thing in my classes," Zack said, waving the pile of papers he'd reluctantly taken from his lecturer.

"I'm trying not to freak out, but I just don't know where to start," Braden sighed, pushing the books to one side so he could rest his head on the desk. "Plus, it's fucking freezing in here!" he mumbled into the desk.

"Dude, I thought it was just me! You checked the thermostat?" Zack replied, feeling the cold chill creep around him.

"Yeah, it was the first thing I did when I got back. Think the fucker's broken, it's stuck on 50. I pressed the button like a thousand times, and it's not doing anything," Braden said, lifting his head up and shooting a pointed glare at the small white box fitted onto the wall next to the door.

"I'm usually pretty warm natured, but it was starting to get really chilly last night," Zack said, walking over to the thermostat to check it out.

"I have no idea how your naked ass could stand it; I woke up shivering," Braden stated, pushing himself up out the chair to join Zack in examining the small white box of doom. "You any good with stuff like this?"

"Dude, no joke... I'm terrible with electrical stuff. I stayed away from all this since I got electrocuted when I was young. Turns out... you shouldn't stick a fork in sockets."

"Yeah... no bro... maybe we should just slowly back away before you burn the place down. Maybe we can talk to somebody or find one of the maintenance guys, they should be able to help us out."

"That's not a bad idea, I'll keep an eye out tomorrow for someone. Until then, we'll just have to wrap up warm."

"That's easier said than done," Braden sighed, trudging over to his bed and slumping down. "I didn't pack many clothes, and the shit I did bring is mostly shirts and jeans."

"Dude, I fucking live in hoodies, they're my shit. You can borrow one if you're seriously that cold." Zack offered, but Braden shook his head and sprawled out in his bed.

"Nah, I'll just suffer in silence, man. But between this syllabus and being colder than a nunnery in here, I'm not getting shit done."

"That's it, break time!" Zack exclaimed, to which Braden lifted his head curiously to see Zack clearing the desk of all his papers.

"Dude, I gotta get this done!"

"Do you have shit due tomorrow?"

"Well, no..." Braden replied sheepishly, feeling a little stupid for trying to dive in headfirst on the first day.

"So let's take a break! Grab some food, maybe it'll reset your brain. You look like you're gonna have a fucking stroke."

“Ok, so wow... that’s probably true, but still rude,” Braden chuckled, pushing himself up from the bed and swinging on the heels of his feet. “Who knows, it might even be warmer in the cafeteria, maybe it’ll give me a chance to thaw out.”

The walk to the cafeteria was a quiet one, conversation dying naturally as they tried to stay warm in the autumnal weather. Despite offering him a hoodie, Braden objected and assured Zack that he’d be fine. But the hairs on his arms and the silent shivering said otherwise.

It was weird, even in the silence Zack felt like he was getting to know even more about Braden. He was stubborn, but politely so. Zack figured Braden would rather be uncomfortable, than ask for help or taking charity from someone. He liked to do shit for himself, which Zack admired.

The dinner wasn’t as delicious as the previous night. Square slices of pepperoni pizza with an acceptable amount of cheese but nowhere near enough sauce. Zack was rather traditional when it came to food anyway, so wasn’t overly upset by the meal provided. He wouldn’t complain when presented with an overcomplicated dish packed with complex flavours, but he’d much rather have something simple.

There’s a beauty to simplicity.

Braden was somewhat quiet, and any conversation they did have was small talk. Zack began to wonder if he was pissed that he dragged him out of the room, but the poor guy did look like he needed a break. They finish eating and head back to the dorm room with an air of silence between them.

“I can’t believe it’s still freezing; I feel like it’s even colder in here now than it was earlier,” Braden groaned upon opening the door, the cold air rushing out and hitting both of us like an Arctic wave. “Guess I’ll try and take another stab at reading this stuff, see if I can concentrate without freezing my ass off.”

“Why don’t you go hit the showers, man? That always warms me up,” Zack suggested with a shrug, sitting on his bed and stretching out his legs. The college campus was huge, and this was the most walking he’d done all summer. He could feel his knees clicking as he climbed the stairs, he really needed to get some exercise into his daily routine.

“That’s seriously not a bad idea bro, but it’ll be crowded this time of day, though.”

“Shy?” Zack replied with a cocked brow and smirk. Braden shuffled awkwardly, hands in his pockets and eyes locked onto the floor.

“Meh, a little... not gonna lie,” he said softly, not meeting Zack’s gaze. “There’s not much privacy in there, just a frosted wall. And that’s pretty useless if a guy’s waving his junk around in the shower right next to you.”

“Didn’t you say you were a wrestler?” Zack asked, remembering that Braden said he was on a team back in Highschool.

“We didn’t wrestle naked!” he exclaimed, almost like he had to defend himself.

“Heh. Yeah, there’s probably some rules against that. But not what I meant; you probably spent a lot of time in the locker rooms.”

“True,” Braden replied, beginning to search around for the towel he’d discarded after yesterday’s shower, “but I never really got used to the whole naked people in the locker room thing.”

“Yeah, I’m kinda shy sometimes too, you’re not alone,” Zack said in an honest attempt to try and comfort Braden. “Given that we’re roommates though, it’s only a matter of time before one of us walks in on the other one. So I just thought fuck it, and slept in my underwear last night.”

“Yeah well by the looks of things you quite enjoyed the liberation! You’ll have to wait to see my goods though man, they’re protected by lasers so no funny business!” Braden joked, finding the towel that was, just like his pants, thrown over the desk chair.

“Oh for crying out loud...”

“Ha! I’m teasing yah, man,” Braden said, silently hoping his joke hadn’t hit a nerve.

“Gay shit aside, you could walk around this room butt-naked, and it wouldn’t bother me,” Zack replied, noticing Braden’s sudden defence. “I was on the swim team for years back in Highschool and getting used to bare butts and pee-pees was part of the whole thing.”

“Haha, pee-pee,” Braden giggled, making Zack roll his eyes at the childish chuckles.

“That being said...” Zack continued, trying to ignore the stifled laughter, “I’m still a bit shy myself sometimes but couldn’t care less about others.”

“Honestly man, I’m actually pretty comfortable with you so far. I’d probably be walking around here in my boxers, too, if we had the damn heat fixed.”

“Dude just go hit the showers and warm up! If it makes you feel any better, I’ll guard the door with my life,” Zack said, offering a courteous nod as if Braden was some sort of Prince.

“These crown jewels are very precious; I’ll need your word that you promise to protect that door and make sure nobody penetrates our walls.”

“Bro... just go for a fucking shower,” Zack sighed, trying to banish the dangerous image of Braden’s crowned jewels from his mind. “I’ll give you a head start in there, so you have your privacy, and I can set up the TV, maybe we could just hang out and watch some shitty movie or something?”

“Well... it’s tempting,” Braden said, pausing for a moment with a finger on his lip. “What you got in mind?”

“At this point, I don’t even care. We can just flip through the channels and see if something comes up that catches our interest.”

“Alright, you’ve twisted my arm,” Braden shrugged, acting like this was the toughest decision of his life. “I’m down, then maybe tomorrow we can team up and tackle this whole college thing together?”

“Deal,” Zack said, as Braden gathered his things and left for the showers.

The TV certainly wasn't the biggest, it would have been better suited fixed to the wall, but they didn't have a bracket for that... and it would do for just the two of them. You can't complain about an old TV that cost 50 bucks from a garage sale.

Zack finished setting up the TV reasonably quickly, the only issue was trying to angle it perfectly, so it worked for both beds. With some time still left to kill, he decided that he might as well get some shower prep in while he waited for Braden to return.

In the midst of routing through his bags for a specific shower gel he couldn't find the previous day, Braden emerged from the shower and entered the room with a relaxed sigh. "Dude, you called it. That shower helped a lot! I feel so much better!"

Zack's eyes travel upward and become transfixed on Braden as his wet skin glistens under the light. He didn't get a chance to truly appreciate his body yesterday, but now he was taking it all in and couldn't tear his eyes away.

"Y-yeh! Nice man, glad to hear it!" he stumbled out, shaking away the thoughts now running through his head. "Anybody else in there?"

"Nah. It's all you, man. You get the TV working?" Braden asked, pointing at the rather small black box.

"Yep, should be good to go. Looks like they have a decent cable package, too; so we got options," Zack replied, handing Braden the remote so he could flick through the channels.

"Sweet, wonder if wrestling's on?" Braden asked, more to himself than to Zack. Throwing himself down on his bed, still wrapped up in his towel, he repeatedly clicked with his eyes fixed firmly onto the TV.

Zack stood at the doorway for a second, staring back at Braden as he absently smirked and pursed his lips, finally finding the channel he was searching for. His back was still wet, tiny droplets of water dotted around clinging to his smooth skin. The way he was laying on the bed with his legs in the air, the towel had lifted slightly revealing more to the crook of Braden's back.

As Zack's eyes trailed down to the endearing dimples, chattering from further down the corridor snapped him out of his reverie and pulled him back into the harsh reality. Thankful that Braden

was too transfixed on the wrestling match to notice, Zack slipped out of the room quietly and sauntered casually down to the showers.

It was quiet in there alone and reminded Zack of his first day at college, before Braden, and the rest of the student body arrived. While the lack of eye candy was a sure miss, Zack did kind of miss having Braden in here just to make it seem a little less creepy and industrial.

The lighting was creepy, especially when in the room alone. They flickered to an inconsistent rhythm of their own, bathing the room in random flashes of white light. Zack didn't want to keep Braden waiting, so he jumped under the water and showered quickly, trying to ignore the horror film scene he was currently in.

Jumping out, he wrapped the towel around his waist and ventured back to the room with his clothes bundled up under his armpit. Opening the door, he noticed Braden was in the same position as before but with his head face down into the sheets.

"Jesus, do you have narcolepsy?" he said, startling Braden upright. He looked around with squinted eyes, rubbing them vigorously to rid him of the floating lights that took over his vision.

"Heh, I'm just chillin man. I didn't crash yet," Braden said, seeming to suddenly remember that he was just in his towel. Zack noticed the sudden panic in his eyes and outwardly sighed.

"Bro, chill out. Look, I'll turn around," he said, shuffling on the spot to face the door.

"Thanks, man, I just got too into my show. Forgot that I needed to change."

They spend the next few hours watching TV together. Flipping through various sports channels, sitcoms and finally settling on a movie. The majority of the stuff would probably rot anybody's brains, and Zack can practically hear his IQ dropping by a few points. Soon enough, the daylight fades, and the boys laugh and talk into the night.

Zack launched forward in bed, the sound of his alarm scaring the ever-living shit out of him. Like Déjà vu had grown incorporeal arms and bitch slapped him across the face. His heart thundered

in his chest until he's able to finally realize where he is. "I just can't..." he groans, looking at the time on his phone and begrudgingly throwing it to one side.

"You good?" Braden asked, rolling over in his bed to face Zack.

"Yeah, just not feeling this whole class thing today. Think I may stay back."

"I feel ya. I don't have much of a choice, I've been struggling with this stuff and probably should go," Braden sighed, annoyed that he was finding his classes harder than he thought he would.

"But seriously dude, you can't just lay there all day. You said we'd figure this college shit out together, that means getting your ass to class too," he chuckled.

"Fuuuuuuuuck, why you gotta be right?" Zack groaned, but managed to drag his carcass out of bed. "I'll do this for you if you promise to stop snoring all night," he chuckled, winking at Braden cheekily.

"I don't snore!" Braden yelled back at him, throwing a discarded sock at the door as Zack retreated from the room for an early morning pee.

By the time he gets back, Braden's already left for the day. There's a note left on the desk with messy handwriting that Zack could barely read, it seemed to have been written in a rush.

Gone to Class. Catch you later -B
☺

It's a simple note, one that really didn't need writing. Of course, Zack would see Braden after class, they live in the same dorm room. But still, it was a sweet gesture that caused a weightless sensation in Zack's chest.

With a childish spring in his step, Zack walked to class in peaceful bliss. Despite not wanting to get up and leave his bed, the fresh air was nice and gave him a chance to clear his head and prep for the day. It was only a few days into college life, and he could feel himself settling into

the routine... or maybe that's just complacency, after all, he wouldn't have gotten up at all if it wasn't for Braden.

Sitting at the back of the room once again, Zack settled into another day of class. It was mostly review shit, which he found to be astronomically dull. For him, it felt like he was back in high school. He fakes interest and stumbles when answering a question just to give the instructor a sense of accomplishment when he corrects him. Zack chuckled to himself, everyone needs to feel useful every now and then.

The class finally concluded with a collective sigh as the instructor talks of an upcoming paper as if it was a prophecy. Not wanting to get squashed in the stampede of students that rush to the doors, Zack held back in his seat to check his phone.

For some reason, he was expecting to see a text from Braden. When he hadn't received one, his chest grew heavy for a moment, before realizing that they hadn't actually swapped numbers. Thankful that no one could call him out for being such an idiot, he pocketed his phone and made his way towards the door.

Just as he reached the exit, a tall man walked through grumbling under his breath and holding a broom as if it was a sword. Their eyes lock for a moment of awkward silence, until the man's face twists in frustration, "ugh, class is over kid. You need to get out of here, no squatters. I need to clean up after you bastards."

"Wow, bitter much?" Zack said, raising his brow at the guy's attitude. He had scraggly ginger hair that looked as if someone had quickly run a hand through it, but he likely just woke up like that, pulled on his blue janitor overalls and came to work.

"Easy kid... watch your smart mouth. You need to leave though, it's a liability for me to clean while people are in here," he says, somewhat calmer and more relaxed after the sudden introduction.

"Eh, sorry sir... maybe we got off on the wrong foot. I wasn't trying to be a smartass," Zack apologized, hoping he didn't make an enemy so early into the school year.

"Look, kid, I really don't care one way or the other. Regardless of whether we're best buds, you still need to leave," he says, gesturing to the door for Zack to make his exit.

“Wait... you don’t happen to be the maintenance guy do ya?” Zack suddenly asked, the thought of his arctic room popping into his head.

“Oh, wow! You really do belong in college! You’re observant as hell, here I thought this disguise would fool everyone...”

“Look, you don’t have to be all sarcastic. I’m just trying to find someone to talk to about the heat in my room, it doesn’t seem to be working,” Zack replied pointedly, over the guy’s attitude.

“Christ, it’s always something with you kids. Fucking millennials...”

“Sir, I’m really not trying to be disrespectful. I just wanted to know how to get it fixed and wasn’t really sure where to start or who to talk to,” Zack repeated, hoping he would soften up and help him out. “You just happened to be the first person I saw that may know, that’s all... I wasn’t trying to offend you or be a dick.”

Silence returns as they stare at one another again. It’s weird, almost like the guy was assessing Zack and scanning him from head to toe, trying to find an ulterior motive of some sort. “Look, sir, sorry for bothering you. I’ll just look elsewhere, thanks anyway, I appreciate your time. Hope you have a nice day,” Zack said with a courteous smile, before heading for the door.

“Hold on kid...” the guy called back with a heavy sigh, resting his broom against the wall so he could stand **straight**. “Most of the kids around here act all preppy and holier than thou... especially around most of us maintenance guys. We don’t see too many people politely ask for stuff, you kinda get used to holding your own. I have a smart mouth, so I use it.”

“Understandable, kids are dicks,” Zack agreed, shrugging his shoulders like this was just a fact of life. “I figured that out on the grade school playground during kickball... God, I hated kickball.”

“Yeh, kickball sucks ass,” he replied, shaking unwanted grade school memories from his mind.

“Look, to get stuff fixed around here you have to put in a maintenance form. It’s on the school website, a bunch of click down menus and stuff,” he started, peering around Zack to make sure nobody was listening from the hallway outside. “I probably shouldn’t be telling you this, but it’s a waste of time. You could probably just do it yourself, we’re usually busy as hell, and it can take us weeks to get to nonessential jobs like that.”

"I tried that last night, but no luck. Same with my roommate, we're both kinda hopeless at this type of stuff," Zack admitted, not wanting to tinker around with electronics.

"It's honestly not that hard. If it's really that cold, I can probably walk you through the process if you want."

"Sure, it beats spending the next few weeks with the penguins," Zack chuckled. The guy began to explain how to fix it, until eventually Zack felt like he was armed with the knowledge and ancient secrets of maintenance. "I really suck at mechanical stuff, but you seem to be a good teacher. Think I can give it a decent shot now."

"You're alright, kid. Here... take this screwdriver. It's not hard to adjust, just don't tell 'em where you got it from."

"Got what?" Zack replied with a blank stare, quickly pocketing the screwdriver.

"Good answer. Let me know if you have any other problems."

"Will do, thank you, sir."

"Call me Ernie," he said, holding up his hands and squinting at the word sir.

"Will do. Thank you, Ernie. Have a good one," Zack waved, leaving the classroom to rush back to his dorm to try out his new toy.

Tinkering takes up the majority of his day, but the room begins to get slightly less cold, and a comforting warmth begins to hug their place. Ernie's instructions were simple and easy to follow, Zack set a reminder on his phone to seek him out and say thank you.

Drenched in sticky sweat, Zack grabbed a towel and headed for the showers. It's been nearly two weeks since he last worked out, and if using a simple screwdriver is causing him to break a sweat, then he's more out of shape than he thought.

With no windows in the shower room, he was once again greeted by a scene from Silent Hill. Flickering lights, chipped white tiles that were unevenly placed down and a corner completely drowned in darkness; all served to build apprehension and give the sense that you weren't ever alone in the room. It would be pointless to log this as a job on the college's website; like Ernie said, it would take weeks to fix. Knowing he'd likely need more than a screwdriver to fix the lights, Zack wondered if Ernie could help walk him through fixing those too.

The bathroom was empty right now, and the frosted glass wall came into view. Zack shakes his head, finding the entire thing pointless. Like Braden said, once you're in there, it's pretty useless when a guy's standing inches away from you. Stripping down to his birthday suit, he hit the shower letting the warm water soothe his body.

Once clean, he headed back to the dorm room and checked his phone. Braden should be back soon, judging by the time. It was quiet without him, not that he was loud. But Zack felt like it was just empty without him like something was missing. Pulling on his underwear, he sprawled out on the bed, hoping Braden would get back sooner rather later.

"Fuck me sideways, today has been a day..." Braden groaned, suddenly bursting through the door as if conjured by magic.

"Sup man?" Zack chuckled, catching Braden's eye as he kicked off his shoes and threw down his books.

"Nada man, just another day behind me. Tired... you?" he groaned, spreading out his arms like an eagle and falling down face-first onto his bed.

"Hey..." Zack smiled sheepishly, sitting upright and crossing his legs.

"Hey..." Braden replied, turning his head so that his cheek was squashed into the mattress.

"Wanna do anything?" he asked, rocking back and forth with raised brows.

"Wow, you must've been really bored..." Braden laughed, before finding the strength to push himself up. "I'm kinda hungry, I didn't get any lunch. Wanna grab some food?"

"Sure, I'll just get dressed," Zack jumps up, pulling on his pants and a hoodie.

Their adventure across campus to the cafeteria doesn't take them as long, now that they've become more comfortable with their surroundings. When they enter, it isn't all that crowded, but the noise from the kitchen staff makes it difficult for them to talk across the table. "Jesus, it's loud as fuck in here today," Braden groaned, rubbing his temples feeling disorientated. "I seriously feel like there should be an ordinance for the amount of noise coming out of that kitchen."

"Right? For like no good reason too," Zack agreed, glancing over to the kitchen to see one lady brandishing a ladle like a lance.

"Like, the entire point of us coming here to eat together is to fucking talk... to like, get to know each other and stuff."

"It's almost like they're back there fighting with fucking metal trays or some shit," Zack chuckled, seeing the lady dash from one end of the kitchen to the other flailing her arms like an octopus.

"Or someone's paid them to just sit back there and perpetually drop noisy things," Braden groaned, pushing his tray forward and shaking his head.

"You done?" Zack asked, gazing down at his half-eaten meal.

"Yeh, this place is giving me a migraine, I need some fresh air."

"No problem, we can take the long way back," Zack offered a warm smile, taking one last bite of his burger before heading out with Braden.

"Ah, that's more like it," he sighed as the cool air hit his face. "Why the fuck doesn't our dorm have self-catering, I'd kill for a stove man."

"You cook?" Zack asked curiously, not taking Braden for the chef type.

“Nothing fancy, but I make a mean omelette. I’ll make it for you sometime,” he offered, before suddenly pouting remembering something. “We spent ages last night flicking through endless channels of cooking shows, and you know what sucks?”

“Besides the fact that technology hasn’t figured out a way for us to smell the shit they’re cooking?”

“Ok, that would be dope,” Braden paused, letting his thoughts drift to the wondrous possibilities, “but no... like I used to cook with my grandma and stuff. Well, ok, she used to cook, and I would basically make a fucking mess.”

“Heh, I used to do that too,” Zack smiled at the fond images of his childhood returning to him.

“But like, I miss it. Watching these shows makes me wanna mess around in the kitchen, but we don’t fucking have one! It’s pretty lame that we have cooking channels, but not a fucking kitchen! Just saying...”

Braden’s cooking related rambling continued for the entire walk back to the dorm. The pros and cons of using a toaster, whether it’s morally appropriate to boil water in the microwave as it makes the kettle using English cry, and how exactly do you get jam inside of a doughnut.

All philosophical questions to put Socrates to shame. By the time they reached their dorm room, Zack wasn’t sure how he managed it, but Braden had somehow kept him engaged in a pointless conversation that he’d otherwise have tuned out from. It was something about his voice, it was soft, almost sweet to listen to.

As they entered the room, Braden went **straight** for the bag beside his bed and pulled out numerous textbooks and note pads. “Ugh... I can’t believe I have this much homework that needs doing.”

“What? No way, I’m putting my foot down man. You are not studying tonight,” Zack said, folding his arms firmly. “I legit had a dream last night, and I’m pretty sure it was in APA format...”

“That’s fucked up.”

"I can't even remember anything past that! Makes me feel like I took Ambien or some shit..." Zack explained, taking the books from Braden's hands and placing them to one side. "We are chilling out tonight. You. Me. That motherfucking, cheap-ass, garage sale TV. No questions."

"Wow, intense speech," Braden chuckled, allowing Zack to take the remainder of the books before slumping down onto his own bed. "I do feel a bit cranky tonight too, though. You're such a bad influence, but it's probably not a bad idea to relax."

"Me? A bad influence? Dude, you're cranky as hell! You spent the entire walk home complaining about fucking kitchens and cooking shows! You need a nap."

"Fine, fine. Put something on the stupid TV," Braden waved him off, getting into a comfortable position at the foot of his bed.

They end up catching some action flick that held Zack's attention reasonably well. He was never one for movies or network TV. Aside from the typical reduction of profanity—a travesty in of itself—but the damn commercials are distracting and interrupt the flow of the movie.

At some point, he rolls over and notices that the sun has gone down, and the room is dark. They both crashed and fell asleep in their clothes. Kicking off his socks and jeans, Zack pulled his shirt over his head and threw them into his washing basket, which was actually just an old Ikea bag discarded at the foot of his bed.

He glanced over towards Braden, still fully clothed and lightly snoring. Quietly tiptoeing to the side of his bed, Zack assessed a way to get Braden into a more comfortable position without waking him up. Despite Braden himself stating he could sleep through being mugged, as Zack attempted to manoeuvre his hand discreetly under his back, he began to squirm and wriggle at the touch. Silently removing his hands, Zack grabbed the pillows from the top of the bed and tucked them underneath Braden as carefully as possible, not wanting to wake the sandy-haired boy.

Flopping down onto his bed Zack stared over at Braden for a moment. Encapsulated by how beautiful he looked even when asleep, his heart began to flutter again like it had that morning. A simple gesture, a simple note... was that really all it took for his emotions to go into overdrive?

It didn't even say anything profound, nothing of magnitude. But perhaps by being so simple, by being so pointless and unnecessary, it showed that Braden cared about Zack, enough to leave a note because he felt bad for leaving without saying goodbye.

Zack laid in bed for the next few hours, his thoughts racing and his eyes darting back to Braden. He finally succumbed to the lullaby of sleep, welcoming any dreams he'd be transported to, and hoping that Braden was there with him.

Chapter 1 Beginnings - Part III

The first couple of weeks pass like a monotonous metronome counting each beat of the supine story unfolding. College, for the most part, was boring for Zack. Fumbling through life trying to remain in the background left little opportunity to make new friends and he wasn't overly interested in any of his classmates.

Despite everything that college had to offer, there was only one thing he looked forward to, the moment when Braden walked into their dorm room at the end of each day. Zack's classes were much closer to their dorm building than Braden's were, so he often got back twenty to thirty minutes before his new blonde-haired companion.

Each day Zack would pretend to bury his head in a random textbook he had no intention of actually reading, just so he could take subtle glances as Braden unwound from a stressful day. From the way he would take a deep breath after entering the room, to how he would kick off his shoes and stretch out his arms which then pulled up his shirt just enough to see the small tuft of hair trailing down beneath his waistband.

It took one innocent note and fourteen monotonous days for Zack to become utterly captivated by Braden. Some days they would talk about nonsense until the early hours of the morning, and others would be spent in silence as they studied and completed class assignments. But every conscious thought drifted back to Braden. His plump lips, his sandy blonde hair, his beautiful tanned skin... Zack couldn't pull himself away from the boy. He was a secret siren, calling out to Zack through hums in the night unknowingly casting a spell.

Zack had only been back ten minutes and was already noticing how quiet and lonely the room was without Braden. Not that he's loud, but it just felt empty without his company. Plus, he'd spent weeks trying to fix the thermostat and he finally did something to fix the heat... not that he knew exactly what it was he had done.

Suddenly the door slid open and Braden trudged through with a sigh. He carelessly tossed his bag over his desk chair and kicked off his shoes. Wiping away a bead of sweat from his forehead and stretching out his aching arms, Braden subconsciously pulled up his shirt exactly how Zack had imagined moments earlier. "Sup man?" he asked, trying to act cool and avoid looking at Braden's happy trail.

“Nada, another day behind...” he sighed, taking a moment to just breathe and unwind. Braden closed his eyes letting his body relax but quickly scrunched his face realizing that something felt different. “Dude... is it warm in here or did I get Zika?”

“It’s totally Zika. Did you try googling your symptoms? I know that always makes me feel better...” Zack replied sarcastically, remembering his mother doing the same thing whenever she got the slightest cough.

“Ha! I know, right? Fucking internet always gives you the worst possible diagnosis...” Braden chuckled, but then narrowed his eyes walking over to the thermostat curiously. “Don’t dodge the question man, did you fix the fucking heat?”

“I did actually, and I feel pretty boss about it too,” Zack replied, folding his arms and kicking his feet up onto the bed. “I actually met one of the maintenance guys. Dude was kind of an ass at first but he gave me a screwdriver and walked me through the process. It’s taken me a few weeks... but surprise! We have heat!”

“Oh my God, this is amazing!” Braden exclaimed, throwing his hands in the air thankful that he no longer had to sleep in socks and a hoodie. “Dude. You... are... a... fucking... BEAST!”

“My first Do-It-Yourself project. I feel like I’m adulting, I’ll be flipping houses before you know it.”

“Heh, I’m gonna crack up if I see you sportin’ one of those fanny pack/apron things with hammers ‘n shit hanging off it,” Braden laughed, strapping an imaginary belt around his waist and parading around.

“You’ll regret it when that’s ALL I’m wearing around here!” Zack said, wiggling his eyebrows daringly.

“Oh my God... yeah that shit would be crazy. Not gonna lie though, I’d almost pay to see that.”

“Be careful what you wish for...” Zack leaned forward, his daring expression growing more intense.

“I’m not worried about you getting that comfortable with projects anytime soon,” Braden shrugged, before sitting down on his bed across from Zack. “Besides, this project only used a screwdriver.”

"Well, who knows. Maybe if I track down that maintenance guy again he'll show me the ropes. Give me a job or something. He did say they were pretty busy..." Zack trailed off, thinking of his college debt and how much it was actually costing him.

"I wouldn't hold my breath," Braden replied dismissively, rolling over to lie on his front and scroll through his phone.

"Yeah, me neither. I may look him up though," Zack said to himself, making a mental note to check in with Ernie to see if he had any other jobs for him.

"Well, there's no sense in wasting time. I'm getting out of these clothes to enjoy the heat now that you've fixed it. Hawaii, here I come!" Braden cheered, wriggling out of his hoodie and *slacker* shirt.

Zack tried not to stare, but Braden's tanned skin glistened under the light with sweat. Running his hands through his sandy beach curled hair, Braden slid out of his jeans and tossed them aside. His boxer shorts were baggy, and not at all what Zack expected. "So does it bother you if I walk around the room like this?" Braden asked, slightly embarrassed that he hadn't asked before stripping.

"No way man, you do you. Hell, I sleep in my underwear and I didn't really ask you if you were ever comfortable with it."

"It doesn't bother me, man. You good... well, long as I don't see you over there with a tent in your pants."

"Well, that shit happens man... and you're one to talk. You're actually wearing a tent!" Zack exclaimed, pointing out how baggy and large Braden's underwear was compared to his small frame.

"Don't judge man, this shit is comfy as fuuuuck!" Braden fired back, narrowing his eyes. "I don't like tight underwear man, hate feeling cramped and squashed down there. How do you wear that shit bro?"

"Remember, I told you I was on the swim team back in high school. Years of tight speedos kinda get you used to the feeling," Zack replied, suddenly feeling slightly defensive. Truth was,

he never really felt like that about tight underwear, it always felt more comfortable than having everything swinging about.

“Oh yeah, that’s right. I keep forgetting you were a swimmer,” Braden said nodding his head. He then suddenly pointed right at Zack with an accusing finger. “I can’t believe you still have that hoodie on as warm as it is in here.”

“Well, figured if you walked in and I was butt naked, shit would just get all kinds of awkward.”

“That’s probably true...” Braden trailed off, before shrugging and looking directly back at Zack. “So, boxer party?”

“Well, you know I’m a boxer brief kinda guy. Thus, my shit’s a bit tighter than those parachute shorts you got on. You ok with that?”

“Meh, whatever. Not like I haven’t seen you in ‘em before...” Braden shrugged, ignoring Zack’s playful attempt at teasing.

“Cool, I’m game...” Zack said, hopping up off the bed and dressing down to his underwear.

“Better?” he asked, throwing his arms out to display his rather tight black boxer briefs.

“Great, I don’t feel so pervy now,” Braden chuckled, kicking back on his bed so his back was against the wall.

“Heh, the dorm room is now a pants-free zone I guess!” Zack chirped, trying to keep his gaze up so Braden wouldn’t notice his wandering eyes.

“Yep, place is like a Junior High girls’ slumber party...” Braden said, poking fun at them.

“I don’t think girls actually do that,” Zack said with a raised eyebrow, remembering back to all the teen dramas that would dominate television. “Besides, no pillow fights in our underwear... that’s just fucking gay.”

“Ha! Agreed,” Braden laughed awkwardly, still unsure how to navigate the subject sensibly.

A few hours passed before Zack began to notice his stomach growling. A deep thunderous roar rumbled through the dorm room, but Braden didn't stir up from his phone. It was the pinging and cutting of several bedsprings that finally forced Braden off his bed. It was already getting late into the evening and neither of them had eaten anything all day, college life was relentless... and there was very little time to actually stop and process what was going on.

Venturing across campus to the cafeteria wasn't as eventful as it had been previously. Zack finally found the quickest route which took just ten minutes. To think they had spent nearly an hour searching before just seemed ridiculous, but they had... and were now thankful it was just a pebble throw away.

"Ugh, those beds fucking suck..." Braden finally said, arching his back to crack it. Zack sat across from him, poking at his risotto that looked less like food and more like a bowl of cat puke.

"What kinda bed did you have at home?" Zack asked, not estranged to a bedspring or two popping into his back.

"Nothing really special but it was a queen-size, so definitely a lot more room," Braden replied, taking a bite out of his much more appetizing hotdog. "There's nothing worse than an uncomfortable bed because it fucks up your back and that's just not what I'm about."

"What are you about?" Zack asked, the question feeling a little more direct than intended.

"Comfortable beds man, bouncy enough to sleep in and big enough so my feet don't hang over the edge... not that I've ever had that problem," Braden corrected, knowing he wasn't the tallest guy around.

"Nah, you're a nice size," Zack said simply, not looking up from his monstrous risotto as he spoke. The silence that followed eventually made him peer up to see Braden watching him with a raised eyebrow before he realized what he'd said. "Ok yeah, that sounded pretty gay... I'm gonna just throw this shit away and pretend like that never happened," he said, excusing himself from the table and dumping his food in the garbage.

Zack needed to find something else to focus on; anything else. Braden was constantly on his mind and the last thing he wanted was to come off weird or creepy. Despite living together for a few weeks now, they barely knew each other. Zack wanted to know everything about Braden.

What his room back home looked like, his highschool life and even his family. There was so much he wanted to know, but so much he couldn't ask in fear of sounding intrusive or stalkerish. "Hey, I'm gonna head back and have a shower. Been a long day," Zack finally said, walking back over to the table. He stood to the side, slightly keeping his distance.

"No problem, I'm almost done anyways," Braden moved to get up, but Zack shook his head and pointed down at the unfinished hotdog. There was over half of it left and Braden hadn't even touched his fries yet.

"Don't be stupid man, you're nowhere near finished," Zack said. "Eat up, growing boys need their food," he joked, hoping that would cloud over his earlier comment.

"Ha! Ok man, just don't get lost," Braden laughed, going back to his meal. His eyes remained fixed on Zack as he left the cafeteria, still unsure what to make of his new roommate.

Zack trudged back to the dorms slowly, hoping the silence brought on by the dimming skies would help focus his mind. His attempts of derailing his train of thought continued through the courtyard, up the stairs, and to their room as Braden's face flashed incessantly in his mind.

Draping a towel over his shoulder, he headed for the showers hoping that nobody else would be there. Poking his head quietly through the door, he sighed in relief at the empty room inside. Discarding his towel on one of the wooden benches, he noticed a mop leaning up against the wall that seemed to be calling his name.

With an absent mind, Zack held the mop in his hands for a moment before sliding it up against the door and through the handle to prevent anyone else from coming in. He needed a moment to breathe in peace... a space to find solace without fear of interruption or judgment.

Turning on the hot water he let the room fill up with steam, ignoring the flickering lights and SAW like walls. Stripping down he let the water run over his tanned skin, not caring that the heat was a little too warm. Within minutes his skin turned red but it was the distraction he needed from Braden, from his thoughts.

Eventually, the heat became too much and Zack turned off the water. Opening his eyes, he hadn't realized just how much steam had filled the room. He could barely see an inch in front of

his hands. Stumbling over to his towel, he wrapped it around his waist and sat down on the bench waiting for the steam to clear.

Thinking back on his day Zack began to sink into the vapor abyss, allowing the mist to cloud over the image of Braden. He woke up that day already feeling antisocial, not in a serial-killer kinda way, but just a general lack-of-desire-to-be-around-others kinda way.

He had hoped a bunch of people would skip class so it wasn't overly crowded. When he finally did reach the classroom, it was almost entirely empty, and Zack had to take a second to make sure he wasn't in an episode of the Twilight Zone or some shit. He caught one of the students muttering something about class being canceled for the day and he silently cheered thanking the higher powers above. Wonders never cease, and all that proverbial nonsense.

Sat in the void, Zack thought back on the empty classroom and realized that it was at this point in his semi-adult life that he made an interesting discovery about school and college in general.

No one cares...

In his mind, he looked around at the sea of bobbing heads and realized that he's just a number. While responsible for classroom attendance, there's no real accountability. If he chose to stay in bed that morning, life would have endured. Class would have continued and people would have gone about their lives.

Surprisingly, the internal argument with his distracted mind allowed time to flow quickly, and eventually, the steam had all but disappeared leaving Zack in isolation once more.

Collecting himself, Zack made his way back to the dorm room with his clothes bundled up under his armpit. He wasn't sure just how long he'd spent in the shower but it must've been quite some time. Braden was already back and laying on his bed in his underwear. "How was your shower?" he asked, looking up from his phone with a smile.

And just like that, the butterflies began fluttering again... Zack's chest tightened and he wasn't sure what to say without it fumbling out incoherently.

“Yeh, it was warm...” he said, wincing at how awful of a response that was. “Didn’t take you long though, you’ve already stripped back down to your tent boxers!” he joked, trying to change the topic back around to Braden.

“Yeah man, I’m loving this heat!” he exclaimed, stretching out his arms and legs sinking into the bed with a grin. “What do you wanna do tonight? I’m so overstudying, just wanna enjoy this heat while it lasts.”

“TV night?” Zack replied simply, feeling somewhat self-conscious that he was standing in just a towel. Sure his underwear was both smaller and tighter, but there was something more intimate about a towel... something more revealing. Any second it could unravel and leave him swinging in the breeze in front of his **straight** roommate, which would be enough embarrassment to kill him.

“Sure, I’m down...” Braden said, barely paying Zack’s near nudeness any attention.

After a couple of seconds fumbling around, Zack finally managed to pull his underwear on from under his towel. He then sprawled out on his bed with his head resting against the far wall. Both boys spent the rest of the night watching TV and further rotting their brains. Sharing a few laughs even though some of the programming sucked, but for Zack... it was cool to just hang out. “Dude, these medication commercials kill me,” Braden chuckled, shaking his head in disbelief.

“I know, right? It’s like 30 seconds of stock footage...” Zack added, sure he’d seen the same clip of the woman looking distressed in a cleaning advert 10 seconds earlier.

“Bro, the shit these people are doing has nothing to do with the drug! Why is she making a roast Zack... why!?”

“I wanna know what the target audience is for this channel! Like all they have are lawyers begging you to sue people for the medications you take and then... BAM more medication commercials,” Zack laughed, holding his stomach to stop it from bouncing up and down.

“Don’t forget sad animals that need adoption,” Braden pouted, glancing over to Zack with puppy dog eyes batting his lashes innocently.

“Christ, now that shit makes me need medication. I don’t know what kind of medication, but something...”

“Right?” Braden giggled, rolling back over to bury his head into his blanket to stifle snorts of laughter.

“Oh, God...” Zack murmured, gripping Braden’s attention. “Not this bathtub in the field commercial again! Who the fuck carries this shit out their anyway?”

“Oh shit, that reminds me...” Braden said suddenly as if he’d forgotten to throw his golden ring into Mordor. “I was leaving the cafeteria earlier and you said you used to swim, right?”

“Yeah, back in high school I was decent,” Zack nodded, intrigued with where this was going.

“So it looks like they have a swim team that’s recruiting. I saw a flier outside on the bulletin board, and thought that would be great for you,” Braden grinned, noticing Zack’s eyes light up at the mention of a swim team.

“No shit? There’s a pool! I’m down, I mean... it’s been a while but I may be up for trying out for sure!” Zack exclaimed, excitement ringing in his voice for the first time since being at college.

“This is a bigger school than I came from so there’s probably a lot more competition.”

“Bah, you’ll be fine,” Braden shrugged, shaking off the hint of doubt coming from Zack. “Not that I know for sure cause you could sink like a rock for all I know... but dammit I’m trying to be supportive!”

“Heh, thanks, man. I may look around, any specific requirements for it?”

“I don’t remember, didn’t pay a lot of attention to it cause I don’t know shit about swimming. I just saw the flier and figured I’d mention it to yah.”

“Cool, thanks... I may check it out then. See what I can find tomorrow,” Zack said, trying to think if he’d packed his swim gear or not.

At some point, after watching several more hours of shit TV, they both fall asleep with the soft hum muttering to itself through the night. The extremely loud bathtub commercial that Zack

hated with a vengeance began to blur out of the TV at an ungodly hour, rocking him awake in a fit of sweat.

Angrily clicking the off button on the TV remote, he threw his head back against the pillow with a heavy groan. He hated being woken up in the middle of the night, it was the worst feeling... being ripped from your dreams by something so sudden.

Braden's quiet snores soon caught his attention, and Zack watched silently as his chest rose up and down softly. It was weird, the feelings that began to stir for Braden. He didn't know how to act, what to say... or who to be around him.

He looked peaceful, blissfully unaware of the effect he was having on Zack. That stupid note and toothy grin were captivating... enticing Zack to delve deep into his thoughts and emotions. Falling for his roommate was never the plan, it was the total opposite of what Zack wanted. College was supposed to be a new start, building up the man he wanted to be and making friends that he could finally feel comfortable around.

Zack knew now, that couldn't be Braden. With how he felt over a simple kind gesture... how he felt when Braden walked into a room. They barely knew each other and yet, Zack couldn't wait to see him each day.

Flipping over to face the wall, Zack tried his best to drown out his thoughts. But he lay with his hands over his ears and eyes scrunched tightly through the early hours of the morning, only falling asleep when the birds started to sing.

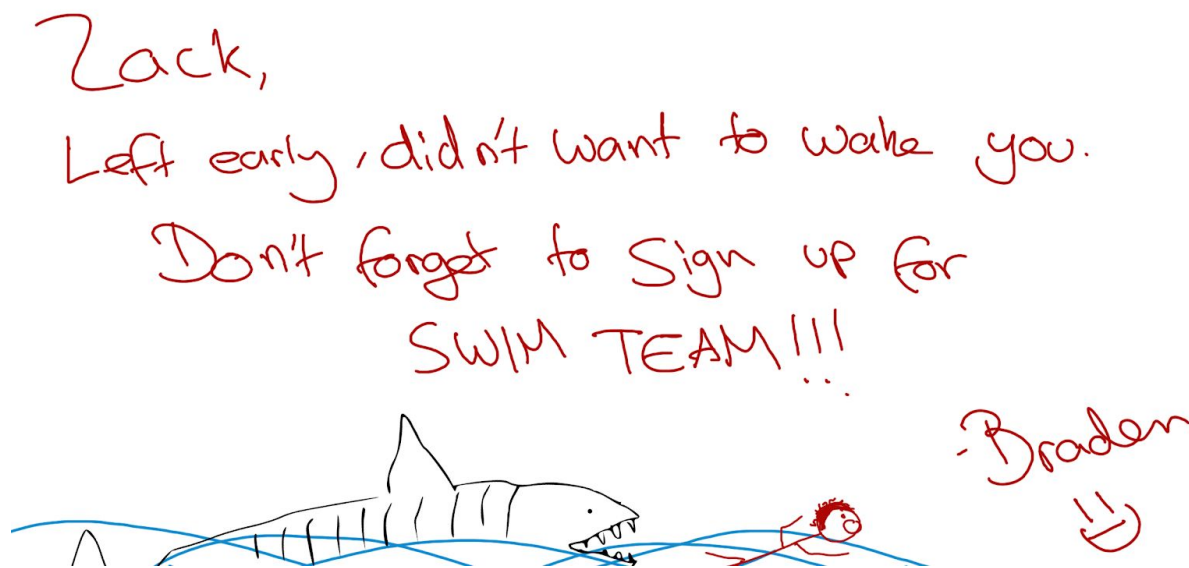
When Zack woke the next morning, it was already way past his alarm. Trying to find his phone through squinted eyes he finally flicked it on noticing it was nearly lunchtime. Braden had already left for the day, leaving his bed messy and unmade as usual.

Taking a moment to wake up, Zack swung his legs over the side of the bed and began to get ready. There was no use in showing up to class halfway through the day, what would be the

point? Instead, Zack decided to rummage through his bags until he finally found his swimming gear.

A pair of tight yellow speedos tucked neatly at the bottom of his suitcase that he'd pushed underneath his bed. They were part of his high school team's uniform, the colors signifying their school. Zack presumed that they would be suitable for the time being, and if he really needed to buy a new pair he could ask Ernie if there were any part-time jobs available around campus.

Packing the tiny yellow speedo into his bag, Zack searched for his notepad in case he needed something to write on. He finally spotted it on Braden's desk, open with a red pen splayed out on the paper without its top.



"Ugh, why does he do this to me?" Zack sighed, his chest feeling light as if all the air had rushed out of his lungs. Flipping the notepad shut he shoved it into his bag, out of sight out of mind.

It didn't take too long for Zack to finally stumble across the pool. He had a vague idea of the direction from when he and Braden got lost the first few nights and wandered aimlessly through the campus finding all sorts of buildings and complexes.

As the automatic door slid open, Zack's jaw dropped to the floor in awe. The pool was fucking HUGE, way bigger than anything they used back in high school. Chlorine filled the air and the sound of distant splashing echoed through the open space as swimmers raced up and down the length of the pool.

"Hey, can I help you with anything?" a tall boy asked, pulling himself out of the water and walking over to Zack. His lean, tanned body had a sizeable but intricate tattoo displayed across his pecs and down his right arm.

"Erm, yeah..." Zack trailed off, unable to keep his eyes from drifting down the boy's body. "I heard about the swim team and wondered if there was anything around here about sign-ups or tryouts..." he explained, averting his eyes back up to meet the boy's playful gaze.

"You mean that poster?" he pointed out, water dripping from his arm as he pointed to the wall behind Zack. Pinned up was a simple poster that looked like it was designed by a toddler using WordArt for the first time. "Yeah, not my finest work but it gets the message across," he winked, shrugging and taking a step closer.

"It says I need to get a sports physical, where the fuck do I even get that at?" Zack asked, reading the poster intently trying to ignore the boy standing behind him.

"There's a physician's office on campus, not hard to find. Though it can be a bitch to book an appointment... I'd do it sooner rather than later."

"Well, it's definitely something to look into. I'll see if I can track it down, thanks for the help man," Zack said sheepishly, offering his hand.

"Mikhail," the boy replied, taking Zack's hand and shaking it eagerly. "It was nice to meet you, I'll see you around..." he trailed off, waiting expectantly.

"Zack..." Zack replied, feeling a little awkward. It was a weird feeling, he wasn't sure if he felt strange because Mikhail was standing in a tight speedo with his skin glistening under the harsh white lights, or if it was because he'd spent so long out of the pool and away from this environment.

Offering a final warm smile, Zack exited the pool complex rubbing his temple with frustration. How was he supposed to make friends when every nice guy that smiled at him was diverting blood from his head directly down to his pants.

Annoyed, exasperated, infuriated... Zack felt trapped in a prison of self-doubt. The thoughts rushing around in his head shooting waves of uncontrollable emotion through his body, crippling any sort of normal friendship he desired.

Retreating back to the dorms Zack took solace in the shower room, bringing the mop up against the door again to barricade him in isolation. "What the fuck is wrong with me?" he asked, holding his head between his hands fighting furiously with his inner demons.

Suddenly, a familiar face flashed in his mind. His brother... once lost now found, staring back at him through glass eyes. The cold stare of his best friend... his only friend... a harsh reminder that Zack had nobody. After his brother's accident, his parents distanced themselves more than just asunder, that even the concept of family was jaded and shattered. "A number... is that all I am now?" he asked, feeling the inner workings of his mind begin to fall apart.

Staring into the mirror hung up on the wall, Zack hated the boy looking back at him. His stupid vacant expression, his armor of humor, and washed out attire a simple distraction from the fact that he didn't want to be noticed. He didn't want people... he didn't want Braden to see him for who he truly was. But he had suppressed his inner demons for so long that he now couldn't remember what life was like before his brother left.

Buzz* *Buzz

Zack's back pocket rang, his phone ripping him out of his hole of self-pity. "Hello?" he answered, the caller ID showing as unknown.

"Hey man, how'd it go?" Braden's voice rang through, soothing Zack's ears like a soft melody.

"How did what go?" he replied, stepping back from the mirror and walking over towards the glass wall.

"The swim team... did you sign up or what!?" Braden asked excitedly, his voice practically jumping through the phone.

“Fuck, yeah! I stopped by the pool just now actually...”

“Aaaaaaaand...?” Braden trailed off impatiently.

“And I need a sports physical before any sign-ups or tryouts. Damn man, you’re like a pushy parent trying to get your kid to do extracurriculars!” Zack chuckled, but Braden didn’t respond for a moment and instead just breathed heavily down the phone like he was running.

“Yeah sorry man, I’m in a rush. My next class is across campus and I have like, no fucking time to get there so I’m sprinting like crazy!” he exclaimed, before seeming to brace himself for either a large jump or sudden crash. *“Anyways I gotta go man, just wanted to check in. See ya!”*

“Bye,” Zack said to himself, the phone cutting off before he could reply. Shoving it back in his pocket, he brought his hand up to his forehead with a sigh. “What is this guy doing to me...” he muttered.

The mop, unbeknownst to Zack, had slid out from the door handle and was laying flat beside the glass wall. Not paying attention to his footing Zack stepped backward onto the mop, the wooden handle sliding out from underneath which sent him flying back and crashing into the glass wall... shattering it entirely.

Laying in a pool of shards, Zack remained motionless unable to pick himself up from the mess. Only when he felt the trickles of blood running down his arms did he sit up, noticing shards sticking out all over his body. “Fucking great, just what I needed today...” he groaned, picking out the pieces of glass one by one. They weren’t large shards, but enough for Zack to need the First Aid kit hung up on the wall and to cover his body with plasters that were supposedly ‘skin color’.

Picking up the device of betrayal and searching for a store cupboard Zack found the mops accomplice... the bucket. Grabbing a brush and a few trash bags he spent the best part of forty minutes sweeping and mopping until there was no trace of the shattered glass wall.

Remembering how busy Ernie mentioned he was, Zack figured he might as well clean up the rest of the room while he was at it. Wiping down the shower walls and scrubbing old jizz stains off the shower floor, Zack gagged more times than he cared to count. He cleaned out the

lockers and just as he was about ready to call it a day, he noticed a stack of lightbulb boxes in the store cupboard.

As luck would have it, there were enough bulbs to fix the dodgy lighting and the room instantly looked a thousand times more inviting than before. "Place looks hella better," Zack grinned, proud of his work. The creepy music that would play in Zack's head every time he walked in stopped, and now... despite it being a painful accident, the glass wall was gone, opening the room up making it much more breathable.

"Making me wear this stupid fucking thing..." a familiar voice grumbled as the shower room door flung open.

"Hey, Ernie!" Zack greeted warmly, eager to show off his maintenance abilities.

"Well, lookie here. If it isn't my personal hero," Ernie grinned, piecing Zack's handful of trash bags and the clean shower room together. "This place looks great. Kid, what-is-it you kids call people nowadays? A Beast?"

"Ernie, you're making my slang uncomfortable..." Zack said with a raised brow.

"Heh, sorry kid. You kids today don't even know how to use slang. The shit you say doesn't make sense."

"Oh, yeah... you're totally right. We should sooo bring back shit like 'rad' and 'tubular'. That was waaay more contextual," Zack mocked.

"No, now you just sound like a ninja turtle," Ernie laughed, "how old do you think I am anyway?"

"Hmmm....?"

"Yeah, nevermind. You're on my good side, let's not fuck that up," Ernie chuckled, and Zack nodded along agreeing with him. "I'm quite impressed you've managed to get this place cleaned up though, even the lights! Damn boy, you got some skill getting all those in without electrocuting yourself."

“Yeah, it was pretty bad in here,” Zack shrugged, thankful that his jeans and hoodie hid the plethora of plasters covering his arms and legs. “Oh shit, I almost forgot! I got the thermostat working too.”

“Great! That’s another job down that I don’t have to do! Well here, you might as well take this then since you seem to be gaining a knack for this kinda shit,” Earnie said, handing over a spare toolkit.

“I was kinda wondering if you had any more odd jobs and stuff. You said you were busy and I...” Zack began, but Earnie cut him off before he could explain.

“Look, kid. You’re alright, I’ll give ya that. And you’re right... we’re always running behind. But no official jobs are going right now and I can’t exactly pay ya either. You know how much we make? I got a family at home to feed on the pennies they give us to keep shit tip-top.”

“I’m cheap! I promise!” Zack pleaded, clasping his hands together as if praying to Earnie.

“Jeesh... ok kid, tell yah what... it’s not necessarily a better offer but I may have something for ya.”

“Shoot,” Zack grinned, eager to hear him out.

“So we do maintenance but we do janitorial stuff too. Usually, the cleaning gets pushed on the back burner when maintenance projects take longer than expected to finish. So basically, if you can handle some cleaning stuff you’ll probably find shit in about you could make decent cash with.”

“So I keep what I find... no questions asked... and in return, you might teach me a few other tricks in your spare time?” Zack asked, wiggling his eyebrows keen for Earnie to confirm.

“Yup, best I got right now,” he replied with a shrug. “But I’ve found all sorts of shit in here before. Phones, clothing, tools... some other weird shit you don’t even wanna know about...”

“Hmmm, alright I’m down. I’ll give it a try,” Zack agreed, shaking Earnie’s hand to seal the deal.

“Regardless of how long you do it, it’ll help me out, kid. For that, I’m grateful,” Ernie smiled, before picking up his other toolkit and heading for the door. “I’ll see ya around, hope you find some good stuff you can pawn off.”

“Yeh, thanks, Ernie. See ya,” Zack waves, waiting a minute to examine his work once more before heading back to his dorm room.

Conscious not to fall too far behind with classes, Zack spent the rest of his afternoon reading through textbooks and taking notes. As if by clockwork, Braden walked through the door at his usual time, kicking off his shoes and wiping the sweat from his forehead. Hearing him run on the phone earlier gave Zack a little more clarity as to why Braden was always sweaty after class, the poor guy runs around campus all day.

Today, however, Braden kicked off more than just his shoes. His jeans and shirt quickly followed and were tossed carelessly through the air, his jeans nearly hitting Zack square in the face. “Shit man, you about took my eye out,” Zack chuckled, picking up the jeans and throwing them back at Braden.

“Sorry man, I’m just loving this heat!” Braden exclaimed, dropping down onto his bed like a starfish.

“How was your day?” Zack asked, closing his textbook and notepad.

“The hard part’s over but I feel like crap,” Braden exhaled, enjoying the brief relaxation of splaying out in bed. “Should probably go hit the shower though, I stink of sweat.”

“Sounds good, I was thinking about hitting the shower early tonight too,” Zack said, but suddenly realized that he hadn’t washed any of his towels. “Shit, all my towels are damp. I don’t have any fresh ones...” he sighed.

“That’s cool, I have a couple fresh ones still. You can borrow one, just make sure you wash it before you give it back. Don’t want your junk all over my face...” Braden said, chuckling to himself as he tossed a towel over to Zack. “And I’m calling first dibs!”

Braden wrapped a towel around his waist and dashed for the door, exuding a sudden burst of energy Zack wasn’t expecting. He waits a few minutes, giving Braden a head start, before wrapping himself with the fresh cotton towel and heading for the shower.

Opening the door, Zack smiled to himself proud of the work he’d done. The room still smelled of musty balls but at least he could see shit in there now. It was a far cry away from the horror film set he walked into on the first day. A soft humming caught his attention through the steam. Moving past the lockers, Zack peered around the corner to see Braden in the shower. He hadn’t seen Zack come in and stood with his back to the room humming to himself.

Zack quietly walked over to the bench to set down his stuff. Sitting on the bench, he took the opportunity to appreciate the new light and flipped a proverbial middle finger at the wall he accidentally demolished earlier.

Braden’s soft hums soon become louder, beckoning Zack with an enticing melody. Unable to ignore the call, he glanced across to Braden for a brief glimpse but instantly lost the battle of self-control.

Water raced down Braden’s tanned skin, dripping from strands of his hair that hung in front of his face. He placed his right hand up against the wall and arched his back, stretching his muscles and letting the warm water massage into his skin.

“Oh... my... God... that ass,” Zack whispered to himself, biting his lip unable to look away. Braden’s cheeks were sculpted to perfection, a Greek statue come to life. He lathered his body with soap, the suds and bubbles enhancing his features and drawing even more attention to his behind. Zack shifted awkwardly, his dick starting to get hard under the towel.

Suddenly, Braden turned around and they locked eyes. Zack’s heart thumped furiously, terrified of what Braden could be thinking.

“Oh my shitting God, Zack! I didn’t hear you come in!” he exclaimed, keeping his front facing the wall and using his hands to hide his junk.

“My bad, man. I wasn’t trying to be a ninja,” Zack explained, hoping this wasn’t going to create tension between them.

“Dude, I don’t know what happened to the screen in here but there’s no fucking privacy at all anymore. This isn’t cool,” he said, wiping soap and water from his face.

“Yeah, I noticed that when I came in,” Zack replied, trying to act shocked and thankful that the plentiful steam would blend the miscolored plasters to his skin.

“You mind coming back in a few when I get done? I hate to kick you out, but I’m totally not cool with having two of us in here with no screen.”

“Sure, no problem man,” Zack said, keeping his eyes averted from Braden to not make him any more uncomfortable. His dick had gone soft in an instant and didn’t need to try and hide it as he walked out.

Pacing back and forth in the room his heart thumped out of his chest. He couldn’t figure out if it was because he almost got caught staring, or if it was because he was really starting to feel something for Braden. Several minutes of panic went by before the door finally creaked open and Braden walked in sheepishly.

“Er, the showers all yours now man,” Braden said, looking up from the floor to meet Zack’s gaze. “Thanks for waiting, I have no idea what happened to that wall. The privacy sucked in there before but now it’s really bad. I feel like I’m in the fucking army.”

“Yeah, wonder if they’ll put a new one up... it’s really weird it just disappeared,” Zack lied, the act coming painfully natural to him.

“Right? Fucking weird man, hopefully they fix it...” Braden began but lost his train of thought as his eyes narrowed in on Zack’s arms. “Dude, what happened to you? You’re covered in bandaids,” he said, worry thick in his voice as he dove across the room.

“Oh, it’s nothing...” Zack said, panicking and looking around frantically for inspiration. A picture of Braden with his family caught his eye, a family portrait in a nice garden with lots of greenery. “I fell into a thorn bush when I was looking for the pool earlier. Shit got me good, man.”

“Yeah man, there’s like twenty bandaids here. You better hit the shower, you don’t want any of that getting infected,” Braden said, ushering Zack out of the room seemingly forgetting about their awkward encounter.

Taking a sigh of relief, Zack hunted down his nemesis the mop and propped it up against the door, ensuring it was secure before dropping his towel. Braden had believed his lie and seemed to be more worried about his fake thorn bush accident than the shower incident.

Turning on the water, Zack embraced the heat and let the water run through his hair and down his body. He had to admit, if it wasn’t for the mop blocking the door he would be worried about being in the shower like Braden. He’d always been shy about being naked in front of others.

Thankfully, he was able to chill out and felt totally relaxed. Well, except for his aching dick! Zack’s whole groin had butterflies, his heart wouldn’t stop thumping after seeing Braden in there earlier. His mind began to race with crazy thoughts... about that ass...

“Of fuck, I’m starting to get hard again...” Zack groaned. “Shit, I need to think of something else,” closing his eyes he tried to focus his mind on anything else that wasn’t Braden. “This isn’t working... fuck, I can’t stop it.”

With a groan he pushed it down, trying to ignore the sensation. But the urges and desire were too much, controlling the chemistry in Zack’s body. “Fuck, now it’s really aching... this isn’t going to go away on its own,” he groaned, giving in to the fantasy and grabbing his cock with a hard squeeze.

His body shudders as he pushes it down again, feeling it grow harder in his hand. Leaning on the wall for support, the torrent of butterflies in his stomach felt like they were on fire. Pumping his dick, he bit as lip as the warm water massaged his body with a seductive touch. He clenched his ass cheeks, feeling the sudden build-up in his groin.

“Shit... I’m gonna cum,” he groaned out, giving his cock one last hard pump. Braden’s ass enveloped his mind and he Zack couldn’t think of anything he’d rather cum to at that moment. The orgasm tears through him like a freight train, two weeks of build-up splashing across the shower wall in thick ropes.

It took everything he had not to scream, but a few muffled and pathetic whimpers escaped as the last few drops drained out and fell into the swirling water below. "Oh my fucking God I needed that..." Zack panted, taking a second to breathe before reality hit him.

He just jizzed all over a public shower thinking about his college roommate who isn't even into guys. "Fuck, what am I doing?" he said through deep breaths. "This is starting to get a lot heavier than I thought..."