

queer as folk

JULE's Fanfic



SERIES

Grab Your Things I've Come to Take You Home

Brian goes after what he really wants.

Brian walked up the stairs and tried to figure out what he was even doing there. He should be at home sleeping not here looking for him. It was all so ridiculous and probably pointless. Luckily he couldn't imagine running into anyone he knew in this hellhole.

The closer he got; the more irritated he became with himself. One fucking night, he couldn't even last one fucking night. How pathetic was that? Once he reached the door, the urge to leave became even stronger. But instead of turning around, he found himself knocking.

"What are you doing here?"

Brian ignored the man sneering at him. His eyes automatically searched for Justin. He found him standing a few feet back from the door. He looked beautiful, but he also looked tired and miserable. For some reason, that gave Brian hope. He couldn't think of anything to say so he inclined his head in Justin's direction.

"Brian?"

"Grab your things; I've come to take you home." Brian felt as surprised as Justin looked by what he had said.

"What?" Justin asked clearly confused.

"You heard me. Let's go." Brian hoped he sounded more confident than he felt. If Justin resisted, he wasn't sure what he would do.

"Just like that?"

"We'll talk later; I promise. Will you just come with me?" Brian was quickly losing patience. He was about two minutes away from going in there and carrying Justin out. Whatever it took.

Justin looked at Brian closely for a minute then reached for his bag. He was halfway to the door when Ethan grabbed his arm. "Where are you going?"

Justin turned to look at Brian before answering. "Home, apparently." His smile left no doubt as to what that meant. Ethan's shoulders slumped as he watched Justin walk away with Brian.

The ride home was silent. Now that Brian had Justin with him, he was once again at a loss for words. He needed time to regroup, time to figure how to answer the questions Justin was sure to ask. He wanted to enjoy having Justin with him before it all went to hell.

They had been back at the loft for a few minutes before Justin said anything. "Brian, why did you bring me back here?"

Brian picked nervously at his fingernails. It wasn't the worst question he could imagine, but that didn't make it any easier to answer. He moved so he was facing slightly away from Justin. "I missed you last night," he finally said quietly. "It was different without you. It seemed quiet, empty."

"I didn't think you'd notice."

Fuck! Justin was going to make this difficult. "I know what I said, but it wasn't exactly true. It does matter to me if you are here or not. I do care. But I didn't want that to be the reason you stayed. I needed you to choose. It had to be your decision." Then he added softly, "I wanted you to choose me."

"How was I supposed to choose you when you were going out of your way to prove you didn't want me? I felt like I had no choice. I thought I was doing what you wanted. I was starting to feel more and more like the trick that stayed too long. Just like Michael always fucking said."

Brian was surprised by Justin's anger. "You're more than that. You know that."

"I used to. But sometimes it's so damn hard. Everything you say, everything you do is some kind of code. And I don't seem to understand it anymore."

Brian knew he couldn't argue with Justin so he tried to change the subject. "It doesn't matter what I'm saying or doing. All you're supposed to care about is what you want. That's what you needed to figure out. What you wanted and where you wanted to be."

Justin laughed, "That's such bullshit; I'm not even going to waste my time explaining it to you. All I've ever wanted is you. It's not like I made a secret of that."

"Are you sure? It didn't take much for you to leave." Brian willed himself to shut up. He had Justin back, but he was practically pushing him out the door. At some level, he still needed Justin to choose to stay.

"It took a lot for me to leave. You just weren't paying attention. Seriously Brian, you weren't the only one who had a bad night. As difficult, temperamental, and impossible as you are, you are the one I want. Ethan was a nice distraction, but that's all he was. I liked having someone say all the right words to me and act like I was the most important person in the world. But it didn't mean anything because he wasn't you. It wasn't real. At least not on my part. I would have left whether you showed up or not."

"I'll never be like him, Justin. You have to understand that. I'll never have the right words, and I'll hurt you more times that you'll be able to count." Brian wanted Justin to be clear on what he was in for. And then he wanted him to stay anyway.

"I know all that, and I can live with that. Because when you aren't busy proving what an asshole you are, you are the most amazing man I've ever met. You're a much better person than you give yourself credit for. I'll only ask one thing of you. You can fuck every fag in Pittsburgh, except Michael of course, fifty times for all I care. All you have to do is let me know that I mean more than that. Don't let me think I'm nothing but a convenient fuck. Even if you think it's for my own good. I know you better than you think I do so I won't be as easy to manipulate in the future."

"So you think you know me?" Brian laughed at Justin's knowing smile. "I can do that, or at least try. You are more than that, a lot more. But you have to remind me too. This doesn't come naturally to me so you need to help me." Brian knew it would be difficult for him. His instinct was to keep people at a distance. By letting Justin know he was important to him, he was giving Justin the power to hurt him. But if he didn't, he'd lose Justin. And that hurt more than he'd ever imagined.

"I can do that."

"I pushed you away because you were getting too close. I'd never let anyone see that much of me before. I thought it was safer to back away."

"Brian, I love that you would let your guard down with me. My favorite times with you were when you forgot your act and let me see how you really felt. It's what I saw from the first night I met you. When you starting hiding from me again, I thought you didn't want me anymore. I thought it was your way of letting me know I'd overstayed my welcome."

"Well, you know what I figured out?" Brian asked as he reached for Justin's hands. "I like having you close to me." He pulled Justin to him.

Justin's smile lit up the room. "How close?" he asked seductively.

"Why don't I show you." Brian led him back to the bedroom. The room that had seemed so empty last night now looked very inviting. He knew they still had things to talk about, but he also knew they'd work everything out. All that mattered was that Justin was home again. Right where he belonged.

Won't You Make It Go Away

Emmett looked over the crowded dance floor at Babylon and sighed when he saw Justin walking out of the backroom while Brian was walking in-- his latest trick in hand. He turned toward Ted and Michael and asked, "What are we going to do about those two?"

"Who?" they asked in unison.

"Who?! Brian and Justin" he answered in disbelief. "You know the ones running the 'Anyone You Can Do I Can Do Better' contest. How long are we going to watch them kill themselves with booze, drugs, and tricks before we do something?"

"Like what? Justin hasn't spoken to any of us other than to take our order in months, and Brian doesn't give a shit what we think" Ted replied.

Emmett tried one last time. "There must be some way to convince them to stop being miserable alone when they could be happy together."

"Are you out of your mind?" Michael asked harshly. "They were never happy together. Besides, Justin left Brian. His choice. Now he has to live with it. And Brian's not miserable. He's back to being the same Brian he always was before Justin showed up."

"So you haven't noticed any changes in Brian the last few weeks?" Emmett questioned.

"He's been under a lot pressure at work. He just needs to unwind a little more. No big deal. He was fine after Justin left. You're reading too much into this. They aren't Romeo and Juliet pining away for each other."

"I agree with Michael. If Justin wants to turn himself into the next Brian Kinney, it's none of our business. As for Brian, if nonstop sex is an indication of being miserable, I'd hate to see what he does when he's happy."

Emmett couldn't believe his friends were so clueless about what was going on. Ted was right about one thing; Justin had been avoiding them. He understood it when Justin was with Ethan, but had expected things to change when that relationship ended last month. Instead Justin refused to tell Emmett where he was living, saying he needed to start a new life for himself. Some life, Emmett thought. Coming to Babylon every night. Always arriving and leaving alone, but making several trips to the backroom. It wasn't like Justin, and Emmett was worried. While Michael and Ted couldn't see the connection between Justin's reappearance at Babylon and Brian's all time drug and sex high, Emmett could. Frankly he figured Brian's being made partner was the only reason he still had a job since he hadn't seen him sober in two weeks. He opened his mouth to explain this to his friends, but seeing the looks on their faces changed his mind. Michael wasn't ready to hear the truth, and Ted, well Ted probably wouldn't understand. Instead he switched the conversation to safer ground, "So will Ben be joining us after his study session is finished?" He asked Michael, pasting a wide smile on his face.

Justin woke up head pounding, heart racing and glanced around the room, unconsciously making sure he was safe. He looked at the clock-4:30am. Not bad, he thought to himself. Almost two hours sleep tonight. Then as he did every night, he walked into the living room, flipping lights on as he went. He settled on the couch and reached for the sketch pad he learned to have waiting. The nightmares, this routine were becoming familiar. No less terrifying, but familiar. He could draw what he couldn't face when he was awake. He could escape for a few hours since sleep no longer gave him any peace. He wondered what a shrink would think of his personal version of art therapy. Then quickly dismissed that thought and all others as he began to draw.

A long while later he looked down at what he had drawn and felt his breath catch. This drawing was different. The dream had been different; he just hadn't let himself think about it. Justin continued to stare at the paper as snatches of the dream replayed themselves in his head. Until he finally remembered everything. Until he realized just what he had lost. Until he knew everything had to change.

Brian walked into the diner and casually looked around. As he approached the counter, Deb shot him a surprised look and announced, "He's not here."

Brian let out the breath he didn't know he was holding and tried to act uninterested. Even with Debbie he had to keep up some appearances. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed. Two weeks ago Justin had mysteriously vanished from Babylon as quickly as he had appeared. He had continued to avoid the diner when Justin might be working and since no one dared mention his name in Brian's presence, he wasn't sure what was going on with Justin. He wouldn't admit it, but his rare trip to the diner during one of Justin's regular shifts was to make sure he was OK.

"Change in school schedule?" Brian asked. He could explain knowing Justin was back in school since he paid the tuition.

"No, new job."

Brian glanced up quickly, too quickly. And Debbie smiled as she continued, "He's doing some after school art thing at an elementary school. Doesn't finish till six so he switched to the eight to two shift. Doesn't give him much time for a social life, but he said he doesn't care." She checked to make sure Brian was still listening. "Seems to like it. Actually smiles when he talks about the kids. About the only time he smiles anymore." She couldn't resist the last dig. She swore she'd stay out of it this time, but wouldn't hurt Brian to know Sunshine was miserable. Or maybe it would, and that was the whole point after all.

"Well I guess Mikey must still be at the store. I'll catch him over there. See you later Deb," Brian called over his shoulder as he made his escape. Deb could read him too well, and since he had accomplished his mission of making sure Justin was still alive, he needed to get out before he made a total fool of himself.

Less than an hour later, Brian was back in his loft trying not to think about Justin and failing miserably. Going to the comic book store hadn't helped. He'd seen the Rage display and made the mistake of asking Michael about the next issue. He'd listened to Michael hem and haw for five minutes about trying to finalize the storyline all while carefully not mentioning Justin's name. Maybe that was what irritated him. How easily Michael could pretend Justin didn't exist. How happy he was to go back to the way things were before; how easily he let Brian go back to the way he was before. He knew Michael hadn't understood why he insisted Justin continue to draw Rage. Brian also knew Michael arranged to send the story to the editor who would send it to Justin for the drawings and so on. Michael actually thought by not seeing or talking to Justin he could somehow turn back time to before they'd met him. Of course, most people would say Brian did the same thing. But Brian's denial was a well choreographed act, and Michael's denial was just that-- denial. Brian thought back to a conversation they had at Woody's about five days after Justin stopped showing up at Babylon.

"I'm glad things have settled down at work," Michael had said to him.

"What?" Brian asked, having no idea what Michael was talking about. Of course, he'd only been half listening as he cruised some guy playing pool.

"Well, you've been more yourself recently. You know more normal. So I figured . . ." Michael's voice trailed off as he realized he had Brian's full attention now and that probably wasn't a good thing.

Brian stared at his friend trying to decide if he was serious. He knew what Mikey meant by normal. A normal amount of booze, drugs, and tricks instead of the all time high he'd been at. But since a two year old could have connected the dots between his return to "normal" and the fact that he no longer had to watch Justin fucking everything that moved, he wasn't sure where Michael was going with this.

"You figured what exactly?" he asked Michael, one eyebrow arched in anticipation of his answer.

"Well, that it must mean, ummm maybe you were under less pressure at work?" Mikey finally managed to stammer.

Even now the memory made him smile at Mikey's ability to turn a blind eye to the truth. The fact that Emmett had rolled his eyes at Michael's analysis told him not everyone was as clueless as his best friend. Which also meant he was not covering his tracks as well as he needed to. Both Debbie and Emmett had been able to see through his lack of interest in Justin. So things needed to change. No more allowing Justin to dictate his moods or where he went. No more avoiding Justin. He would prove to himself and everyone else that he could handle seeing Justin. That Justin didn't mean anything to him anymore. And if Justin didn't like it, too damn bad. He reached for a bottle of Jim Beam and settled in to celebrate the return of Brian "I don't give a fuck" Kinney.

Three days later, he walked into the diner at 8:30pm. Ignoring the shocked looks on everyone's faces, Brian slid into the booth next to Michael. "So boys, almost ready for Woody's?" He had timed his entrance well. They were almost done eating. He would only need to spend about fifteen minutes in Justin's presence before they left for the bar.

Emmett recovered first, "And to what to we owe the pleasure of your company so early in the evening."

"I can pick up the guys faster if I walk in with you losers. My appeal increases in comparison," Brian smirked.

"Nice to know we're useful," Ted dead panned.

"I wouldn't go that far." Anything else Brian might have said was lost as he got his first good look at Justin. Brian hid his shock and managed to respond appropriately to some insult Emmett sent his way. He carefully watched the boys for their reactions to Justin's appearance as he waited on a table across the room. He wasn't pleased by what he saw.

After enduring a half hour of Emmett and Ted unsuccessfully hitting on half the population of Woody's, he mumbled an excuse about promising to see Lindsay about Gus. As he made his escape, he agreed to meet them at Babylon later. Not that he had any intention of showing up.

"Is Justin still babysitting Gus?" were the first words out of Brian's mouth as Lindsay opened the door.

"Of course," she answered clearly puzzled by his unexpected visit and question.

"Do you actually look at him, or do you and Mel just throw Gus at him on you way to . . . well do whatever it is you two do?"

"Yes, we look at him!" Lindsay yelled backed. "Brian, what the hell is going on? You refuse to let us mention Justin's name for months, and now you want to question the way we treat him."

"Maybe because I see Justin for the first time in weeks looking like death warmed over, and no one else seems concerned. Jesus, Linz he's lost at least fifteen pounds and the only color in his face were the circles under his eyes. Why didn't someone do something?"

"You know how stubborn he can be. He doesn't want anyone fussing over him. He's got a lot going on right now--new classes, working two jobs. Things will settle down once the show is over."

Brian pounced on her last remark, "What show."

Lindsay looked around for help, but found none. Finally she sighed and answered, "Justin has some pieces in a show next week, but no one is supposed to know."

"No one or me?"

"No one. I found out by accident, and when I mentioned it to him he got really upset. Said he didn't want anyone going. I convinced him to let Mel and I come by promising not to tell anyone. He told me if anyone else found out, he'd pull out of the show."

"That's not like Justin. He loves to show off his work. So when is this show?"

"Oh no Brian. There is no way I'm telling you. Justin would kill me. It was really important to him to keep this a secret."

"Which is exactly why I'm going. Don't worry, I'll slip in at the end. He'll never know I was there, and if he finds out, I'll tell him the school sent me something. I have a right to see his work. I am paying for it after all." At Lindsay's look he relented. "I want to make sure he's not having any more trouble with his hand."

Lindsay smiled at Brian's confession, "All right, here's the info."

Lindsay hugged Justin as they walked out of the gallery. She wished she could erase the pain from his eyes. "Sweetie, your pieces are amazing. I'm so proud of you."

"Thanks," he answered giving her a wan smile in return.

"We'll see you tomorrow?" Mel asked, as she too hugged Justin goodbye.

"Of course. Give Gus a kiss for me."

As soon as they were out the door, Mel turned toward Lindsay, "You cannot let Brian come here. There's no way he can handle that."

"I know, I know," Lindsay replied cell phone already at her ear. "Brian, hi it's Lindsay. Listen, Mel and I are just leaving the show, and you can't come here tonight. No, just listen. His hand is fine, but you being here would be a big mistake. Trust me on this. Why? Well, he has someone with him. It would be too awkward for him. Just come by tomorrow after work, and I'll tell you all about it. OK. Bye."

"Let's hope he listens for once," Lindsay reached for Melanie's hand as they made their way out to the car.

Brian glanced around the room as he entered the gallery. Lindsay was a terrible liar so he didn't believe for a minute that Justin was here with someone, but something was definitely wrong. He didn't see Justin or anything he could identify as his work as he made his way toward the back of the room. Then he spotted a familiar blonde head. Justin was deep in conversation with someone so Brian figured he could get a quick look at his paintings then sneak out. He moved closer to where Justin was, figuring his pieces would be nearby. Suddenly he saw them. Brian literally felt the air being sucked out of his lungs. He must have made some sort of sound because Justin turned in his direction.

Justin looked at Brian and realized his worst nightmare had just come true. Acting on instinct, he began practically pushing Brian back out the gallery. "Brian, you have to leave. NOW! You can't be here. You aren't supposed to see this." Brian didn't answer him. Satisfied that he would stay outside, Justin made his way back into the building. He headed for the restroom, needing some time to himself to regain his composure before saying his goodbyes to the other students and professors at the show.

Brian stayed exactly where Justin left him for about ten minutes. Then he slowly returned to the gallery. He needed to go backed, needed to make sure he hadn't imagined what he had seen. He didn't make it past the first two paintings. He had always known Justin was talented, but he'd never seen anything like this. Unlike Justin sketches, his paintings were larger and in vivid color. Too vivid for Brian's taste.

The first one showed a bat swinging through the air. It sounded so innocent, but it wasn't. Brian didn't know how to paint fear, but Justin did. It was there, what Justin must have seen, felt as he realized what was happening. That was bad enough; then he looked at the second painting. Blood. At first that's all he could see. Then he noticed the white scarf winding its way through all the blood. His head began to pound as he headed again to the exit. All he knew was that he had to get out of there.

Justin found him sitting on a bench outside when he left. Apparently waiting for him. He rubbed his eyes, wishing when he opened them Brian wouldn't be there, and he wouldn't have to have this conversation. No such luck.

"Brian," he began hesitantly reaching a hand out to touch his shoulder. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean for you to ever see those."

Brian finally looked at him. "So this is why you kept the show a secret."

"It seemed best this way. Mom and Deb would just cry. And then probably try and send me to some shrink. You and Daphne, you already lived through it once. That was enough. I never should have put them in the show; I didn't mean to. One of my professors saw them and suggested I show them. It wasn't worth it. I'm sorry," he repeated.

Brian sighed and gestured for Justin to join him on the bench. "What about you? You lived through once too. Wasn't that enough? Did you really need to see them?"

"Yeah, I guess I did," Justin answered, giving him a ghost of a smile.

"How, why?"

"I started having nightmares shortly after," he paused, searching for the right word "your birthday," he finally settled on. He and Brian had never really been able to talk about the bashing and saying the word aloud suddenly seemed too harsh. "Drawing gave me something to do when I couldn't sleep. Helped me understand what I saw in my dreams."

"Didn't your fiddler play you lullabies until you fell back to sleep?" Brian retorted.

Justin laughed. Nothing ever changed, Brian still got defensive if they talked about anything vaguely emotional. "I started drawing after Ethan and I ended things. But no, he didn't play me any lullabies."

Brian looked at Justin expectantly. He could tell there was more to the story and for some reason he wanted to hear it. Now it was Justin's turn to sigh. He never thought Brian would be the one he finally confided in about his breakup with Ethan. "The nightmares were kind of the last straw between us. We were already having problems. Ethan wasn't thrilled when he found out about my past."

"What past? Jesus Christ Justin, you're nineteen! You don't have a past yet."

"Have you forgotten the King of Babylon contest and my short-lived career as a go-go dancer? Ethan may have abandoned the club scene, but most of his friends haven't. They recognized me. Ethan didn't like having such a well-known boyfriend. It didn't quite fit with the struggling artist image he had of me."

"Prick," Brian muttered under his breath.

"We were dealing with that. Then the nightmares started. Of course, I had to tell him about the prom."

"You mean he didn't know?" Brian cut him off.

"No, that's the strange part. I never mentioned it to him before. It never occurred to me to tell him. I'm so used to everyone knowing. No one ever talks about it, but it's always there. I just assumed he knew." Justin took a deep breath before continuing. This was the hard part. Well, he'd just tell Brian as little as possible. It's not like he'd ever find out the truth. "I think Ethan realized just how much baggage I come with. Too many issues. He wanted something simple, and we both know I'm not that." "Fucking bastard. So much for loving you for who you are,"

Brain wished he could take the words back as soon as he said them. He watched a wall come down over Justin's features and knew whatever comfort they had achieved with each other was over.

"Well, it's pretty ironic. I left you because I could never be enough for you. I left to be with someone who said I was all he needed. In the end, I was too much for Ethan"

"Justin"

"Look, Brian it's late. I need to go. I'm sorry again about tonight."

"Justin, the paintings they're . . . " he stopped trying to find the right words. How do you describe a reminder of the best/worst night of your life? Beautiful? Haunting? "I wish . . . "

"I know. Me too. They just don't have a place anywhere."

"Did they help?"

"Yes, a lot. Now get going. It's still early enough for you to hit Babylon and forget tonight ever happened," he shooed Brian away with a smile.

"Join me?"

For a minute Justin looked sad again, "No, I tried that already. Doesn't work for me. You stick with tricks; I'll stick with art."

Brian nodded to Justin as he walked away.

It would be three weeks before Brian would have a chance to see Justin again. Two of those weeks were spent traveling trying to land a new client. And the third, well, Brian had needed some time to think about the last conversation he had with Justin. He realized Justin was better off without him. He had been able to face his nightmares in a much better way than Brian ever could. Ethan may not have made Justin happy, but he still had a better life than the one he shared with Brian. For reasons only Brian would understand, this made smile as he walked into the diner expecting to see a relaxed, healthier Justin.

Unfortunately, that was not the sight that greeted Brian. One look at Justin taking the boys order, and he felt his control slip. "FUCK!" he exclaimed, turning on his heel as he exited the diner earning startled glances from the patrons.

When Michael caught up with him an hour later at Babylon, he was sizing up his third trick of the night and already high enough to have forgotten everything but his name.

"What the hell was that about?" Michael demanded

"Nothing, I just forgot an appointment"

"Where, in the backroom? What's going on Brian?" Michael continued.

"Nothing, yet Mikey. But give me few minutes," Brian replied as he moved in for the kill.

Michael shook his head as he watched Brian walk away. He headed over to the bar to join Ben and didn't see Brian again until it was time to drive him home.

The next morning over breakfast at the diner, the subject of Brian's performance came up.

"So, what was with Brian last night? I haven't seen him that out of control in a long time," Ted asked Michael.

"Beats the hell out of me. Who can ever understand Brian's moods?" Michael shrugged.

Emmett had finally had enough. He was tired of watching Brian self destruct and even more tired of watching everyone ignore the reason. "It's Justin! Justin! Brian's mood was caused by Justin."

"Are you out of your mind? They're not even talking to each other," Michael looked at Emmett in disbelief. Ted just shook his head.

"Are you two really this blind? Open your damn eyes!" Emmett sighed in frustration. "Do I have to explain everything to you?"

"Apparently," Ted answered. "I certainly don't see what Justin has to do with anything. He and Brian have barely even seen each other since the party. Brian didn't give much thought to Justin when they were together. Why would he start once Justin left him?"

"First of all, Justin didn't leave Brian," Emmett held up his hand to stop the arguments Ted and Michael tried to make. "Brian pushed him away. He decided Justin would be happier with Ethan and made sure that's where Justin ended up. Is anyone following me here? This is Brian, the king of grand, dramatic self-sacrificing gestures."

"What does any of this have to do with last night even if it is true?"

"Well Teddy, since your romantically challenged pea brains are incapable of recognizing the truth about Brian and Justin, I have to start at the beginning. As I was saying, Brian pushed Justin away so he'd be happy. Brian can now go back to his old life convinced Justin's better off. Everything's fine until Justin shows up at Babylon clearly not happy. Next thing you know, Brian's on a two week bender. Justin stops coming to Babylon, Brian's back to normal. Last night Brian sees Justin for the first time in weeks. We can all agree that Justin looks like hell. Brian's now back in self-destruct mode. Let me make it simple for you. Justin's happy, or Brian can pretend he's happy, and Brian's happy. Justin's miserable then Brian's miserable."

"I just don't see it. Brian was glad Justin left; he's happy to be free of him. He doesn't care about what happens to Justin," Michael said somewhat unconvincingly.

Emmett really wished Debbie was there to slap some sense into Michael. Sometimes it was the only thing that worked. A quick glance at Ben told him confronting Michael was the right thing to do. "Michael, you're Brian's best friend. God dammit act like it! Of course he cares about what happens to Justin; he always has. He loves Justin even if he's too stubborn to admit it. Brian made a mistake with Justin, and now they're both suffering. YOU need to do something. Brian will never face his feelings for Justin unless he's forced to. Stop being so fucking jealous of Justin and help Brian!" With that, Emmett made a dramatic exit, as only he can, leaving shocked silence at the table.

When Michael opened the door to the loft later that evening, he found Brian slumped in a chair, bottle in hand. "I came to see if you wanted to come to Woody's, but it looks like you've already had a drink."

"Or two or three," Brian laughed. "Just getting started on the weekend Mikey"

Michael looked at his best friend and thought about what Emmett had said. "Brian why are you doing this to yourself? Is it because of Justin?"

"Doing what to myself? Enjoying a few after dinner drinks? And you know the rules Mikey, we don't mention his name. He doesn't exist anymore, remember."

Kneeling down in front of Brian, Michael looked him in the eye and continued, "Stop Brian. I know you better than this. Drop the act. What is going on?"

For just a second Brian let his guard down, "He was supposed to be happy. Ethan was supposed to give him everything I won't"

"So your upset because things didn't work out between Justin and Ethan?" Michael swore he would never understand Brian.

"No, I knew that would never last," Brian contradicted himself as if it made perfect sense. "Why didn't he come back? He should have come back."

Michael thought he was beginning to understand and wondered then how stupid Brian was, "Are you fucking nuts?" He stood up as he began to yell. "Did you think Justin would come crawling back? He's not an idiot you know. Jesus, even I know that he'd never do that."

"Why not?"

"Why not, why not?" Michael repeated in disbelief.

"Could we stop with echo. You're giving me a headache."

"Brian, everyone knows your motto, `No excuse, no apologies, no regrets.'"

"So."

"That also means no second chances. Justin understands that. There's no going back with you. God, and people think you're the smart one."

Brian shook his head as if to clear it. This was way too much truth for one night. "Fuck it, Mikey, let's go. There's a pool table with our name on it."

Michael followed him out of the loft having no idea what just happened. Of course, with Brian he was used to that.

Brian didn't let himself think about what Michael had said until he returned to the loft that night, or the next morning depending on how you looked at it. He hadn't really admitted to himself until today that he'd let Justin go assuming he's come back. It would be so easy. All Justin would have to do is say he didn't need all the romantic bullshit the fiddler was supposed to give him, and everything could go back to the way it was. He had expected Justin to understand that. Still slightly drunk, Brian decided to take matters into his own hands. Obviously Justin needed to be reminded of how things worked in Brian Kinney's world. A short time later, Brian knocked on the door to Justin's apartment. He hoped he wouldn't have to pound too loudly in order to wake Justin up. It was almost four in the morning, and Justin slept like the dead after a shift. He was shocked when Justin flung the door open after his first knock.

"What are you doing here?" is all Justin could manage as he came face to face with Brian.

"Do you always open the door without checking to see who it is in the middle of the night?" Brian countered as he looked Justin over. He looked adorable standing there barefoot wearing nothing but sweat pants. He'd obviously been awake. As Brian pushed his way into the apartment, he noticed drawings of Rage spread out on the table. "More nightmares?" he sighed.

Justin just shrugged and again asked why Brian was there.

Brian sat down on the couch and tried to gather his thoughts. Now that he was here, he didn't know what to say. "Why didn't you come back? After you and Ethan broke up, why didn't you come home?"

"Like that was an option. Please Brian, give me a little credit. I knew when I walked out of that party it was forever. You don't do second chances."

"What if I told you you were wrong? What if I said you could come back?"

"To what? You made it perfectly clear that you had no use for me other than sex. That you didn't care one way or another if I stayed."

Justin wasn't going to make this easy, and Brian wasn't sure how much he was prepared to admit in order to get him back. "Look Justin, you wanted out. You wanted flowers and romance and poetry. But that didn't make you happy. You're not happy now."

"Happy, " Justin snorted. "Some people aren't meant to be happy. You know that better than anyone, don't you Brian?"

"What is going on? I saw you a few weeks ago and you were fine. You said the drawings helped. Has something happened?"

"Stop pretending you care. Stop fucking with my head," Justin was rapidly losing control. He hadn't slept well in forever. He was too tired to deal with Brian. He couldn't let Brian make him think about things he knew he could never have. "I don't know who sent you to fix me, but you need to leave. We are not part of each other's lives now. Deal with it, I have."

"Justin no one sent me here. I just wanted . . ." Brian stopped, he was no longer sure why he had come. Something was very wrong and he needed to find out what it was, "You know I care"

Justin cut him off, "No you don't. You did once, but not anymore."

"I didn't stop caring after the party. You know me better than that."

"It has nothing to do with that. It was long before that. I remember Brian. You don't have to pretend anymore"

"What do you remember? Justin, you're not making any sense."

Suddenly, Justin cocked his head to the side and looked at Brian, "How many of my paintings did you see at the show?"

"The first two. What has that got to do with anything?" Brian asked becoming even more confused.

Justin disappeared for a minute and returned holding two canvases. "Look at these and you'll understand."

The first painting showed two hands clasped. One leading the other. It spoke of promise. The other showed two figures embracing on a dance floor. Brian stared at them for a minute then turned to Justin, "You remember the prom. All of it, not just the end? Justin, that's wonderful. It's what you always wanted."

"Well, I should be the poster child for 'Be careful what you wish for.' I remember everything, and now I know exactly what I've lost. Ethan was right. I'm nothing more than a whore."

"You are not a fucking whore! Why would you listen to anything the fucking fiddler had to say? And what does any of this have to do with the prom?" Brian began pacing around the small room as he became more and more agitated.

"I left some things out when I told you about Ethan. He pretended to understand about the bashing, but I knew he didn't. He kept asking me what I was thinking asking you to the prom. What did I think was going to happen? Eventually, he got tired of listening to me call out for you every night. When he told me to leave, he let me know what he really thought. He told me I was asking for it. His friends were right; I was and always would be Brian Kinney's whore. That flaunting you at the prom proved it. He thought he could change me, but he realized it was hopeless. The sad part he said was that I was proud of it."

"Justin, how could you believe that? You didn't deserve what Hobbs did."

"Don't worry Brian. I told him he was wrong about all of it. I know I didn't deserve what Hobbs's did to me. So I left. My great romance was over, we were over. I figured what the hell, why not enjoy being nineteen. I finally took your advice. Love is bullshit; fucking is honest."

"So why did you disappear from Babylon?" Brian asked when Justin stopped to take a breath.

"Because one night I remembered. I remembered you walking in, I remembered the dance, the kiss, the walk to the jeep. All of it. And I knew Ethan was right about one thing; I was a whore. Oh, not for the reason he thought. Ethan, my dad, even Michael all thought was trading sex for a place to live, for the material things you gave me, for the thrill of being with the great Brain Kinney. But they were wrong. I loved you, and I just wanted you to love me too. So I played the games and I joined the three ways all in attempts to hang on to you. That's when I became a whore. But it was already too late."

"Justin," Brian tried to interrupt him.

"Don't! Just listen. For once in your fucking life listen to me! I was so stupid. I spent months convincing myself you loved me. When you told me it wasn't guilt that you wanted me with you, I believed you. But it was all a waste of time. I was chasing after something I'd already lost. I remember how you looked at me that night, how you kissed me. You loved me then. For that one night. I know that. But it ended there. You never looked at me like that again. No matter how long I waited, no matter how many guys we did together I would never get that back. It was over before it started. All the things I told myself were love were just guilt and pity. All the drugs, all the alcohol, all the tricks can't change that. So what's the fucking point? I just wanted it to stop. So I drew my little pictures and convinced myself I was putting it behind me. I even convinced you. But do you know what I see when I close my eyes at night? I see your eyes. I see the love that was in them for that one night. And then I hear Ethan's voice reminding me that I'll never be anything more than Brian Kinney's whore."

If Brian had to listen to Justin call himself a whore one more time, he wasn't sure who he was going to kill first. "Will you please listen to me."

But Justin wasn't listening to anything right then. "One swing of the bat and I lost everything. I lost you. Hell, I even lost Ethan and I hadn't even met him. For one night, I had everything. It was the perfect night. The best night of my life. How can anyone compete with that? Look what I did to myself, to you, to Ethan all trying to get back something I didn't even know I already had and lost. How pathetic is that?" Justin had finally run out of steam. He stood before Brian all his defenses gone.

Brian looked at Justin and couldn't stand the defeat he saw in his eyes. They had all hurt him so much. Hobbs, Ethan, himself. Brian thought he wanted things to go back to the way they were. But now he knew that couldn't happen. If he wanted Justin back, he was going to have to fight for him. And dammit, he wasn't going to let Hobbs or Ethan win.

He took a deep breath and looked Justin straight in the eye before speaking, "You didn't lose anything that night. You were right, I did love you that night. But no one can take that away from us." He saw Justin begin to turn away from him. He couldn't believe he was doing this, but somehow the need to make Justin see the truth was greater than his own fears. He turned Justin's face back toward him. "Look at me, Justin. I love you." And then he leaned in to kiss him. He felt Justin relax as their lips met. He felt his own heartbeat return to normal as he was finally able to hold Justin in his arms again. When he felt Justin's arms wrap around him, he thought maybe this was exactly what he's come here for after all.

Justin leaned into Brian's kiss, not quite sure what was going on. One minute, he was talking, shouting really, telling Brian all kinds of things he swore he'd never share. Then Brian was telling him he loved him and kissing him. Wait a minute, he thought. Brian told him he WHAT? Justin pulled back and looked at Brian, a shocked expression on his face.

Brian smiled slightly, "Yes, I said it. Now stop staring at me and let me show you that I mean it." He pulled Justin more firmly into his embrace and began laying soft kisses along his neck. He ran his hands along Justin's back, refamiliarizing himself with the feel of Justin's body. He had missed this, him, more than he'd even realized, he thought as he slipped his hands beneath the waistband of Justin's pants, caressing his ass and pulling him even closer.

"Bedroom," Justin murmured as Brian's tongue began doing wicked, delicious things to his ear. He pushed Brian back toward the bed while trying to get his clothes off of him at the same time. Somehow they ended up naked on his bed, hands roaming, searching for the places they knew would bring the most pleasure. God, how had he lived without this, Justin wondered as Brian's mouth found his again. No one kissed like Brian Kinney.

Brian let out a moan as Justin's hands found his balls, then stroked up the underside of his cock, finally circling the tip in lazy circles. As good as that felt, he wanted this to last. He batted Justin's hands away and began working his way down Justin's body with his tongue. He teased his nipples, licked his way down his rib cage, nibbled at his hips and inner thighs before finding his mark. He swirled his tongue around Justin's cock from the base to the tip, taunting him before slowing wrapping his lips around it. His mouth continued to work its magic while his hand slipped beneath him, and he gently teased his hole. He quickly brought Justin to orgasm and reveled in the look on his face as Justin closed his eyes and lost control.

While Brian moved back up the mattress to reclaim Justin's lips, Justin began his own exploration. His hands moved over every inch of Brian's body. He petted, teased, and tormented him while nuzzling his neck and gently tugging on his earlobe with his teeth. Finally, he reached his hand between their bodies and encircled Brian's cock with one

hand and stroked his balls with the other. Brian countered by sliding lubed fingers in and out of Justin's hole expertly preparing him for what was to come.

When Justin had enough, he reached for a condom and slowly slipped in on Brian. "Now, Brian," he demanded breathlessly. Brian moved Justin's legs onto his shoulders and looked him in the eye, "Now Justin."

They both gasped as Brian entered him. Justin stared into Brian's eyes and saw everything he needed to see. He arched off the mattress and pulled Brian's head down for a hard, passionate kiss. Bodies, tongues, fingers entwined, they found a rhythm that left them both breathless. As they climaxed together, for the first time in forever both men felt complete.

Brian woke up in the late afternoon to find Justin staring at him. He sighed, "Justin, don't."

"Hmmm?" was the only response he got.

"Don't think, question, analyze. Whatever it is you're doing, don't." He reached up, gently cupping the side of Justin's face and pulled him down for a kiss. "I'm here, with you. This is exactly where I want to be. OK?"

"I love you."

"I know," Brian quipped, hoping to make Justin smile. "Look, we have things to talk about, and I promise we will. But for now let's just enjoy this, enjoy each other. After what you did to me this morning, I can't handle any serious discussion. I've forgotten what it's like keeping up with a young lover."

Whether it was the mention of sex or hearing Brian refer to him as his lover, Justin did smile then. He looked at Brian seductively, "You know, we have a few hours before I have to be at the diner."

"You are trying to kill me, you know," Brian laughed as he watched Justin hastily throw on his clothes later that evening. "And for God's sake, get a bigger shower."

It was Justin's turn to laugh as he walked over to kiss Brian goodbye. "We managed, didn't we. I've got to go or I'll be late."

"I'll pick you up after your shift."

"Not meeting the boys for dinner?"

"No, I have a few things to take care of. Now come here and give me a proper goodbye."

"We don't have that much time," Justin teased as Brian pulled him in for a tight hug.

"I know," Brian replied as he held Justin to him and kissed the top of his head. He was hesitant to let Justin go. He worried the time apart would give the doubts time to creep their way back into Justin's mind. He pulled back slightly and gave Justin a long kiss, "Remember, I love you. Later."

"Later," Justin repeated as he walked out the door.

Brian heard violin music as he walked up the stairs. He reached the door of the apartment and walked in without knocking. Ethan's eyes widened and he stopped playing as he realized who his uninvited guest was. "If your looking for Justin, your little whore doesn't live here anymore," he sneered.

Brian ignored him, but kept moving closer until he had pushed Ethan into a corner. "One week, you have exactly one week to get the hell out of Pittsburgh."

"What are you talking about?"

Brian looked down at him, a menacing glare on his face, "Let me make myself perfectly clear. In one week, you and every trace of your existence will be gone. Go to New York, Miami, hell, go to Boise for all I care. Just make sure it's a one way ticket."

Ethan glanced around nervously, but tried to act unafraid, "You can't tell me..."

"Oh, I can and I just did," Brian cut him off. He took the violin bow from Ethan's hand and cocked his head to one side, studying it as he ran his fingers along the string. "One more thing," Brian slowly ran the bow along the side of Ethan's jaw and then across his throat. "If you come anywhere near Justin, if he sees you, hears your voice, or is

reminded of you in any way, I will kill you." With that, Brian pulled the bow from Ethan's throat and snapped it in half.

"Hey, do you know how much that cost me!" Ethan protested.

Brian's arm replaced the bow across his throat as he shoved Ethan up against the wall. "Do you know what it cost Justin to look me in the eye and call himself a whore? You are a very stupid boy, aren't you. You underestimated me once, DO NOT do it again. Mess with what's mine and you will be very sorry. And make no mistake about it, Justin is mine." Brian abruptly removed his arm and watched Ethan slide to the floor in a heap.

He brushed an imaginary piece of lint from his arm as he strode from the room, "One week, not a second longer." He spared Ethan a quick glance and had the satisfaction of watching him slowly nod, fear evident in his eyes.

Justin tried to keep his mind off Brian while he worked. He knew how easy it was for him to fall into the trap Brian had caught him in this morning. He'd start out thinking about how happy he was that Brian said he loved him, how beautiful last night was, then next thing you knew he was analyzing everything. Did Brian really mean it? Would he want to try again? Could he forgive him for Ethan? Could he forgive himself for Ethan? Once his thoughts turned to Ethan, things really went downhill. He'd never loved Ethan; he knew that now. But somehow, Ethan had hurt him way more than Brian ever had. Ethan made him doubt himself in ways no one else ever had. He could never forget the look of disgust in his eyes when he called him a whore. What Justin kept coming back to was that he had to have done something to turn the look in Ethan's eyes from love to hate. And if he did it once, what was to stop him from doing it again?

Luckily, the diner was busy and Justin had very little time to think. He stayed focused on the customers, and if his mind starting wandering, he tried to remember the good-bye kiss Brian had given him. Unfortunately, the diner was so busy Michael and Ted didn't notice Justin was only a few tables away when they began discussing Brian's recent behavior.

"So should we start a pool on how many trips Brian makes to the backroom tonight? He's certainly on pace to set a new record, even for himself."

"I don't think he'd appreciate that, Ted. Especially if we guessed low."

"So what do you think of Emmett's theory regarding Brian and Justin?"

Justin couldn't help but listen for Michael's answer. He didn't know exactly what Emmett's theory was, but he could only imagine. As the hopeless romantic of the group, he told Justin many times he thought Brian and Justin were destined for each other.

Michael thought for a moment before answering. Considering Brian's behavior at Babylon last night, he obviously wasn't going to change because he and Michael had what for them counted as a heart to heart about Justin. He couldn't share what little Brian had admitted to him so there was no point in even mentioning the conversation. In the end, Michael opted, as he always did, to protect Brian's reputation. "It's bullshit. Brian and Justin are over. Brian tricks because he likes it. Always has, always will. Justin has nothing to do with his life anymore."

Justin slipped back to the kitchen without Michael or Ted ever noticing him. The next time he passed by their table, Ben and Emmett had joined them and the conversation centered on some party Emmett had been to. Justin took their order with a smile, but treated them with the same polite distance he had maintained since he left Brian. As usual, he resisted Emmett's attempts to draw him into the conversation and gave no hint that anything had happened between him and Brian.

When Brian walked into the diner an hour later, he took one look at Justin's face and knew something was wrong. "Brian, we're ready. Let's go." He was momentarily distracted by Michael scrambling out of the booth toward him. Oblivious to the events of last night, Michael apparently wanted Brian away from Justin as soon as possible. He held up a hand to stop Michael's progress and turned his attention back to his lover.

"Justin," he barked in exasperation. Silence fell over the diner as everyone stopped what they were doing. No one wanted to miss what was expected to be the first public confrontation between the former couple. "I told you, NO thinking," Brian continued as he closed the distance between them. Those expecting fireworks were not disappointed. Brian pulled Justin to him for a very long, very passionate kiss. "I love you," he whispered in his ear. Then a bit louder, "Later."

"Later," Justin answered flashing him a huge smile.

"Well, come on boys. Let's go," Brian made his way to the door ignoring the shocked looks he and Justin were getting. Michael, Ted, Emmett, and Ben trailed after him in stunned silence.

Brian sipped his drink and wondered who would break the silence. His money was on Emmett, who was sitting next to him grinning like the village idiot. Ben wouldn't care enough to ask, and Ted generally knew better than to ask Brian about his personal life. That left Michael, who almost never asked about Justin, mostly because he didn't want to know. Which is why Brian was as surprised as anyone when Michael spoke up.

"What the hell was that? Here, I thought you were actually opening up to me last night. `Why doesn't he come back Michael' What a joke. When THAT'S been going for how long behind our backs?" Michael finally stopped when Ben put a hand on his arm, "Michael, stop. Give Brian a chance to explain."

"Well, I for one, think it's fabulous. True love wins in the end. Just like in the movies," Emmett clapped his hands and laid his head on Brian's shoulder.

Brian rolled his eyes and pushed Emmett off his shoulder. "There's nothing to explain. And nothing has been going on behind anyone's back," he said with a pointed look at Michael. "I went to see Justin last night and we talked . . ."

"You talked," Ted snorted in disbelief.

"We talked," Brian continued with a glare, "and here we are. End of story."

"Details, Brian, I need details!" Emmett pleaded. "What was he wearing? What did you say? Did he beg for your forgiveness? Did you tell him you love him? Was the make-up sex fantastic?"

"Why do you want to know what Justin was wearing?" Ted interrupted.

"I'm trying to get a mental picture, if you don't mind."

"I mind," Brian said clearly irritated. "What happened is none of your business. I will say, however, that since I was involved any make-up sex that may or may not have happened would have to be fantastic." Brian listened to Ted and Emmett bicker about his ego and whether or not he and Justin could spend ten minutes together without having sex. It was so easy to distract them. One mention of sex and they forgot all about their questions. Unfortunately he was going to have to bring the conversation back to his and Justin's reunion. The fact that Justin hadn't mentioned it worried him. And left to their own devices, God only knows what these idiots would say to Justin.

Brian took a deep breath and spoke, "Listen, don't give Justin a hard time about this, about me. He's had enough problems lately. He doesn't the third degree or a lecture from any of you."

"Maybe you're the one that needs a lecture," Michael began angrily.

"Michael," Ben again tried to calm his lover down, but this time Michael brushed his hand away. "No, Brian needs to hear this. You are out of your fucking mind! He's been nothing but trouble since you met him, and you're already trying to protect him. And from what? The truth. That he doesn't deserve you after what he did. God, Brian he can't be that good in bed. After everything you did for him, did he appreciate it? No. He takes off, first chance he gets, with his little dream lover."

Brian had listened to enough, "Sometimes dreams turn out to be nightmares, don't they Mikey. This is exactly what I'm talking about. What I do with Justin is none of your God damn business. And if you say anything like this to him . . ."

Emmett interrupted quietly, "What did Ethan do to him?"

Brian gave them an abbreviated version of the story Justin had told him. He gave them enough details to know how deeply Ethan had hurt Justin, but he left some things out. He deliberately left out Ethan's use of the word whore, he didn't want someone (Mikey) throwing back in Justin's face later.

"How dare he say those things to our baby. I say we go kick his thrift store reject, violin playing ass!"

Brian smiled at Emmett's reaction. "Don't worry, in six days, twenty-two hours and sixteen minutes Ethan will no longer be a problem."

"Oh my God, Brian! Did you put a hit out on him?" Emmett gasped.

"Jesus, Emmett get a grip. No, I did not put a hit out on him. Although I did leave the possibility open. I just made him understand that his future lies outside Pittsburgh." Brian stood up abruptly, "That's enough talking, it's time for Babylon."

After they had been at Babylon for a while, Brian pulled Michael aside, "Look, Mikey I know you have problems with Justin, but you have to let it go. He's going to be around from now on, and I won't have you hurting him."

"What about him hurting you? I still don't understand after what he did to you how you could even think about . . ."

"Mikey, it doesn't matter. This is what I want. Sure, he made mistakes, but he's more than paid for them. And I've made mistakes too. Some people would say he's out of his mind to want to do this again."

"So it's just going to be like it was before. We're supposed to act like nothing happened?"

"I don't know what it's going to be like, but you need to stay out of it. As far as you and the boys are concerned, nothing did happen. How we deal with it is between us. Understand?"

Michael opened his mouth to protest, but closed it when he remembered what Emmett said about it being time he started acting like Brian's best friend. Instead he just nodded.

He was rewarded for his choice by a smile and quick kiss from Brian. "Thanks, Mikey. For last night too. If it hadn't been for you, I wouldn't have gone to him."

Great, Michael thought to himself as he watched Brian walk away. Not only do I have to put up with Justin again, I'm the one responsible. He didn't have to like Justin being back in Brian's life, but it looked like he was going to have to live with it.

Brian walked into the diner at 1:30am and snuck up behind Justin. He slipped his arms around him and whispered in his ear, "Miss me?"

"Always," Justin answered as he turned around and gave Brian a welcoming kiss. Once again, every eye in the place was on them and Justin blushed slightly when they pulled apart. "Go sit somewhere and behave while I finish my shift. I'll bring you some coffee."

"Don't like all the attention Sunshine? Just be glad Deb's off tonight or you'd really be in trouble," Brian laughed but did as he was told.

A few hours later, Justin lazily trailed a hand along Brian's chest and thought about how happy he was to be back in Brian's bed. He never believed he would be here again. "So, how pissed was Michael?" he asked abruptly.

"What makes you think Michael was pissed?" Brian smiled at the look Justin gave him. "OK, he was a little pissed but mostly he was surprised. Except for Emmett, they were all surprised."

"Emmett's always believed in happy ending."

"Speaking of surprised, however, why didn't you say anything?"

"How would I work that into the conversation? `Coffee anyone? By the way, Brian came over last night, I had a minibreakdown, he told me he loved me, and we made love for hours. Who wants the special?' So what did you tell them?"

"Not much. Mostly that it was none of their business," Brian sat up slightly and gave Justin a kiss before continuing. "And you didn't have a breakdown, mini or otherwise last night. Considering everything that has happened to you, you have the right to be a bit of a drama princess. I was paying attention last night and now, it's your turn to listen. I didn't stop caring about you after the prom; I just went back to hiding it. It seemed safer that way, for both of us. As to what happened later, I wanted you in my life, but I didn't want things to change. Having you be part of it seemed like the best of both worlds. We can do it differently this time. You need to forget everything the fucking fiddler ever said to you, everything. Most importantly, I want you to remember our dance as a good thing. You told me once it was the best night of your life. Remember it that way; I do," Brian hoped Justin understood what he was saying. He didn't know how much more of this he could take.

"Are you sure you want to do this at all? I need to know that Brian. Why did you come see me last night?"

"Because I missed you. Because someone made me realize you weren't going to come to me. Because I want you with me, always. Look, Justin it won't be perfect. I'm not going to become some sweet, romantic boyfriend. I'm not ready for locks on the door. But it will be better. I do love you. But you have to know that even when I don't say it. You have to believe that we can make this work."

"I don't want perfect. I tried that and it was a lie. I don't need you to change. I want you; I always have. It helps though, if you can be as honest about the good things as you are about the bad. I don't need locks, but I won't trick with you anymore. With my schedule, you'll have plenty of nights out without me. Do what you want. I don't need details, and I don't need to see it. That was half the problem last time. I never minded the other men as long as I knew what we had was different and separate from that. Once it became a game with us, it became harder to believe I was more than a trick to you."

"You have always been more than a trick even when I didn't want to admit it."

"I know. I love you Brian. I never thought I'd have a second chance with you and there is no way I am going to screw it up. This time we go in with our eyes wide open: no missing memories, no games, no illusions. Now that's enough talking, let's celebrate."

Brian's only answer was to spend the rest of the night showing Justin exactly how much he loved him. It truly was a celebration since both men were sure they could make it work this time.

5 years later

"Stop fidgeting, for God's sake. You're starting to make me nervous," Brian smiled at his lover as he smoothed the jacket of his tuxedo.

"Brian, I'm not sure this is a good idea."

"Justin, you told me five years ago these paintings had no place. I found a place for them. It's time to stop hiding them. They are beautiful pieces, and we are stronger than the bad memories. Right?" As soon as Brian had heard about the benefit show one of the more prominent anti-hate crime groups was planning, he'd known Justin's work would be perfect. Justin was beginning to make a name for himself in the art world so any of his pieces would have been welcome. But the director was thrilled to be able to showcase paintings that spoke to the heart of her organization's mission. It had only taken a little convincing to get Justin to agree to it, but shortly before the opening he seemed to be having second thoughts.

"You're right Brian. I just worry about opening old wounds," he reached up to touch Brian's face and searched his eyes for familiar demons. Finding none, he smiled and relaxed.

"Don't worry. Think of how good this could be for your career. Maybe you can start supporting me for a change."

"Jerk," he shot back as they made their way from the hotel to the gallery.

Brian watched Justin a few hours later as yet another person told him how moved they were by his paintings. The response to Justin's work was amazing. Unfortunately, it also meant Justin had to answer questions about the bashing over and over again. Brian stuck close to his side waiting to step in if it got to overwhelming. Christ, he

thought, I've turned into the devoted boyfriend in spite of myself. The last five years hadn't been perfect or easy, but they had been better than he ever expected. After a few torturous months of taking things "slowly," Justin had moved back in with him when his lease was up. Justin had finished school with honors and found a job he liked that still left him plenty of time to work on his art. Over time, Justin's mother and Michael had stopped questioning their relative sanity. Eventually Brian stopped questioning his own happiness and learned to enjoy it. Without any pressure from Justin, he'd drifted into monogamy, and they'd both been faithful for over a year. It wasn't the life he'd envisioned for himself, but he wouldn't trade it for anything.

Brian jumped when he felt a hand on his arm. "Hey, if you're done staring at me we can go," Justin said with a smile. He didn't know what Brian had been thinking about, but since he didn't look upset, it must have been good. "I know this was kind of boring for you, but I'll make it up to you when we get back to the room."

"Now, why would I be bored watching everyone fawn all over you? I love watching you try to charm all these people. You're OK aren't you? There were an awful lot of questions."

"I'm fine. Like you said, we're stronger than the bad memories and I like remembering the good parts of that night. How about you?"

They were now walking back toward the hotel. Brian reached for Justin's hand and pulled him closer. "We put all that behind us years ago. But I do want to tell you how proud I am of you. You handled yourself beautifully tonight."

"Thanks, all that country club breeding comes in handy now and again. I couldn't have done it without you, though. Having you there made all the difference. I love you so much. Just being able to look at you tonight reminded me that people like Chris Hobbs don't always win. Sometimes we win. Now let's go upstairs so I can thank you properly."

"One minute, Sunshine," Brian stopped Justin's hand before it reached the button for the elevator. "I have a surprise for you. Just remember I love you and don't get mad. OK?" Brian led Justin to one of the hotel's conference rooms and gave him a quick, nervous kiss before opening the door.

Justin had no idea what to expect, but it certainly wasn't the sight that greeted him. The room was set up for a party complete with music, a buffet, and a bar. What left him speechless were the guests: Debbie, Vic, Michael, Ben, Melanie, Lindsay, Ted, Emmett, his mom, even Daphne were all there. "Brian, what the hell is going on?" he whispered. No one had noticed them in the doorway, and Justin wanted to keep it that way.

"I know you wanted to keep this a secret, but their your family, and they deserved to be part of your night. And don't tell me you were sparing them. It's good for them to see that Chris Hobbs doesn't have any power over you, over us anymore. Those paintings are important to you and should be shared. But I didn't want to totally freak you out so I arranged for them to see the pieced before the gallery opened. I shipped them off to a Broadway show during the actual opening. You're not upset, are you?"

Before Justin could answer, Debbie spotted them. Her shouted "Sunshine" alerted everyone to their presence and all hell broke lose. Justin spent the next hour being alternately hugged, kissed, congratulated, and yelled at. Brian finally told everyone that it was supposed to be a party so there need to be more dancing and drinking and less fussing.

It was after three when Brian and Justin finally made it back to their room. "So am I forgiven?" Brian asked as they collapsed on the bed.

"Always. And you were right. It was a good idea to have them here. Thank you for thinking of it."

"Just add it to the long list of reasons you worship and adore me. I'm just glad you're happy," Brian said as he began kissing his way up Justin's neck. "I love you," he whispered seductively in his ear.

"I love you too," Justin responded while unbuttoning Brian's shirt. "Let's start working on the worshipping part," he said with a wicked grin.

The sun was coming up when they finally settled down to sleep. Justin laid his head on Brian's chest and fell asleep to the beat of his heart. Brain wrapped his arms around Justin and relaxed once he felt the familiar weight of Justin against his body. If Justin could have drawn them at that moment, he would have added one last painting to his prom series. Because sometimes love does win.

Strange Ways How We Fly



Set seven years in the future. Justin has been missing for a long time. What happens when Gus finds him?
Sequel: Touch My Heart is the sequel to this story.

Part 1

"Hey," Brian answered the phone expecting to hear Michael's voice on the other end.

"Da, I saw him!" he heard his son say excitedly instead.

"Gus, is that you?"

"Yes, it's me and I saw him."

"Slow down Gus. Who did you see?" Brian was confused. He knew Gus was on one of the weekend trips he took with some art group Lindsay enrolled him in. He was in Philadelphia this time, and Brian couldn't imagine who he could have seen that would make him this excited.

"Justin, I saw Justin. He was at the museum."

Brian sat down heavily as a million questions rushed through his mind. He didn't want to upset Gus so he settled for asking just one. "What did he say when you saw him?"

"Nothing. He didn't see me. We were in different rooms and I didn't go over to him. I wasn't sure it was him, but I looked at my pictures when we got back and it really was Justin. I thought maybe he was dead. But he's not, Da, I saw him," Gus's voice dropped to a whisper on the last two sentences.

"I know you did Gus. And it's good that you didn't say anything in case it hadn't been him. Listen, it's late you probably need to get to bed. I'll see you when you get home tomorrow."

"Good night Da. I love you," Gus said before hanging up.

Brian sat staring at the phone. Gus had seen Justin. It had been so long; long enough that Gus needed to look at a picture to be sure. Over two years since anyone had seen or heard from Justin. He'd never tell anyone, but sometimes he wondered if Justin were dead too. At night after the tricks left, when he couldn't sleep, he'd imagine all kinds of horrible things that could have happened to Justin. But Justin was alive; Gus had seen him.

Gus, God he hoped he wouldn't be too freaked out by this. Gus had only been seven when Justin left, but he'd never forgotten Justin. In fact, Gus was usually the one to mention him. He always acted like Justin would return at any moment. That was why Gus had a picture of Justin with him. Lindsay and Melanie had been able to chaperon all of Gus's trips until this one. Gus insisted that at nine years old he could go without them. Lindsay decided to have him take family pictures with him in case he got homesick. She told him he insisted in taking a picture of Brian and Justin together because "Da was happy then." Gus was too smart for his own good. He was the only one who understood how much Brian missed Justin. Even Lindsay and Debbie came to believe he was happy to go back to his old life. Now Gus had found Justin, and that changed everything. The next night Brian found himself and Lindsay and Melanie's listening to Gus recant every second of his trip as only a nine-year-old can.

"And that's when Bobby got sick on the bus. It was really cool."

"What about the ancient Egypt exhibit? Did you see any paintings you liked at the museum?" Lindsay tried to redirect Gus's story to the purpose of the trip.

"It was all right. I liked the mummy case. I wanted to open it and see if there was a real mummy inside, but they said no. Some of the paintings were OK, but lots of them looked like my finger paintings. Why would anyone want to see those? Oh, and that's where I saw Justin. They did have some naked pictures. They reminded me of Da's place."

Brian smiled as he watched the shocked looks come over their faces. "Wait a minute Gus," Mel finally managed to ask, "you saw Justin? Our Justin?"

"Yeah, I called and told Da. He was at the museum."

Lindsay and Melanie asked Gus all the questions Brian hadn't been able to bring himself to: What did he say? How did he look? Was he alone? What was he doing? Was he working there? Did he ask about anyone? Was he happy?

Gus rolled his eyes as he tried to remember everything his mothers wanted to know. "He didn't say anything cause I didn't talk to him. He looked like Justin. I don't think he worked there cause he didn't have a badge and he was just wearing jeans and stuff. He was in a room with some lady pointing to places on the wall. I don't know what he was looking at because the walls were empty. He laughed a couple times. Then we had to go. Can I have a snack? I'm hungry."

"Sure, but then it's off to bed. You have school tomorrow."

Brian knew the minute Mel took Gus to the kitchen he was in trouble. He braced himself for Lindsay's questions.

"Why didn't you tell me Gus saw Justin? When are you going to Philadelphia?"

"I didn't tell you because it wasn't important, and I'm not going anywhere."

"How can you say that? Don't you want to talk to him? Find out what happened, why he left?"

"In case you've forgotten, Justin and I weren't speaking for six months before he left. Why start now? If he wanted to contact anyone, he could have. Now you know he's not dead; he's not being held as someone's sex slave. He has a new life, and we aren't part of it. Leave it alone," Brian gave Lindsay a quick kiss and walked out the door before she could say anything else.

Brian spent the rest of the night with a bottle of whiskey and memories better left forgotten. He knew more about why Justin left than anyone, but he still didn't understand it. Maybe it had all just been an excuse, a reason to leave. Maybe he was happy now. For all we know he could be married to some guy who tells him he loves him everyday. Or maybe he regrets leaving and wishes he'd told me the truth. Or maybe I'm losing my fucking mind.

He couldn't help but remember the last time Justin had been in the loft. It had been a few months after his graduation from PIFA. Brian had come home to find Justin with all his belongings packed.

"It's over Brian. I'm leaving," was all he had said.

Brian had closed his eyes for just a second and when he opened them, they were expressionless. "Do you have somewhere to go? Do you need any money?"

"Stop trying to take care of me. The only things I need from you I can't have: love and commitment," Justin had searched Brian's face looking for any hope that he was wrong. Finding none, he'd shaken his head, "Forget it, Brian. Just try to be happy, OK?" With that, he walked out and never came back.

Brian had sunk to the floor right where he'd been standing. He'd stayed there for a long time. Even though he'd been expecting it, he couldn't believe Justin had left. Brian had been pushing him away for months. Ever since Mikey had told him about the job in California; the one Justin never mentioned. He'd always known Justin needed more than he could give him, but he realized he wouldn't leave without a push. So he'd been picking up more tricks, he'd stopped holding his hand or putting his arms around him, he'd spent more time at the office. Brian had hoped Justin would get the hint and leave on his own because Brian was never strong enough to make him go.

But now that it had happened, he didn't know what to think. He never expected it to be so easy, so emotionless. This was Justin after all. He expected arguments, tears, begging, anything but the cold resignation he'd gotten. Justin must have been more ready to leave than he'd realized.

Another shot of whiskey brought Brian back to the present. He'd let Justin walk out that day; never made a move to stop him. Damned if the loft still didn't seem empty. Even after all this time, he knew something was missing. God, I'm becoming maudlin in my old age, Brian thought to himself. Too much Irish whiskey and too much Irish heritage. Still, his thoughts strayed to Justin.

He didn't see Justin for almost six months after he left. Brian's life returned to the way it had been before Justin. He had his work, the boys, Woody's, Babylon, and of course the backroom. That was all he needed. No more strings or complications. Justin had kept his job as an illustrator for a publishing company, but stopped showing up on Liberty Avenue after work. He'd cut off ties with everyone but Gus. Justin and Gus had been very close so Brian wasn't surprised or upset that Justin had kept in touch with his son. He knew he saw him a few times a week and liked to bring Gus drawings from the children's book he was illustrating. So it made sense that when Gus was hurt, Justin received the same phone call from Lindsay that Brian did.

In all the time he'd known him, he'd never see Justin as upset as he was that night when he walked into the hospital. Brian, what happened? Is Gus OK?" he'd asked panic evident in his eyes.

Brian had resisted the urge to pull Justin into his arms, but tried to calm him with his voice instead. "He's fine, Justin. He fell out of a tree and broke his arm. He hit his head, but there's no concussion. They're keeping him over night as a precaution."

"Why did he fall? Did something scare him?"

"Justin, he's a kid; he just fell. It happens."

"You're sure it was an accident?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Look, go in and see him. Maybe then you'll calm down," Brian was baffled by Justin's continued questioning. He thought being in the hospital might be bringing up too many memories of his own accident. Hopefully spending time with Gus would help.

Justin had stayed at the hospital all night. When Gus woke up, he'd asked Lindsay to talk to him alone. He walked out of Gus's room an hour later and vanished. No one saw him again.

Once everyone realized he was gone, Debbie had tried to find him. Justin had closed his bank accounts, changed his email address, quit his job with no notice, paid the balance of his lease, and left. There was no trail to follow. Jennifer had remarried and moved the year before and no one had a current name or address for her. Although Brian never told anyone, he'd used his contacts at the agency to quietly check other publishing companies or ad agencies Justin might have gone to for a job. He also found nothing. Eventually they stopped looking. Gus had been the last one to speak to Justin, and now he was the one to find him. Brian laughed at the irony.

Now what? Lindsay wanted him to go after Justin. To find out what happened. But Brian had gotten most of his answers a long time ago. Unfortunately, they had lead to more questions he didn't think he really wanted answered. He should leave well enough alone. But he hated to give Kip Thomas the satisfaction. He raised his glass in salute, "Fuck you, Kip. You really did screw up all our lives."

Four months after Justin disappeared, Kip had walked into Brian's office like he owned the place. "Get the fuck out," Brian had ordered without really looking at him.

"Don't be so quick to get rid of me Brian. You should hear me out first."

"Nothing you could say would interest me. So once more, get the fuck out."

"Justin was always interested in what I had to say."

Brian glanced up quickly, but otherwise managed to control his reaction. "Justin who?"

"Don't treat me like I'm stupid Kinney. I know all about Justin Taylor. Your live in lover. The trick who got to stay. You two were the talk of Liberty Avenue. In fact, I know more about Justin than you do."

Brian snorted, "I doubt that. Now are you leaving voluntarily, or am I calling security?"

"Didn't you ever wonder why I dropped the lawsuit?"

"Not really," Brian answered confused by the change in subject.

"He really didn't tell you. I'm not sure I ever believed that. Well, let me tell you a story. Your Justin seduced me and then threatened to have me arrested for having sex with a minor if I didn't drop the suit. Of course I didn't know who he was then, and by the time I found out he was old enough to consent it was too late. I'd dropped the suit and lost my job. Imagine my surprise when I reported to my new boss a few months ago. There he was with his nice office, giving me orders."

"Life's a bitch Kip. But since this is ancient history, I don't have time for it," Brian wanted Kip out of his office before he said anything else. He didn't want to think about Kip touching Justin. He didn't want to think about what Justin had done, risked, to save him.

"Oh, but I'm just getting to the good part. I finally had my chance for revenge. It was so easy once I found out you two were living together. I gave him a choice: leave you or be exposed for the blackmailing slut that he is."

"That's it? That's your great revenge? You're stupider than I thought," Brian shook his head, but he really wanted to ring Kip's neck. "Your big opportunity and all you ask is that he leave me. Boy, the mafia better watch out for your criminal mind."

"You don't get it. It wasn't about me; it was about hurting him. Sure, I could have asked for money, but it was more fun to watch the light fade from his eyes. Watching him suffer was the best revenge of all," Kip smirked as he told his story.

"And you telling me this now because?"

"Now that he's gone, I was getting bored. I wanted to see if my plan had any

extra bonuses. I know he adored you, but I could never get a straight answer about your feelings for him. Half of Liberty Avenue says you loved him, the other half says you kept him around out of guilt and because he was great in bed. So which is it? How many notches did I manage to knock the great Brian Kinney down?" So pleased to be able to tell someone about his great plan, Kip didn't realize that baiting Brian was never a good idea.

Kip really was stupid if he thought Brian would ever let him see how he felt. He pinned him with an icy glare and answered in a clam deliberate voice, "Sorry to disappoint you Kip, but I never even noticed that he left. Now for the last time, get the fuck out."

Realizing he'd pushed Brian as far as he could, Kip scurried for the door like the weasel he was. Brian waited until he was gone to throw the crystal paperweight at the wall and watch it shatter into a million pieces.

"So there you have it," Brian spoke to the now mostly empty bottle of whiskey, "the answer everyone has been waiting for. Why Justin left." But Brian knew it wasn't entirely true. Kip's story might explain why Justin left him, but not why he left town. Parts of what Kip told him made no sense, but there was enough truth in it to know it wasn't a total lie. Only Justin knew the whole truth. And know that Brian knew where to find him, he wasn't sure he really wanted to know. So he finished off the bottle and went back to not thinking about it.

Two weeks later, Brian found himself standing outside a museum in Philadelphia wondering just what the hell he was doing.

Brian walked into the museum and realized this had to be the stupidest thing he'd ever done. But after two weeks of listening to Lindsay, Debbie, and Emmett harp at him to go find Justin and bring their Sunshine home, and he would do anything to shut them up. Even go off on this wild goose chase. And wild goose chase it was; it's not like Justin would still be standing in the same place Gus saw him. He figured he would walk around a bit, ask if a Justin Taylor worked there, and then be able to go home and tell everyone he tried.

After about ten minutes of wandering, he saw a sign advertising the "Faces of AIDS" exhibit and decided to check it out. He recognized the theme of this year's AIDS awareness campaign since his agency had done some work on it and was curious as to what he would find here. He picked up a pamphlet on his way in that said the exhibit featured the work of four local artists. He spent a few minutes looking at the sculptures in the middle of the room before turning his attention to the paintings.

The first wall of paintings contained some abstract pieces he didn't care for so Brian quickly moved on and found himself looking at Justin's work. There were about a dozen sketches, and Brian would have recognized Justin's pieces anywhere. Brian stood there for what seemed like forever completely amazed by what he was seeing. These drawings had a depth of emotion far greater than Justin's earlier work. Some made him smile; others made him want to look away from the sadness in them, but he couldn't. He found two of Vic. One showed him sitting at the kitchen table, in his robe and glasses, smiling, but with all his pill bottles spread out in front of him. The other was of Vic and Debbie dancing. He couldn't count the number of times he'd walked in on the two of them dancing around the house like they didn't have a care in the world. Justin had captured them perfectly. Obviously, Justin had forgotten about them after all. He flipped the pamphlet over and found a brief biographical sketch on all the artists. All he found out about Justin was that he was working in the art department of a local private school, and he recently had a few showings. It wasn't much, but as he reached for his cell phone, Brian hoped it would be enough.

Brian pulled up in front of Justin's apartment building and wondered once again if he'd lost his mind. He didn't want to be nervous, but he was. Justin still had too much power over him. It didn't matter how long they were apart; he knew the minute he saw him it would all start again. This wouldn't be some casual visit between old friends. Nothing with Justin had ever been casual. Thank God he knew Justin lived alone. Walking in on some cozy domestic scene might have been too much for him to handle.

In other circumstances, Brian would have been amused by seeing Justin rendered speechless by the sight of his ex-lover leaning casually against the door frame. Instead, he was grateful that Justin's shock gave him a few minutes to

discreetly look him over. He still looked so young, standing there in his jeans and oversized sweatshirt. Until Brian looked in his eyes. Then he knew leaving had cost him more than he'd imagined. The urge to touch him, comfort him was so strong, but Brian knew this wasn't the time.

"Brian?" Justin finally managed to whisper.

"Where are your manners, Sunshine? Aren't you going to invite me in?" Brian pushed himself away from the door frame and made his way into the apartment. He was settled in a chair before Justin turned to follow him.

"What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

Brian shrugged, "I was in the neighborhood and decided to drop by."

Something in Brian's tone seemed to snap Justin out of his daze. "Don't give me that bullshit. It's been too long." Then a flicker of fear passed over his face, "Is everyone all right? Did something happen?"

"Everyone's fine, Justin," Brian allowed his voice to soften for just a second. "Now sit down so we can get reacquainted."

"You're not staying Brian. We have nothing to say to each other."

"Look I have two choices. I can come back with you in tow or with a full report of your life for the munchers and Deb. Take your pick."

"What's really going on? Why after all this time did you decide to look me up?"

Brian chose not to answer that question just yet. He knew the best way to get answers from Justin was to keep him off balance. "I saw your work at the museum. I'm impressed. I'm sure Vic would love to see the sketches you did of him."

"What the hell were you doing in an art museum in Philadelphia? Fuck whatever game you're playing, Brian. Just get out."

"This isn't a game, Justin. It is, however, time for you to start telling the truth. What happened two years ago? Why did you leave?"

"I needed to start a new life. One without you in it. No big deal."

"You never were a good liar, Justin. And even if you were, that wouldn't explain the way you left. Do you realize how worried everyone was when they realized you were gone, when they couldn't find you, when you never called to say you were OK? Debbie looked for you for a long time. It broke her heart to give up."

"I never meant to hurt anyone. With the way things were, it just seemed best. But you found me, so let everyone know I'm fine and leave it at that."

"It's not that simple Justin, and you know that. If I can't offer them something better than that, they'll probably show up en masse next weekend. You'll have to see them eventually. You know that."

"You already told them where I am?" Justin asked starting to look nervous.

"I didn't have to. Do you really think I showed up here on my own?" Brian hated the way that sounded and wished he could take it back when he saw Justin wince. "I didn't find you. Gus did. He saw you at the museum a few weeks ago."

Justin's head flew up at the mention of Gus's name. "Gus," he swallowed hard and looked away, "Gus shouldn't even remember me."

"Well, he does. Fuck Justin, you spent more time with him than I did. How could you think he'd forget? Once everyone found out, I had no choice but to come after you. I just never expected to be able to find you."

"Are you sorry you did?" Justin asked quietly.

Brian ran his hands through his hair. Justin always did ask the hard questions. For once, Brian decided to give him a straight answer, "No, I'm not. This disappearing act of yours has gone on long enough. It's time to come home." He held his breath for a moment wondering if Justin would understand what he was trying to say.

Justin shook his head sadly, "This is my home now. I have a job I like; I have a life here. It's too late. I can't go back."

Brian should have felt rejected, but the defeat in Justin's eyes made him more determined. "It's not too late unless you want it to be. Of course, if there's someone else to consider?"

Again Justin shook his head, "No, there's no one. There never has been anyone else."

Brian allowed himself a small smile at that revelation. "Then come back. At least for a visit and fill everyone in on this new life of yours."

"No."

Realizing this conversation was going no where, Brian decided to pull out the big guns, "Gus wants to see you. He was afraid to talk to you at the museum and he's worried he'll never get another chance. Listen, all those art lessons Lindsay insisted on have paid off. His school is having a student art show and he has some drawings in it. It would mean a lot to him if you came."

Longing and fear washed over Justin's face before he answered, "I can't"

Brian got up to leave, but stopped when he reached Justin and spoke softly in his ear, "Kip's in Omaha."

Justin's only reaction was to whisper softly, "I'll be there."

Brian nodded as he walked out the door, "I'll be in touch. Later."

He didn't look back to see Justin's reaction to his parting word. He needed to get away from Justin before he did something stupid. Like kiss him, or physically drag him back to the loft. Justin hadn't said much, but Brian could still read him well enough to know coming here was the smartest thing he had ever done. For both of them. It wasn't going to be easy, but in the end Brian Kinney always got what he wanted. And what he wanted was Justin back with him where he belonged.

Part 2

Brian shifted restlessly in his chair at Woody's and tried to concentrate on Michael's endless babbling while ignoring the voice in his head that kept reminding him that Justin would be here in two days. As much as he'd wanted to, Brian hadn't gone back to see Justin. Instead he settled for three short phone conversations. The first to give him the details of Gus's art show; the other two to confirm he would be coming and staying for a few days. None of these conversations had reassured Brian. Justin sounded so quiet and hesitant. Except for after the bashing, quiet and hesitant were two words he would never have used to describe Justin. He mentally replayed their last phone which had taken place about an hour ago.

"Do you have somewhere to stay? I could arrange"

"It's taken care of, Brian."

"Well, be at the school around six. And then dinner at Deb's."

Again the hesitation, "I don't know."

"Justin do you really want the first time Debbie and Emmett see you to be at Gus's school? We'd probably all get thrown out, and then Gus would have to change schools."

He thought he might have heard Justin laugh. "I guess you're right."

"I'm always right. We decided to let this be a surprise for Gus so be prepared."

"I said I'd be there, Brian, and I will. See you Thursday." With that, Justin had hung up the phone leaving Brian cursing himself for always saying the wrong thing.

"Brian, are you even listening to me?" Michael's whining brought him back to the present.

"Of course, Mikey. You were talking about Ben. Where is our favorite professor this evening?"

"If you'd been listening, you'd know. What's with you tonight? You haven't listened to a word I've said." Not getting an immediate answer, Michael continued, "You're thinking about him, aren't you?"

Partly because he didn't want to discuss Justin and partly because he got perverse pleasure out of fucking with Mikey, Brian decided to play dumb, "If you mean the blonde over by the pool table, I was thinking about several ways I might allow him to please me."

Michael rolled his eyes, "I'm not that stupid and either are you. I meant Justin. That's all anyone's been talking about. Ma's still pissed at you for not giving her his address. She wanted to go see him after they saw Vic's pictures."

"Which is exactly why I didn't tell her. The last thing we needed was your mom, Vic, Lindsay, and Melanie showing up on Justin's doorstep. He would have disappeared all over again."

"What I don't understand is why any of you care? Especially you. You weren't even speaking to him when he left."

"That doesn't matter and you know it. And beside, it's not about me; it's about Gus. He wants to see Justin. Just drop it, OK. Let's go to Babylon; I feel like dancing." Brian was already out of his chair leaving Michael no choice but to follow.

"And Chase made this one, isn't it awesome?" Gus pointed to a clay sculpture of what Brian thought was an eagle.

"Awesome," he murmured in response. Gus continued to chatter away, happily oblivious to the tension emanating from his parents. Between the three of them, they glanced at the door every five seconds. In the end, it was Gus who spotted him.

"Justin! I knew you'd come," Gus shouted as he flung himself at the blonde making his way toward them.

Brian had to look away from the emotion in Justin's eyes as Gus wrapped his arms around him. When he looked back, both Mel and Lindsay were hugging him, tears streaming down their faces.

"Baby, it's so good to see you."

"I can't believe you're really here."

"We've missed you so much."

Finally, Brian had enough, "Christ, you two are causing a scene. And I think you may have smothered our son."

Laughing and wiping their eyes, Lindsay and Melanie reluctantly let go of Justin. Lindsay reached out one hand to gently touch Justin's face, "Thank you."

Justin looked like he was going to say something, but the moment was lost as Gus piped up, "Thanks, Da. I couldn't breathe down there. Come on, Justin. I want to show you my pictures." Everyone relaxed and followed as Gus dragged Justin down the hall.

Brian pulled the jeep into Deb's driveway and waited for the others to arrive. Gus had insisted on riding with Justin, something Brian was thankful for because it meant Justin had to show up. He hoped this dinner wasn't as awkward as the school visit had been. While Justin had talked to Gus at length about his drawings, he'd otherwise been uncharacteristically silent. Even Lindsay had given up on trying to make small talk. Luckily Gus kept up a running commentary on everything they had seen.

He could still hear Gus talking as they made their way onto the front porch. Justin reached out a hand to knock on the door, but Brian beat him to it and walked in unannounced. All conversation stopped when the door opened.

Debbie broke the silence with a loud shriek when she got her first glimpse of Justin, "Sunshine!" she shouted. "Oh honey, I can't believe it's really you. Let me get a good look at you." She held him at arms length for a second before enveloping him in a rib crushing hug the likes of which hadn't been seen since Michael returned from Portland.

Vic was the next to greet him. He settled for a long hug and a subdued, "Good to see you again."

"You too, Vic. You look good," Justin managed to answer.

Emmett opened his mouth three or four times to speak but no words ever came out. He finally hugged Justin and kissed him on the top of the head. Brian's glare kept the others at bay and once again Gus came to the rescue.

"Can we eat now Grandma? I'm starving."

"Of course, sugar. What was I thinking? Everyone to the table." Deb was in full waitress mode now, and there was no stopping her. "Michael, make sure the glasses are full. Gus, you give everyone their napkin. Ben, come help me with the serving bowls. Mel, light the candles." Justin took a step forward, but she cut him off before he could speak, "Don't even think about it Sunshine. Just sit your bubble butt down and let me enjoy you."

Brian sat as far away from Justin as he could. Usually when they ate at Deb's, they played some interesting variations of footsie under the table. A little distance was probably for the best. There is nothing like good food, lots of wine, and a nine-year-old for easing tensions. As a result, dinner went surprisingly well. Once he relaxed a bit, Justin's breeding took over and he was his usual charming self. He kept the conversation focused on what everyone else had been doing rather than on himself. He and Ben discussed teaching. He laughed with Emmett over his latest romantic disaster. He seemed surprised but pleased to learn Ted had been living with someone for over a year. Michael pouted most of the evening, but even he gave in and told Justin about the new store he was opening. The only person Justin never directly addressed was Brian. As far as Brian was concerned, this was a good thing. Justin wouldn't bother avoiding him unless he still had feelings for him.

"Justin, honey, those pictures you did of Vic. Well, they were just beautiful," Deb told him reaching for his hand across the table.

"You saw them?" Justin asked clearly startled.

"Of course we did. As soon as Brian told us about them, we had to see them. Lindsay and Melanie came with us. The asshole, here," Deb gestured toward Brian, "wouldn't tell us where you lived or we would have come to see you too."

"Love you too, Deb," Brian yelled across the table.

"You don't mind do you, Vic."

"Not at all. In fact, I'm flattered you included me," he reassured Justin.

"I'll send them to you once the show's over, if you want."

"Justin, I was impressed by the whole series. How long did you work on it?" Lindsay asked.

This led to a rather lengthy discussion on art Brian only half listened to. Justin planned to stay in town few days which didn't give Brian a whole lot of time. He had two objectives. One was to find out what really happened with Kip. The other was to start convincing Justin to come home. He wasn't sure which would prove more difficult. The more time he spent with Justin, the more realized how much he missed him. He was tired of games and being alone. Brian Kinney might finally be growing up, but he didn't want to do it without Justin. He reluctantly tore his thoughts and gaze away from Justin when Ted asked him about a new campaign he was working on.

Finally around 10:30, Justin got up to leave. Overexcited and up past his bedtime, Gus began to whine, "But I want to go with you, Justin."

"Gus, stop that or you'll grow up sounding like your Uncle Mikey," Brian scolded him.

Everyone laughed at Michael's indignant, "Hey, what's that supposed to mean?"

"Don't worry, Gus. I'll be over after school tomorrow. Think of something fun for us to do," Justin told him.

After twenty minutes of goodbyes, hugs, kisses, and promises to see everyone again, Justin made it out the door. Brian slipped out behind him and caught up to him before he reached his car. "So was it as bad as you thought?"

"No, it wasn't bad at all. It was," Justin looked away as if searching for the right answer, "strange. It was like I'd been gone forever, but sometimes it felt like I never left. Everyone seems happy. Even Ted."

"Not everyone," Brian answered softly. He sighed when Justin averted his eyes, afraid he was pushing too fast. "Look Justin, you don't have to avoid me. I won't bite."

"I'm not avoiding you." At Brian's look he gave in, "OK, maybe a little. It's just I can't figure out where you fit into all this. I understand how they all feel," he said pointing to the house. "I even know why Michael wishes I'd never come back. But you, I don't understand. If it were really all about Gus, you could have sent Lindsay or Melanie after me. After the way things ended between us, why did you come find me?"

"Maybe because I wanted to. If you want a better explanation than that, you're going to have to answer some questions of your own. But not tonight. You need your beauty sleep because we're going to Babylon tomorrow."

"I am not going to Babylon."

"Oh yes you are. Come on, it will be fun. The lost king returns to his kingdom. Everyone will fuss over you. You'll love it. I'll pick you up at your hotel around ten."

Justin raised his eyebrows in disbelief, "You are going to pick me up and take me to Babylon. That sounds more like a date than anything we ever did before. Is the world coming to an end?"

"Fuck you. I just thought you might have forgotten where it was," Brian was secretly pleased Justin was beginning to act like himself. He took a step toward Justin and gave him his most persuasive look. The one Justin had never been able to resist. He leaned down so his face was close to Justin's before speaking, "Please. I haven't had anyone good to dance with in forever. I promise no trips to the backroom. Unless of course, you'd care to join me."

Justin laughed and gave Brian the first real smile he'd seen from him. "What the hell. Ten it is."

Brian leaned all the way in then and captured Justin's lips in a soft kiss. He was about to pull away when he felt Justin's tongue slip into his mouth. Surprised, but pleased Brian deepened the kiss. He brought one hand to the back of Justin's head to pull him closer and traced a lazy path up and down his back with the other. He felt arms wrap around his waist as he heard Justin groan. They stayed like this for a long time, but eventually and with great reluctance Brian broke off the kiss. He slowly caressed Justin's face and tilted his head to meet his eyes, "Later."

This time Justin answered him. "Later," he said with a small smile.

They walked to their cars still slightly dazed and oblivious to the faces pressed up against Debbie's front window.

Brian waited until Justin was settled in the jeep to speak. God, he was gorgeous. Luckily, Brian had enough sense to have Justin meet him in the lobby. One look at him in his tight black pants and basically see through silver shirt and he knew he's made the right decision. Otherwise, they'd still be in Justin's hotel room. As much as Brian wanted that, he wouldn't risk sending Justin back into hiding. "So, what did you and Gus do today?"

"We went to one of those arcade/restaurant combos. Your son is quite the video game master," Justin laughed.

"Who had more fun? I recall someone else having a fondness for video games."

"Well it wasn't a hardship to play with him. Who's going to be there tonight?"

Brian heard the tension in Justin's voice when he asked that last question, "Michael and Ben, Emmett, Ted. Dan, Ted's whatever, is still out of town so he won't be there. Why? Are you nervous?"

"No, it's just they all know what happened last night and . . ."

"Don't tell me you think our friends and family would stoop so low as to spy on us? Whatever gave you that idea?"

Justin laughed at Brian's feigned shock, "Mel and Lindsay were too giddy even for them. And when I stopped at the diner for lunch, Deb told me three times how happy she was with the way things ended last night, emphasis on ended."

"Not exactly subtle are they? At least you missed breakfast. Michael glared at me the whole time, Emmett felt compelled to review his favorite screen kisses, and Deb smiled at me all morning without yelling even once. What did Gus have to say? I'm sure he was watching along with the rest of them."

"He told me he wished he had two dads like he has two moms," Justin looked away as he answered.

"Oh," Brian was saved from making a more meaningful response when they arrived at Babylon.

An hour later, Brian was searching the club for Justin. Between Emmett's fussing and what seemed like eighty million other people who wanted to talk to Justin, Brian hadn't spent more than five minutes with him. Spotting him at the bar, he slipped up behind him, "Hey, I thought you came here to dance?"

"I thought you'd never ask," Justin gave him a bright smile and led him to the dance floor.

It didn't take long for them to get back in sync with each other. To say they attracted attention was an understatement. They had once been the most interesting couple on Liberty Avenue and most people were hoping they would pick up where they left off. Dancing gave both of them an excuse to relax the walls between them. Out here it was OK to be close and touch each other.

Brian couldn't believe how relaxed he was. He hadn't been this happy in God only knows how long. But as Mikey once told him in a rare and ill-timed moment of perception, he always liked dancing with Justin.

Several songs later Brian was seriously rethinking his no backroom promise. Being this close to Justin had him ready to explode, and sexual frustration was not a feeling Brian was used to or enjoyed. Finally, he put a hand on Justin's shoulder to stop his movements, "Let's take a break. I'll buy you a drink."

Justin followed him to the bar, teasing him about his age. "I'd watch it if I were you. You're not getting any younger. Before you know it you'll be as old as I was when you met me."

"I'll always be younger than you," Justin replied sticking his tongue out at Brian.

"Brat. For that, you can buy the drinks."

A few minutes later, Emmett dragged Justin back out to the dance floor. Brian smiled as he watched them. Now he understood how Justin felt last night. Right now it was like Justin had never left. This was just another night at Babylon. But he could feel every minute that Justin had been absent from his bed. Not wanting to follow that line of thought, he decided it was time to reclaim his favorite partner.

"Want to go back to the loft?" Brian asked as they walked to the jeep a few hours later.

"No. And you're not coming up to my room either."

"You are no fun at all. Reminded me why I asked you to come with me?"

"Don't blame this on me. You came up with the no backroom policy all on your own," Justin continued to tease. "It's not that late. I'm sure you can pick someone up on your way home."

Brian didn't want to break the mood so he didn't tell Justin that he was the only person he wanted in his bed. Instead he made some joke about lack of options and turned the radio on. When they reached the hotel, he stopped Justin before he could get out. "It's still early. Stay and talk to me for a little bit."

"Nothing too serious. I had a good time tonight. Let the rest go."

"All right, no twenty questions for now. But at least tell me why Philadelphia?"

"Why not Philadelphia? No reason really. It was the first bus leaving. I didn't plan to stay; I didn't plan anything. Things just worked out."

"I can't believe you're teaching. At a private school of all places. Is it St. James all over again?"

"God no," Justin laughed. "It's a very student centered school. My classes are small and the kids in them are actually interested in art. It's not just an easy credit for them. And the schedule's great. I have a lot of time to work on my own stuff."

"I imagine once they get a look at you there's a waiting list of teenage girls for your classes. Maybe a few boys as well. I would have loved to have a teacher like you in high school."

"I'm glad there are no Brian Kinney's in my classes. I don't want to end up being someone's shower story. I've had my share of propositions from girls and boys. It's a bit disconcerting especially when I remember what I was like. I don't know how you put up with me."

"I guess you can't really go with the standard 'you're too young for me' excuse. But don't fool yourself; you were never the average teenager. And it was no hardship putting up with you. So what is your social life like? You said there was no one to consider. Why not?"

Justin shrugged, "At first I wasn't ready. Then later, there just hasn't been

anyone who interests me. You're a tough act to follow." He shot a meaningful look in Brian's direction before continuing. "But there are plenty of backrooms in Philadelphia and plenty of guys willing to show them to you. What about you? Has there been anyone for you to consider?"

Brian laughed and gave Justin a look of total disbelief before answering, "Are you crazy? Absolutely not. I find I do my best work on a one time only basis."

"I think that's my cue to leave. Good night, Brian. I'll see you tomorrow," Justin smiled and reached for the door.

"Wait," Brian reached out and grasped his wrist. "Since I don't get to walk you to the door, don't I at least get a kiss?"

He expected Justin to refuse and was pleased when he leaned toward him and gave him a gentle kiss. But Brian wasn't interested in gentle. He pulled Justin closer and began a heated exploration of his mouth. He then traced the line of his jaw with his tongue and pulled Justin's ear lobe into his mouth, nipping at the flesh with his teeth. Justin responded by pressing himself as close to Brian as he could. Brian then returned his attention to Justin's mouth. Lips met, tongues dueled until finally Justin pulled away. He rested his forehead against Brian's for a moment as they tried to catch their breath. Before Brian could say anything, Justin placed a quick kiss on his lips and left.

"Fuck!" Not rushing Justin was going to kill him, Brian thought as he headed back to an empty loft and a cold shower.

Brian slipped away from the crowd and lit a cigarette. Round two of 'Welcome Back Justin' events was a barbeque at the munchers. All this family togetherness was getting to be a bit much, but Justin seemed to be enjoying himself. Brian took a deep drag on his cigarette, grateful that Gus had left a few minutes ago for a sleep over and he would be spared his son's one-man anti-smoking campaign. Realizing Justin would be leaving soon, Brian decided it was time to get his answers.

"Hey, want to go for a drive?" Brian asked as he pulled Justin aside.

"Now?"

"Yes, now. You'll be heading back soon so it's now or never."

Justin looked nervously at the rest of the group, "Won't it be rude to just leave like that?"

"It will save you a big long drawn out goodbye scene. We'll just slip out. No one will care. It's not like we haven't done it before." Brian didn't add that in the past they always slipped away for sex. No point in pushing his luck yet.

"Let's go before anyone notices."

Both men were silent during the drive to the loft. Surprisingly, Justin didn't object when they arrived at the destination. He followed Brian into the elevator and paused for a moment at the entrance to the loft. "You haven't changed anything. It looks the same."

Brian just shrugged, having no interest in discussing decorating. "Want something to drink?" he asked moving into the kitchen.

"Sure."

Brian got them both a beer and waited until Justin sat down on the couch before asking his first question, "What the hell happened with Kip?"

Justin shot him a panicked look before turning away, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Bullshit. Kip came to see me after you left. He had some interesting stories to tell me. What the fuck were you thinking? Having sex with him and then blackmailing him? Were you out of your fucking mind?" Brian stopped there when he realized he was yelling. He took a deep breath while he waited for Justin's answer. He was shocked when he heard Justin laugh.

"He told you we had sex? And you believed him? Please. I have better sense than that," he raised his eyebrows and gave Brian a long look before continuing. "I didn't even let him finish blowing me. A few vague references to my psychotic father and he was more than happy to drop the lawsuit. It was no big deal."

"If it was no big deal, why did I have to hear about it from him? You acted as clueless as I was when he dropped the lawsuit. Why didn't you tell me?"

"What did you care? The suit was dropped; you were happy. I didn't want you to think I wanted anything from you. I had enough trouble figuring out where I fit into your life without adding guilt and obligation to the mix. Look Brian, this all happened a long time ago. There is no point to this conversation. If this is what you wanted to discuss, I might as well go," Justin stood up and seemed ready to walk out the door.

"Sit down. You're not going anywhere," Brian quietly commanded. "We have a lot more to discuss. Starting with Kip's little blackmail scheme."

"If Kip already told you what happened, you don't need to hear it again."

"What I need is to hear the truth. What Kip told me made no sense. He said he forced you to leave me by threatening to expose you. To who? He thought I already knew. He could tell your bosses, but even if they cared he'd have to tell them about his lawsuit. And it's not like you couldn't find another job." Brian moved to stand in front of Justin and looked him directly in the eye, "Tell me what really happened or I'll hunt Kip down in Omaha and beat the truth from him."

Looking decidedly uncomfortable, Justin sat back down, "Kip showed up in my office one day to work on some project. He was pretty pissed when he saw me. He told me I had ruined his life and he was going to return the favor. At first he did threaten to expose me, but I told him to fuck off. Like you said, who was he going to tell. I told him to do whatever the fuck he wanted, but he couldn't hurt me." Justin looked down at his hands and took a deep breath. "Then he saw a picture of you and Gus on my desk, and he knew exactly how to hurt me. Are you sure you want to hear this? It's over; it shouldn't matter anymore."

"It matters. Go on."

"He became obsessed with breaking us up. He asked around and found out who Gus was. Then he had his weapon."

Not wanting to scare Justin, Brian kept the anger out of his voice, "Did he threaten to hurt Gus?"

"Not physically. He said it would be bad for Gus if people found out what kind of man his father was. If they found out how much time he spent with his blackmailing slut of a lover. I figured he meant going to Gus's school or at worst children's services. I couldn't let that happen. Especially since you had signed your parental rights over to Melanie. What if they tried to stop you from seeing him? So I did what he wanted."

"Then why did you freak out when Gus was hurt? Why did you leave town the next day?" Brian had to be sure Justin wasn't lying to him. If Kip had thought about harming Gus, he was a dead man.

"It was mostly about timing. Kip had been pressuring me to quit my job. I think the thrill of our breakup was wearing thin. We were almost finished with a big project, and I told him I wanted to wait until that was done. He wasn't happy with the delay and when Lindsay called and said Gus was in the hospital, I panicked. I couldn't be sure Kip hadn't gone one step further. That isn't what happened, but I couldn't take the chance anymore."

"Why didn't you tell me? I would have taken care of Kip."

"It was my problem. I didn't want anyone else involved, and I didn't want to worry anyone. Leaving was the easiest solution. If I was gone, Kip would lose interest in Gus. I knew Gus would be safe. Kip was too afraid of you to go after you so his plan would be ruined. It worked out for the best. No one was ever supposed to know. Why the hell did Kip come to see you?"

"He wanted to gloat. He told me how much fun he had hurting you. He left out the part about Gus. He's not as stupid as I thought because if he had mentioned Gus's name I would have killed him right there. He wanted to know how I felt about your leaving."

"What did you tell him?" Justin asked quietly.

"What the fuck do you think I told him?" Brian was so angry he didn't know what to do. Angry at himself for fucking Kip in the first place. He never thought a quick fuck on his desk would lead to all this. Angry at Kip for hurting Justin and having the balls to threaten his son. Angry at Justin for letting Kip get away with it instead of coming to him. He ran his hands through his hair and practically shouted his answer, "I told him I never noticed you were gone. Jesus, Justin"

Justin cut him off before he could continue, "Well now you know everything. The whole stupid story. You have your answers." He got up and headed for the door.

Brian hated the bitterness he heard in his voice. "Justin," he grabbed his wrist and stopped him from leaving. But he didn't know what to say. Part of him wanted to scream at Justin for letting Kip screw up their lives. Part of him wanted to thank him for giving up his whole life to protect Gus. So he decided not to say anything and kiss Justin instead.

Before he knew it, they were making their way to the bed; mouths still joined, clothes frantically removed on the way. Brian paused when he got his first look at Justin naked. He was still the most beautiful, perfect man he had ever seen. He could stare at him forever. Justin took advantage of his stillness to begin covering his body with kisses. When he reached his very hard cock, he flashed Brian a bright smile before taking it in his mouth. At the feel of Justin's mouth and tongue on his cock, Brian thought his heart stopped. All he could do was lay back and enjoy what Justin was doing to him. Justin deep throatted Brian's cock while lightly stroking his balls with one hand. He alternately sucked, licked and teased until Brian could take it no more. As Justin once more engulfed his entire cock, Brian let out a loud groan and shot down his throat.

Once he recovered, Brian decided it was his turn to torment Justin. He rolled Justin onto his back and start with several deep kissed. He then nibbled and licked his way along his collarbones and down his chest. He circled his nipples with his tongue and just before he took the first one into his mouth, he reached down and took Justin's cock into his hands. He would gently tug on one nipple with his teeth, then lick and blow on the other one; all while keeping up a steady rhythm with his hands. When he heard Justin gasp for breath, he knew he was close. He than abandoned Justin's nipples and turned his full attention to his cock. He traced the tip with his tongue and lightly ran a path up and down the length. Then at the last minute, he took the whole thing in his mouth so he could taste Justin as he reached his climax.

He went back to kissing Justin until both their heartbeats returned to a reasonable level. He then positioned Justin on his stomach and gave him a very thorough and erotic massage. Once Justin was relaxed, his tongue followed a familiar path down his back. But this time he bypassed his ass and concentrated on placing open mouthed kissed along his inner thighs. Finally when Justin was squirming in anticipation and pleasure, he parted his cheeks. Just the sight of his hole was enough to make him harder, something he hadn't thought possible. With a sigh, he leaned in and slowly licked around the opening.

"My God, Brian. Please," Justin muttered breathlessly.

Without warning, Brian thrust his tongue into Justin. Enjoying the sounds of pleasure Justin was making, he continued to explore with his tongue. When they had both had enough, he reached for a condom and prepared himself. With one long, smooth stroke, he entered Justin completely.

"Fuck," was all Justin could manage as he pushed up to meet Brian.

Brian struggled for control as Justin's tight heat surrounded him. He finally set a slow deep rhythm designed to give both of them maximum pleasure. With each thrust, Justin arched up toward him. Brian reached for Justin's cock again. As he pushed even deeper into Justin, they climaxed together. Still trying to catch his breath, Brian collapsed against Justin and kissed the side of his neck. "You OK?" he whispered.

He felt more than heard Justin laugh before he managed to flip himself over so he was facing Brian. He reached a hand up to Brian's face and gave him a long kiss as an answer. After a quick clean up, Brian pulled Justin into his arms and fell asleep.

When he woke up the next morning, the only thing on the other side of the bed was a piece of paper. "Fuck, fuck, FUCK!" he exclaimed as he reached for the note Justin left him.

Brian,

Last night was a mistake. A beautiful mistake, but still a mistake. I am going back to Philadelphia. Don't contact me again. If Gus wants to see me, Lindsay and Melanie can call. You got what you wanted from me. Now let me go like you did before.

Justin

"The fuck I will," Brian crumbled up the note and threw it across the room.

Part 3

Two days later, Brian was trying to figure out what to do next. He had called Justin's school to make sure he showed up for work. As long as he knew where Justin was, he had to time to come up with a plan. He was pulled from his thoughts by the sound of Gus opening the car door. "Hey, how was practice?"

"Good. Can we go to the diner now? I'm hungry."

"Of course," Brian answered with a smile. Not many nine-year-olds frequented the diner, but Gus had grown up on Liberty Avenue. And Debbie loved to fuss over him.

"Da, why did you let Justin leave?"

"What?" Brian asked, looking up from the plate of food he'd been picking at.

"You were supposed to make him stay."

Brian really did not want to have this conversation, but it didn't look like he had a choice. "Look Gus, I know you saw Justin and I kiss. Maybe you thought that meant he would stay, but we don't have that type of relationship anymore. Even before he moved, we weren't together. You remember that. Besides, Justin lives in Philadelphia now. It's not that far you can still see him."

Gus rolled his eyes, "I know I can see him again, Da. But I wanted him to stay for you. When Justin was here you used to smile and laugh all the time, I just wanted you to be happy again."

"Gus, I appreciate that, but I am happy. With a great son like you, how could I be anything but happy? I know that you remember Justin and I being happy together, but sometimes it's more complicated than that. Things didn't work out for us."

"I'm not stupid, and I'm not a little kid anymore. I know what it means when you kiss someone like that. Justin would have stayed if you asked him."

Praying this wasn't going to turn into a conversation about sex, Brian tried to wrap it up, "It was just a friendly kiss. You see me kiss people all the time. Your mom, Uncle Mikey. I don't want you to think it means Justin and I are getting back together"

"Mom doesn't count because she's a girl. And you never kiss Uncle Mikey like that, gross! Mama said you never told Justin you loved him. That's why he left you. That and something about doing too many tricks. I never saw you do any tricks. Did she mean magic tricks?"

Brian choked on his water when Gus mentioned tricks, "It means you shouldn't eavesdrop on your mothers' conversation."

"When I was in the hospital, Justin told me he was leaving. He said it wasn't because of me and that he loved me. Then he said, he had a really important favor to ask me. He said since he would be gone I needed to take care of you and tell you I loved you everyday so you wouldn't forget. If you never told Justin you loved him, how is he supposed to remember? If you told him now, he'd come home. I know he would."

Not knowing what to say to Gus, Brian changed the subject by asking him if he wanted dessert.

A few hours later, Brian sat at the bar at Babylon trying to forget his talk with Gus. He looked out and saw Michael waving to him from the dance floor. Brian finished his drink and decided to join his friend.

"Hey, what's up?" Michael asked him with a smile.

"Not much. Are you on your own tonight?"

"Ben will be here later. Emmett's on a date and Ted is having a reunion dinner with Dan. So it's you and me for now."

"Great," Brian answered hoping Michael wouldn't be in the mood to talk.

"Mom talked to Justin today."

Brian tried to appear uninterested, "Did she?"

"Yeah, she wanted to know when he was coming back."

"Hmmm."

"He said he didn't know. We could be rid of him for good if you didn't keep encouraging him."

Obviously, Michael wasn't taking the hint, "What is that supposed to mean?"

"First you kiss him. Where everyone can see you!"

"I didn't realize Deb's driveway was a public viewing area."

Michael continued as if Brian hadn't spoken, "And then you fucked him!"

"And how would you know that?"

"Lindsay said he didn't pick up his car till morning. I know you two weren't talking all night."

"What the fuck to you care, anyway?"

"I don't want him getting any ideas about you getting back together. Then he'll be hanging around all the time again."

Brian was really starting to get pissed so he didn't say anything. But Michael just kept talking, "I mean it took him forever to get the hint last time."

"What are you talking about?"

"Anyone could see you were sick of him right around his graduation. But did he get it? Nooo. It was months before he finally left. I don't now why you didn't throw him out once he had a job. He didn't need you to take care of him anymore, and it was clear you didn't want him around."

"Is that what you think?"

"It's not what I think; it's what I know. You felt responsible for his dad cutting him off and for what happened to his hand. But he got through school, he got a good job. There was nothing for you to feel guilty about anymore. No wonder you were so eager to get rid of him. You'd put your life on hold long enough. Even he finally had to admit he wasn't there because you loved him. He should have let you go along time ago. Just tell me it isn't starting again."

Brian didn't hear the last thing Michael said because he had finally figured it out. Between what Michael and Gus had told him, he might actually know what Justin was thinking. Feeling hopeful for the first time since he woke up alone, he gave Michael a huge smile, "Mikey you are so fucked up, but sometimes you're a genius. If this works, I'll owe you everything." He gave him a quick kiss and headed out the door ignoring the questions Michael continued to yell after him.

Friday afternoon Brian stood outside Justin's apartment waiting for him to come home. He had been tempted to drive here straight from Babylon the other night, but decided to wait. By coming on the weekend, Justin couldn't use work as an excuse to escape him. A few minutes later, he spotted Justin coming toward him.

"Brian, what are you doing here?" he asked clearly irritated.

"We have some unfinished business. Now be a good boy and let me in."

Justin glared at him as he unlocked the door, "I told you not to contact me again. I thought I was fairly clear."

"I lied to Kip. I thought you would know that," Brian got right to the point. No games this time.

"What are you talking about?"

"When I told him I never noticed you were gone. Did you think I would actually tell him the truth? I wouldn't give him the satisfaction."

"Brian," Justin whispered closing his eyes.

"Listen to me for a minute," he led Justin over to the couch and sat down facing him. "I wouldn't tell Kip that I hated coming home to an empty loft. That I missed all the stories you told me about your day. That I had gotten used to having the same person in my bed every night. That I still picked up the phone to call you when a meeting went well. I wouldn't let him see that he had won; that he had taken something away from me."

"Don't," Justin put a hand up to stop him. "Don't do this. I don't want to hear this."

"Justin, I never let you go."

"Don't lie to me, Brian. I was there; I know what happened. Why do you think I didn't come to you about Kip? Because I didn't think you would care. I may have left town to protect Gus, but I left you because it was what you wanted. You let me go Brian. You let me walk out the door without a word. There was still a part of me that hoped I was wrong, but you didn't fight for me, for us. Don't try and tell me you didn't let me go."

"I didn't let you go, but I did push you away."

"Semantics, Brian. It's all the same in the end."

"No, it's not. There is a difference. I didn't fight you because I thought you needed to go. Even after I found out about Kip, I thought that was just an excuse."

He could see Justin struggling to decide if he should say anything. Finally, he just asked "Why?"

"Because of the job in California."

"What job in California?"

"The one you never told me about. You were going to out grow me eventually. You just needed a push to move on. You even told me when you left I was never going to give you what you wanted." "If I never told you about the job, how did you know about it?"

"Michael mentioned it to me. He said it was a great opportunity, and he couldn't believe you passed it up."

"You are so fucked! Why would you ever listen to Michael, who would sell his soul to get rid of me?" Justin pulled farther away from Brian anger evident in his voice. "I didn't tell you about the job because I wasn't interested. It was drawing for some stupid comic book. That's Michael's dream job, not mine. I only told him because I knew some people who were interested, and I wanted to know if it was a good company. If it was important, I would have talked to you about it."

"I didn't want you to miss out on anything because of me. I didn't want you to feel tied down," Brian tried to explain what he had done.

"Again, those are your demons, not mine. When are you going to stop hurting people for what you think is their own good? Instead of asking me what I wanted, you decided for me. Fuck that."

"Will you calm down. I am just trying to explain what I thought at the time. I know better now."

"And how did you arrive at this brilliant revelation?" Justin threw back at him.

"Gus. He told me what you said to him at the hospital. How you asked him to take care of me and tell me he loved me so I wouldn't forget."

"Someone needs to tell you," Justin answered softly.

"Gus is pretty smart you know. He also said you would come home if I asked you to. Was he right?"

"What do I have to home to?"

"He asked me if I never told you I loved you how could you remember? I also depended on you to know how I felt about you, but that doesn't work anymore. I can't tell you I love you. I'm still not sure what that means. I can tell you that you mean more to me than anyone else in my life. When we were together, I was happy or as close to happy as I've ever been. You complete me in ways I don't understand. I want you with me. Can that be enough for you?"

"Brian, I love you; I always have. It's not the words I need from you. It's the feeling behind them. I thought I knew how you felt about me, but then you changed the rules on me. It was easy to let other people's doubt creep in. I needed to know that I mattered to you, and you wouldn't give me that. Your reasons don't matter. I need to know that you would fight for me."

Obviously Justin wasn't quite ready to jump back in his arms, but Brian was determined. "I'm fighting for you now. All I've ever had is my reputation and my pride. I am putting that aside for you. I always said never go after anyone, but here I am. I'm asking you to come back. Don't misunderstand, I'm not proposing marriage or anything. But I still want to come home to you every night. I want you to be the only who sleeps in my bed. I want to wake up with you every morning." Brian stopped and waited for Justin's reaction. This was the most he'd ever opened up to anyone, and he hoped it would be enough.

Justin gave him the most beautiful smile and said, "Gus was right. All you had to do was ask."

"Thank God," he whispered before pressing his mouth down on Justin's. He wanted, needed to reclaim Justin. He quickly shed both of them of their clothing and pulled Justin tightly against him. He kissed him roughly, pushing his tongue deep into Justin's mouth. He groaned when Justin reached his hands around to his ass and pressed their hardening cocks against each other. Brian responded by rolling Justin's nipples in his fingers and then pulling on the hard buds. When Justin slipped a hand between them and began stroking Brian's cock, Brian bit him gently on the neck and nuzzled the sensitive flesh there.

They continued teasing and tormenting each other until they were both panting and covered with sweat. At one point, Justin reached a hand up to stroke Brian's face. When he neared his mouth, Brian pulled his fingers into his mouth. He sucked then deeply into his mouth then pulled back and sucked them back in. He swirled his tongue around and in between them smiling when Justin closed his eyes and sighed. Justin pulled his hand away and stunned Brian by sliding one wet finger into his hole.

"Ahhh," Brian gasped at the unexpected pleasure. Justin explored him gently for a minute then added a second finger. He slipped them in an out slowly going deeper and faster with each entry. Finally, when Brian thought he would explode right then, Justin pulled away and shoved a condom into his hand.

"Fuck me Brian," he demanded breathlessly.

Brian positioned Justin beneath him. He leaned down and kissed him once more while he put on the condom and lube Justin had also managed to produce. He pushed partly into Justin and paused to make sure he was ready. When Justin tried to push up and bring him the rest of the way in, Brian thrust as deeply as he could. He saw Justin's eyes glaze over with pleasure before Justin leaned up, reached a hand into Brian's hair, and pulled him down for a kiss. Brian knew they would last long as continued to pound into Justin. With each thrust, he pulled almost all the way out before quickly pushing back in as deep as he could. His hands kept up a similar rhythm on Justin's cock. They were both gasping for breath and straining to stay as close as possible.

"God, Brian I love you," Justin yelled as he climaxed. Brian felt Justin contract around him and shouted his own release. After getting rid of the condom, he shifted on the couch so they were laying side by side. He kissed Justin gently and stroked his hand along his back. Justin wiggled closer and brushed Brian's hair back from his face.

"I do love you Brian. We'll be OK this time."

"I know we will, baby," Brian answered as he laid his head on Justin's shoulder.

A few hours later, they made it to the bed. Justin turned on his side and smiled at Brian. "So I have Gus to thank for this reunion?"

"Well Gus and Michael."

"Michael? You've got to be kidding."

Brian laughed and filled Justin in on the conversation they had at Babylon. "Mikey unintentionally gave me the last piece to the puzzle. He helped me understand what you were thinking when you broke things off. That's when I knew what to do to get you back."

"Give me your cell phone," Justin demanded with a devilish look in his eye.

"What?"

"Give me your cell phone," he repeated.

Brian shook his head and gave it to him. Justin turned it on and hit a speed dial.

"Ben, hi I didn't wake you up did I? It's Justin. Can I talk to Michael? Hi Michael, just wanted to say thank you. For what? Well if it wasn't for you, Brian and I would never have gotten back together. He's right; we do owe you everything. No, I am not making a crank call," he put his hand over the mouthpiece and turned to Brian, "He doesn't believe me. You talk to him."

Brian took the phone back in time to hear Michael say, "What the fuck is going on. Brian is that you? Where are you?"

"Hello to you too, Mikey. I'm in Justin's bed right now. No, he's not kidding. We have you to thank for it. Tell your mother he'll be home real soon. Bye." He shut the phone off ignoring the sound of Michael's voice as he kept talking. "You are evil Justin. I am never going to hear the end of that one."

"Poor baby."

"You're not getting off the hook that easy."

"I guess I'll just have to make it up to you," Justin replied reaching for Brian. He spent the rest of the night doing just that. When he woke up the next morning, Brian was staring at him. "What are you doing?"

"Enjoying my first day of waking up with you."

"I love you."

"What was that for?" Brian asked.

"Now it's my job to tell you everyday. That way you'll never forget."

"Neither will you this time?"

"Never," Justin said with a smile and he leaned over for his first kiss of the day.

Touch My Heart

Brian took another sip of his wine and tried to feign interest in Michael's latest comic book find. He felt Justin relax against him as he chatted with Emmett about some movie they wanted to see. Justin was always so much better at these family things than he was. But then wine and chitchat in the munchers living room following Gus's family birthday party was never his thing. To make matters worse, he promised to show up at Gus's school party this weekend. As if sensing his tension, Justin moved closer and ran a hand up and down his thigh. Brian put his arms around him and kissed his temple. Then he silently counted to three.

Right on cue, Michael started, "Jesus, can't you two keep your hands off each other for five minutes."

"Lighten up Mikey. It's not like he stuck his hand down my pants or anything," Brian answered with a pointed look at the arm Ben had around Michael's shoulder.

Justin flashed Michael a sweet smile and slipped his hand over Brian's crotch, "Well you caught me, Michael. I was going to jerk him off right here, but I guess I'll have to wait until we get home."

Brian rolled his eyes while he listened to Michael sputter and try not to stare at Justin's hand. He wasn't sure who to kill first. Even though Justin had been back for over a year, Michael still treated him like a trick that overstayed his welcome. He kept waiting for Brian to get tired of him and kick him out. Like that was ever going to happen. And Justin taunted him every chance he got. He asked him once why he didn't just tell Michael to fuck off. Justin had shrugged and told him, "Michael has to believe I'm nothing more than a fuck to you. I can't change that. I could get aggravated about it or I can aggravate him. Which sounds like more fun to you?"

Brian couldn't really blame Justin. With all the shit he took from Michael, from all of them really, he couldn't believe Justin didn't tell everyone to fuck off, himself included. Brian didn't understand them at all. They had practically demanded that he bring Justin home and get back together with him. He'd done that, and at first they were all happy. But within a month it started. Brian could feel them breathing down the back of his neck waiting for him to screw up. Waiting for him to make the one mistake that would cause Justin to leave again. God knows they spent enough time reminding him and Justin of all their past mistakes.

Anyone with half a brain could see things were different this time. Justin wasn't some seventeen-year-old getting all starry eyed over his first lover. And Brian wasn't trying to stop the clock before he hit thirty while proving he was the hottest stud on Liberty Avenue. Justin wasn't at the loft because his father disowned him or because he needed to heal. He was there because it was what they both wanted. That was the difference; they both knew what they wanted and for once it seemed to be the same thing. So they moved beyond all the drama and fireworks their friends were still waiting for. At least outside the bedroom that is.

He couldn't entirely blame them for not understanding. After all, his relationship with Justin had always been unfathomable to most of them. Justin had insisted they keep the whole Kip fiasco a secret so no one knew why Justin had really left, and they certainly didn't know how far Brian had gone to get him back. They accepted without question that Justin loved him, but his feelings for Justin were still a topic of great debate. He swore which way the wind blew determined if the consensus was he loved Justin or that he kept Justin around because he put up with him and was good in bed. Not that Brian had ever been any help in that area. As far as he was concerned, his feelings for Justin were private. As long as Justin knew where they stood, it was no one else's business. And he intended to make sure Justin knew exactly how he felt later on. Although, maybe he shouldn't wait.

"Well, Vic and I need to get going. I have the early shift tomorrow," Debbie said as she stood up to leave.

"Wait," Brian stopped her. "I have something I wanted to tell everyone. Just wait a minute."

Brian walked into the kitchen and started looking through the cupboards. If he was going to do this, he needed something stronger than wine. He could hear murmurs of surprise from the other room and then Justin's voice, "Don't look at me. I have no idea what he's planning."

"There's nothing wrong, is there Sunshine? He's not sick or anything is he?" Debbie asked.

"No, he's not sick. Everything's fine."

"Maybe he's planning to leave town again. I mean after the way he reacted to turning thirty, he's been handling forty too well. This could be the start of a mid-life crisis."

Brian heard a note of irritation creep into Justin's voice when he answered, "Ted, he is not having a mid-life crisis. Where do you get these ideas? Things are going well at the agency; he's happy. Brian is not leaving town."

"You can't be sure. He doesn't tell you everything," Michael piped up.

Brian slammed the glass on the counter a bit harder than necessary. Let it go Mikey, just fucking let it go.

"So are you and Brian going to Babylon later?"

"I have a painting I need to work on, but I'm not sure about Brian. He may want to go."

Brian gave Emmett points for changing the subject and moving the conversation onto safer ground. At least until Melanie opened her mouth, "Honestly Justin, I don't know how you put up with it. I mean Brian's lifestyle has to bother you. Especially the tricking."

Like Melanie had a clue how much tricking he did. Hell, they would all be shocked if they knew how rarely he tricked anymore or how long it had been since his last trick. But again, that was none of their business.

"Mel, Justin knows how Brian is. He knows not to expect too much. He accepts Brian for who he is."

Christ, Lindsay thought she was defending him. As if reminding Justin that he was an inconsiderate, unfaithful shit who couldn't be counted on was supposed to be reassuring. The really sad part was no one was trying to upset or hurt Justin. Well, except maybe Michael. Astonishingly enough, they did it because they loved him. What Brian couldn't understand was how people who loved Justin as much as they did, didn't expect him to feel the same way. Maybe they didn't deserve to be enlightened.

But, he reminded himself, this wasn't about them; it was about Justin. And he did deserve this. He had earned it the last few weeks. It all started with Ted. Ted, who almost lost what little balls he had when he made a remark about how Brian only attended Justin's student art shows in hopes of picking up a new boy toy. He actually had the fucking gall to say it in front of Justin. Brian had started across the table after him when Justin stopped him. Justin proceeded, in his own polite and deliberate way, to make Ted feel like total shit. And then he just let it go. Brian, on the other hand, thought about it all day. He remembered what Justin once said about letting other people's doubts creep in. How long could Brian expect him to hold up with everyone waiting for them to fail? So of course, Brian treated him like shit for the next few days. Finally Justin called him on it, and they had a big blowout over the whole thing. A little while later, Justin sat down with Brian on the couch like nothing ever happened.

When Brian looked at him like he'd lost his mind, Justin sighed and explained, "Brian, let's not make a big deal out of this. You were an ass; I was pissed. Now we move on. It's not like I'm going anywhere. This is no threat to anything. We had a fight. Now we get to make up." And they did. Just like that. So this wasn't because Justin needed reassurance, it was because he didn't. Despite all the bullshit, Justin got it. He got him. And he deserved something for it. He probably deserved sainthood, but this was the best Brian could do.

Everyone stopped talking when Brian walked back into the room. "First of all I am not dying, I am not losing my mind, and I am not moving. There is something I wanted to tell Justin tonight, and I decided to let the rest of you hear it." Brian sat down next to Justin and reached for his hands. "Justin besides being Gus's birthday, it is also

eleven years since I met you. If you had asked me then, I would have said there was no way I'd be with you eleven days later let alone eleven years. But here we are. I know it hasn't been easy, and we've spent more time apart than I care to remember. When I asked you to come home, I told you I couldn't say I loved you because I didn't know what it meant. I think you finally managed to teach me."

"Oh my God, I think he's going to propose," Emmet whispered when Brian paused.

Brian silenced him with a glare before turning back to Justin. He reached out and gently brushed a hand through his hair before continuing. "You have always been so much stronger than me. You see what you want, and you go after it. No games, no pretenses. You're not afraid of your feelings. And somehow you were able to see through all my bullshit and figure out that I loved you long before I did. You were even strong enough to wait for me to catch up. I told you once that you were worth fighting for, that we were worth fighting for. I told you I wanted to be the one you told all the stories about your day to. That I wanted you to be the one I called after a meeting. I told you I wanted you to be the only one who sleeps in my bed, and I wanted to wake up with you every morning. I still mean all of it. I want all of that with you, and I want it forever."

Brian waited for Justin's reaction. He wasn't surprised that his eyes were a bit damp. But there were no tears. Instead, Justin gave him the smile that still made his breath catch and started talking as if he had expected this all along. "When I first met you, I was in awe. In awe of everything about you, the great Brian Kinney. Eventually I stopped being in awe and started really being in love. But you didn't believe me. I was too young; I didn't know what I wanted. And whatever other excuses you could come up with. So you'd push me away and I'd push back. Somehow we made that work for a long time. But you never stopped doubting me. You always held back because you were afraid I could never love the real Brian Kinney. And we both made some stupid mistakes and assumptions. Then I left. I learned something while I was gone. I could survive without you. But it was just existing. My life, my heart are with you. So for anyone who ever thought you were heartless," Justin smiled and looked around the room, "you have mine. All your fears were groundless. I know the real Brian Kinney and I love you. I love your sense of humor and your loyalty. I love how you do things for people and try to pretend it was for some selfish reason. I love watching you with Gus. I love that you came after me in Philadelphia. I love the way you wait while I stare at painting for hours trying to figure where to put the next stroke and then you tell me it's perfect no matter what I do. I love how you hold me at night and sit with me after a nightmare. I love that you finally started listening to me when I tell you I love you. I love you Brian Kinney. Forever."

Everyone was silent as Brian pulled Justin to him for a kiss. At least until Gus ran into the room and threw his arms around both of them. "Does this mean I can finally call you Dad?" he asked a beaming Justin.

While Justin hugged him, Brian scolded, "Gus, were you listening at the top of the stairs again? What did I tell you about eavesdropping?"

"But it's the only way I hear all the good stuff," Gus protested.

Once everyone began to find their voices, they all started talking at once. Brian took the opportunity to pull a red-faced Michael aside. "Mikey," he sighed, not sure what to say.

Michael shook his head, "That didn't just happen. You didn't just promise him"

"Forever. Yes, I did, and I mean it."

"But,"

"Come on, Mikey. You know, you've always known Justin was special. You just hoped I wouldn't figure it out."

"So this is it. He's never going away."

Brian couldn't stop the smile on his face, "No, never."

"Well, I suppose I should go over and congratulate him or offer him my sympathies for putting up with you," Michael said with a slight laugh.

"Thanks, Mikey," Brian hugged his best friend and headed back to Justin.

On the way home, Brian threaded his fingers through Justin's and asked, "So I imagine now you want to plan one of those God awful commitment ceremonies?"

"No," Justin snorted.

"No?"

"What do you call what we just did, Brian?"

"That my dear boy, was a last minute decision designed to keep our well-meaning friends from continuously reminding you what a terrible bet I am."

"Brian, we just told each other how we feel in front of the most important people in our lives. No day with tuxedos, flowers, music, and caterers could ever recapture that moment. It was perfect." Justin leaned over and gave him a quick kiss.

Brian couldn't help but smile. Justin really did get him. "Well, in that case we can finish the evening the way I originally planned." A few minutes later he pulled up on Liberty Avenue and led Justin to a familiar lamp post. He stood in front of Justin and looked into his eyes as he slipped a ring on his finger. Then he said simply, "Forever, Justin," before kissing him softly.

Justin pulled back and looked at his left hand which was now adorned with a wide band of deep, rich gold. The edges were slightly raised and a raised woven pattern similar to a Celtic love knot circled the band. Scattered throughout the pattern were small brilliant diamonds that captured the light. "God, Brian it's beautiful. It's perfect."

Brian took a deep breath and pressed a larger ring into Justin's hand, "Your turn."

Justin studied the platinum band with its center row of channel set blue diamonds for a moment. It had been hideously expensive, but what could Brian say he had a fondness for the color blue. Justin reached for his hand and softly repeated, "Forever, Brian." Then he captured Brian's lips for a long, deep kiss.

Several minutes later, Justin stepped back. "So," he began with a mischievous look in his eye, "since we are revisiting the night we met, are we recreating other highlights of the evening?"

Brian laughed and pulled him closer, "You want to see me juggle again?"

"No, the loft would never survive," he teased. Then he placed his mouth close to Brian's ear and nibbled a bit before whispering seductively, "I was thinking more along the lines of your rimming lesson. As well as the other equally pleasurable experiences that followed."

"I think something could be arranged," Brian answered while running his hands along Justin's chest. He gently pushed Justin back and said with a smile, "Where are you headed?"

Justin paused a minute before answering, "No place special."

"I could change that."

"You already have," Justin answered with his brightest smile before their lips met again.

Love Is a Rage



What should happen after the Rage party. Multiple sex scenes, interaction with other characters, no series or multiple chapters, happy ending.

I heard footsteps behind me as I walked away from Babylon with Ethan. For a second it sounded like Brian. But that was stupid. Brian doesn't chase after people. Then I heard his voice.

"Hey, what are you doing?"

I turned around and found him standing in front of me. He was slightly out of breath and he had the strangest expression on his face. I can't really explain it. Then I remembered another time he came after me, when we danced in the street after Pride. I couldn't believe I'd forgotten that. When he asked me to dance, that's the expression he had on his face. I didn't know what to say so I kept it simple, "Leaving."

"Don't go," was all he said.

I raised an eyebrow at him. He needed to give me more than that. I wanted to be sure of what was going on. I felt Ethan pulling at my hand, but I ignored him. He didn't exist at that moment. Nothing did, but Brian.

"I want you to stay."

I didn't say anything; I couldn't. He wasn't talking about the party. We both knew that. I let go of Ethan's hand and moved into Brian's arms. He held me close, and I knew. I knew that this was where I belonged, that he was home to me. Still I stayed silent, just listening to the sound of Brian's heartbeat. At some point, Ethan must have walked away. I never noticed. He didn't say anything either. I guess we were all learning that sometimes you don't need words.

Finally Brian pulled back and whispered in my ear, "Let's go home."

I don't remember the ride back to the loft. Actually, the first thing I remember is being naked on the bed. Brian was all over me. God, he was practically devouring me. I loved it. His hands and mouth were everywhere. He ran his tongue along the outside of my ear and I shivered in anticipation. He traced a long, slow, sensuous path down my whole body with his tongue. He started along the side of my throat, down my chest and abdomen, over one hip bone. I stiffened slightly when he reached my inner thigh, but he kept going. He finally stopped with a smile when he reached the inside of my ankle. But before I could catch my breath, he moved his mouth to my other ankle. He traveled the alternate path back up my body this time with small wet kisses and gentle love bites. By the time he reached my mouth, I was practically vibrating from pleasure, and he hadn't even touched my cock yet.

Every time I had reached for Brian, he pushed my hands away. I knew what this was about. He wanted me to know that I was his. But I was never very good at being passive. So while we were kissing, I began running my hands over his body. First in long, sweeping strokes designed to just heighten his awareness. I ran my hands through his hair, across his back, his chest, his arms, anywhere I could reach. I knew he liked it when he started moving his tongue in

and out of my mouth in rhythm with my hands. Then I pulled my mouth away from his and began kissing my way down his chest. He gasped when I started licking and sucking his nipples. I reached my hands down between us for his cock. I loved feeling it stretch in my hand. I loved the smooth heat of his skin there. I stroked the length of him with one hand and gently massaged his balls with the other. I felt his heart speed up under my mouth.

"Justin, stop. I want to cum inside of you."

I smiled and reached blindly for the lube and a condom. We were both breathing heavily by this point. A few seconds later I felt Brian slide a lubed finger inside of me. I arched off the bed when he added a second and began slowly, teasingly stretching me open for him. When I thought I would die from the pleasure, he pulled his hand away and opened the condom. I took it from him and very carefully smoothed it over his cock. I traced my fingers over it a few times to make sure it was properly in place. I was rewarded by watching Brian close his eyes and lay his head back in bliss. I moved to roll over, but he stopped me.

"Don't. I want to look at you. I want you to see me," he murmured while moving my legs onto his shoulders. He positioned himself against me and reached for my hands before entering me with one deep thrust.

We both paused for a minute. Trying to gain some semblance of control, but it was useless. He began moving inside of me. Long, smooth strokes that increased in speed as we desperately tried to get closer. I put my hands on his back and tried to push him farther inside of me. I wanted more. I just needed more of him. He was glistening with sweat and I leaned up to lick it off his neck. I loved the salty taste of him. His hand closed over my cock and I knew he was close, and he wanted me to cum with him. I felt a flush come over my whole body. I pulled his mouth down over mine and shoved my tongue inside. I reveled in the feeling when he responded in kind. This was what I needed. His cock buried deep inside of me, his tongue in my mouth. I could feel him in every part of me. I felt him start to cum, and I just let go. Everything hit at once. I didn't exist outside of this amazing pleasure and him.

I don't know how long we stayed like that. Bodies still entwined, just trying to breathe. Finally Brian pulled away, and we took a few minutes to clean up. He pulled me back into his arms and we went to sleep that way. Wrapped around each other without another word being spoken.

I woke up the next morning to someone knocking on the door. Then I heard Michael's voice calling Brian's name. "Dear God," I groaned as I rolled over and tried to nudge Brian awake.

He opened one eye and muttered, "He'll go away if I ignore him."

I gave him a look that told him what I thought of that theory. He must have understood because he laughed and headed for the door. I heard him stop long enough to put a pair of pants on. He must have found the ones from last night. I have no idea where our clothes ended up. Since Michael wasn't here to see me, I decided to stay in bed.

I heard the door open. "What the fuck are you doing here?" Brian asked.

"I wanted to make sure you were all right. After what happened last night." I could hear the eagerness in Michael's voice as he rushed in to play the loyal best friend. I know he loves Brian, but he annoys the hell out of me sometimes.

"Nothing happened last night. I'm fine."

"Don't pretend with me, Brian. I was there. I saw the ungrateful little shit leave with what's his name. After everything you've done for him, I can't believe he'd walk out on you. Holy shit! What the hell happened here?"

I could tell by their voices they had moved farther into the loft. I guess I know where our clothes ended up. Everywhere.

Brian laughed a little before answering, "We were in a bit of a hurry last night."

"We? You brought someone home. Good for you."

Before Brian could respond, my cell phone starting ringing. "Shit," I whispered as I tried to find it.

"Aren't you going to answer it?" Michael asked.

"No, Justin will."

"Justin!" Michael practically shrieked as I finally found my phone.

"Hello," I heard my mother's voice. "Mom, I'm going to put you hold for a minute." I pressed the mute button. There was no way I was going to miss the rest of their conversation.

"Yes, Justin. Who the hell else would it be?"

"Anyone else! He left you, for God's sake," Michael was still yelling.

"He left the party, that's all. Anything else you think happened didn't. Besides, it's none of your business. I'm fine; Justin's fine; everyone is fine. Now go along your merry way. Maybe we'll see you at the diner later."

While Brian herded Michael out the door, I picked my phone back up. "Hey, Mom. What's up?"

"Honey, where are you? Are you OK?"

"I'm fine, and I'm still at home. It's barely ten o'clock."

"Home? You mean the loft?"

I rolled my eyes. You'd think she'd been talking to Michael. "Yes the loft. Where else would I be?"

"But you left with that other boy last night. And you seemed so unhappy."

"I left at the same time as him, not with him. I know I've been moody lately, but everything is OK now. I promise."

"Are you sure, honey? You could tell me if there was something wrong."

I saw Brian coming back into the room so I wanted to finish this. "Mom, I'm fine. I have to go now. I'll talk to you tomorrow." I hung up and tossed the phone onto the table.

Brian sat down next to me, and I leaned against him. "I'm sorry," I told him.

He looked a little surprised, "For what?"

"Making everyone think I left you. For being so stupid lately."

"Doesn't matter. Are you glad you came back?"

"Always," I smiled and leaned over to kiss him.

"I can't offer you more than this," He said a few minutes later.

I shook my head, "You don't need to. I just needed to be sure you were offering. But try not to fight this so much. This, us, whatever, isn't the enemy."

"I'll try. You can't hide from me anymore either."

I knew what he meant. He may have hurt me, but I ran away. "Never again."

We had just stepped into the shower when he spoke again, "You didn't let me finish. What I said before. I can't offer you more, yet. But someday." Then he gave me this small almost shy small that totally melted me.

I swear he had no idea what he does to me. With that one look, I knew how much he loved me. I had no words for what I was feeling so I decided to show him. I worshiped his entire body. I slowly massaged shampoo through his hair while kissing his neck. Then I began washing every inch of him. Following the trails of soap as they washed off his body with my lips and tongue. I knelt down behind him and pushed his legs apart. I took my time washing each leg from his foot to his hip. His breath picked up when I put my head between his legs and I felt him lean against the shower wall. I placed my tongue on the tip of his cock, then ran it along the underside, over his balls, until I reached his hole.

I looked up briefly to make sure Brian was OK with this and saw him rest his forehead against the tiles. I smiled and parted his cheeks to give me better access. I made lazy circles around it and pressed against but never into him. I loved the combination of soap and him in my mouth. Finally, I thrust my tongue inside of him. I explored him gently, swirling my tongue inside of him. It was pure heaven. I wrapped my hand around his cock and began stroking him with my fingers and my tongue. I kept up a steady pace until I felt him shudder and shoot in the stream of water. I kissed my way up his back and rested my head between his shoulders. I laid my hands against his chest so I could feel his heart pounding. We stayed like that until his breathing returned to normal.

When he turned around, he had a predatory gleam in his eye, "Your turn."

He pushed me back against the wall and began kissing his way down my body. I grabbed his hair for balance when he pulled my nipple ring into his mouth and started tugging on it. I held my breath as he neared my cock. I was already so turned on from what I did to him, I knew I wouldn't last long. He licked around the head and gently blew over the tip. Shivers ran up my spine, and I silently begged him to finish this. After a few more minutes of teasing, he pulled the whole thing into his mouth. I thought I would die right then. He slowly pulled his lips down until he almost reached the tip before engulfing my entire cock again. He kept this motion up until I screamed my release. Brian smiled and led me back under the water where we finally finished our shower.

We walked into the diner unnoticed. Emmett, Ted, Lindsay, and Melanie were huddled in a booth with Debbie standing off to the side holding a sleeping Gus. I could only imagine what they were discussing. Brian motioned for me to be quiet as we approached.

"Well, Justin finally did it. I can't say I blame him. I don't know how he's put up with Brian as long as he has," I heard Ted say.

Lindsay chimed in, in Brian's defense of course, "What about poor Brian? I know he hurt Justin, but for all of us to see him leave like that."

"It certainly was an interesting night."

Brian decided to make our presence known, "What can I say Melanie. I throw one hell of a party."

We were greeted by a chorus of shocked "Brian"s. They all looked a little guilty about being caught talking about us. Once they saw me standing behind him, dumbfounded is the best word I can use to describe their expressions.

Debbie recovered first, "Sunshine?"

"Morning," was all I said as I sat down next to Lindsay. Brian smirked at me and pushed Ted over on the other side. "So, how is everyone today?" he asked in a falsely cheerful voice.

It was pretty amusing to watch them fall over themselves to make normal conversation. Since we were both there, no one knew what to say. Alone we would have each been subject to the third degree, but with us together no one knew how to broach the subject.

Eventually Debbie had enough of the avoidance, "So what the fuck is up with you two? Last night I would have put money on you never speaking again. And today you walk in here like nothing ever happened."

I decided to let Brian field this one since he had more experience dealing with them.

"Nothing did happen, Deb. You all let your imaginations run away with you. Just because we left the part at different times, doesn't mean we didn't go home together."

"Different times?" Ted asked in obvious disbelief. "You left with different people. I mean Justin you left with, well you left with someone who wasn't Brian. And Brian, I don't know who you left with. But I'm sure it was someone who wasn't Justin."

Emmet put a hand on Ted's shoulder, "Teddy, stop. You're making it worse."

I rolled my eyes before answering, "Ted, I walked Ethan out of the party. Then I met up with Brian, and we went home. End of story. So what is anybody doing later?"

We made it through the rest of breakfast with nothing more than a few confused and concerned looks. Then Brian and I had the nicest day. We didn't do anything special. Just kind of hung out together until we met the boys at Babylon later.

Brian had gone to get a drink when Emmett twirled his way over to me. "I'm so glad you two are back on track." I must have looked puzzled because he continued, "Oh, come on. I can tell just by the way you look at each other. All the questions are gone from your eyes. And Brian," he put his hand over his heart and smiled. "When Brian looks at you, a wee bit more of his guard has been let down."

Sometimes Emmett knows exactly what to say. "You think so?" I asked.

"Definitely. He's getting there, baby. Just be patient."

"Thanks." I would have said more, but I heard a growled "Emmett" behind me. Emmett's hands were removed from my shoulders and more familiar arms wrapped around me from behind. "Let's dance," Brian whispered in my ear.

I wouldn't exactly call what we did dancing. More like a public prelude to sex. Brian grabbed my ass and rubbed our cocks against each other. I ran my tongue along the hollow of his throat, his collarbone, whatever was closest. The song finally ended and Brian said to me, "I want to take you home and fuck you all night." My only response was to practically drag him out of Babylon.

I had his shirt off in the elevator and he had my pants undone. This was all about possession. There was no time for gentleness. We used our teeth instead of lips, hands clawed instead of caressed. Once again we found ourselves naked in the bed. Brian's entire body was pressed up against me. I couldn't stop touching him. Our mouths collided while we pulled and squeezed each other's sensitive spots. I kissed the side of his face and dragged my teeth over his ear lobe. He kneaded my inner thighs brushing his knuckles against my balls.

I rolled over onto my stomach and pressed the lube and condom into his hand. He quickly prepared us both and drove his cock into me. He groaned when I clenched my muscles around him and tried to pull him in deeper. He moved quickly, each thrust increasing the heat and intensity. I pushed up to meet him every time. He placed one hand over mine for leverage and nipped at the back of my neck. I felt my chest constrict when his fingers, still slick with lube, began sliding over my cock. I twisted my head around so I could reach his mouth. Biting his lips, sucking

his tongue into my mouth. The pleasure seemed to go on forever. Pushing us both higher and higher until there was nowhere left to go. We came together, moaning our releases into each other's mouth.

Later, we laid tangled in each other's arms. "I love you," I whispered. I had never felt closer to Brian, and I had to tell him. I felt him start to move away from me. I stroked my hand along his face to stop him. "Shh. Don't say anything. I know how you feel about me. You told me everything I needed to know last night. I want you to know how I feel about you."

I felt him relax again. "Thank you," was all he said. Then he kissed me one last time before we fell asleep.

The sound of the door opening brings me back to the present. I can't help smiling as Brian approaches already taking his clothes off. "Hey."

"Hey," he answers before kissing me softly. "What's going on?"

"Look what came today." I hand him a plastic wrapped package and watch his eyes light up. God, I love him.

"The tenth anniversary edition of Rage. Wow. Have you talked to Mikey?"

I roll my eyes, "Of course. He's already called me like ten times. I'm surprised he didn't call you."

"He probably did, but I had meetings all day. I didn't check my messages before I left." He laughs a little at my knowing look. "I was in a hurry to get home, OK?"

"Michael wants us to meet him at Woody's later. To celebrate. He's calling everyone else."

"Sure." He looks at the comic book for a minute before setting it down and pulling me into his arms. "Ten years and still going strong. Who would have thought?"

He's not talking about Rage anymore. "I always knew. Are you glad?"

"I'm proud as fucking hell," he says before kissing me practically senseless. "So, when do we have to be at Woody's?"

"Not for a few hours yet." I entwine my fingers with his and can feel myself beaming.

"So we have time for a private celebration?" he asks already pulling me toward the bedroom.

I lick my lips before answering. "Oh yeah," my voice comes out breathless. No one cares if we're late. Hell, they probably expect it. I wouldn't want to disappoint anyone.

Suffering from Soul Fatigue



Justin tries to give Brian the Christmas he deserves.

NOVEMBER 29

Justin couldn't have been more surprised when he opened the door and found Michael on the other side. He didn't even bother trying to hide his shock, "What are you doing here?"

Clearly agitated, Michael brushed past him and entered the small apartment. "When was the last time you saw Brian?"

"Michael, you are not starting that again." One of the first times Brian and Justin had seen each other at the diner, Michael had pulled Justin aside and warned him to stay away from Brian. Secretly, Justin had found it rather amusing. If he and Brian wanted to see each other, there was nothing Michael could do about it.

"I'm not trying to give you a hard time, but I really need to know."

Justin had to think a few minutes before answering. After the Rage party, he'd decided to separate his life from Brian's as much as possible. He still saw Debbie and Vic, and occasionally he ran into Lindsay at some art event, but that was it. Justin could count on one hand the number of times he and Brian had run into each other. Other than hellos and polite inquiries into each other's well-being, they hadn't spoken in almost nine months. "I'm not sure Michael; it's been at least a month maybe longer. Why?"

"I wondered if you'd noticed anything different about him. That's all." By this time Michael had made his way into the small living room where he was nervously looking around.

"What's going on? You don't want me anywhere near Brian so don't expect me to believe you suddenly care what I think about him. If this is your twisted way of telling me he's with someone, I don't care."

"No, he's not with someone else. I don't know how to say this; it's just there's something wrong"

Justin immediately felt panic taking over, he didn't give Michael a chance to finish his sentence. "What do you mean there's something wrong? Has Brian been hurt; did something happen at work, is something wrong with Gus?" Justin felt his world collapsing as he mentally ran through a longer list of worst case scenarios.

"No, it's nothing like that. He's just not the same."

Justin could tell Michael was having a hard time opening up to him, but he was rapidly losing patience, "Michael, you are going to have to do better than that." Or I'm going to kill you, he silently added.

"It's like he's not himself. He still goes out with us, but he doesn't seem interested."

"I don't think losing interest in Babylon is a reason to worry. Maybe he wants something different." Justin wondered if Brian was ready to grow up, and Michael was feeling left behind.

"It's more than that. He's like that with everything-work, Gus. It's like he's just going through the motions. You know how Brian is. Normally if something's wrong he goes into hyper mode, but this is just the opposite. He's starting to shut down."

Even though Justin thought Michael was overreacting, he could tell he was really worried. "Even if this is true, why are you telling me?"

"I've tried talking to him. Mom and Lindsay have tried talking to him. He just blows us off. Says nothings wrong and we need to mind our own business. As much as I hate to admit it, Brian was always different with you. He was more open around you, and you seemed to understand him. I thought maybe you might have figured out what was going on."

Justin shook his head. If he'd understood Brian at all, he'd still be with him. "I'm sorry I can't help you Michael. But like I said I haven't seen Brian in a long time, and I'm the last person he'd open up to."

"I'm at a loss here, Justin. Can't you think of anything?"

Great, now Michael was giving him the puppy dog look Brian always gave into. "I certainly can't say anything without seeing Brian. I'm working an extra shift at the diner tomorrow morning. Bring him in for breakfast since he won't expect to see me. I'll try and talk to him, but no promises."

"Thanks, Justin," Michael gave him a small smile as he left.

Justin sat back down and tried to figure out what he had just agreed to. Reinvolving himself in Brian's life was not a good idea. Not after how hard he worked at starting over. Although, not as most people thought with Ethan. After less than a week, Justin realized whatever feelings he thought he had for Ethan weren't real. They'd just been an escape from his crumbling relationship with Brian. But he hadn't looked back. After a few tense months of living with his mother, they had both agreed it would be best if he found a place of his own. He discovered new bars and clubs to hang out at. He dated. Justin had a whole new life; one that did not include Brian.

Of course, it wasn't quite that easy. While Justin dated frequently, it was never more than a good time and a quick fuck. He hadn't been able to muster up any emotional interest in anyone. Although he rarely let himself think about Brian, he couldn't completely ignore the ache in his heart. Or the fact that his breath caught in his chest the few times he had seen Brian. So if he was honest, it wasn't surprising that he agreed to help. Most likely Michael was imagining things, but Justin couldn't take the chance. If there was something wrong with Brian, if he could help and didn't, he would never forgive himself.

Well if he was going to do this, he needed a plan. The first step would be to gather information. He could start that tonight with Debbie. He had agreed to a day after Thanksgiving feast to make up for skipping yesterday's dinner. Justin thought it would be too awkward if he came, but Debbie had been disappointed. Although, it couldn't have been more awkward than spending Thanksgiving with his mother's family. His mother had been thrilled that he showed up, but no one else knew what to say to him. Between being openly gay and then being bashed, he was regarded as some kind of freak by his family. Hopefully Christmas would be better.

Justin waited until after dinner to try and work Brian into the conversation. "So, did Gus have a good time yesterday?"

"Good question. But since the asshole refused to bring him, I can't answer it."

Shit, Brian was really in trouble now. Debbie had been looking forward to seeing Gus all week. "I thought Brian was bringing him?"

"He was supposed to, but he showed up without him. No explanation, of course. If I wasn't so worried about him, I would have killed him on the spot," Debbie huffed.

"Is something wrong with Brian?" Justin tried to seem only casually interested. He caught the warning glare Vic sent Debbie, but she answered anyway.

"Something's going on that's for sure. He seems lost. Never thought I'd use that word to describe Brian, but it seems to fit. He barely even bothered to insult Ted. I wish I could figure out what's bothering him," Debbie shook her head as if to clear it before continuing. "Enough about Brian. How was your holiday, Sunshine?"

Justin allowed the change of subject, but he was really starting to worry. Maybe Michael wasn't exaggerating.

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NOVEMBER 30

Justin watched the door nervously for the first few hours of his shift until finally Michael and Brian walked in. He snuck a quick glance at Brian and saw no immediate cause for concern. He looked a little tired, but otherwise was his normal gorgeous self. He waited until they had been seated for a few minutes before heading to their table coffee pot in hand. "Good morning, gentlemen. Coffee?" Michael smiled and answered, but Brian only pushed his cup in Justin's direction. "I'll be back to take your order if a few minutes."

Justin took care of his other customers while keeping an eye on Brian's table. Michael seemed to be doing all the talking while Brian pretended to listen. But that wasn't all that unusual. He pasted a bright smile on his face as he made his way back over to them. "So what can I get for you this morning? Two of our special turkey omelets?"

Brian looked at Justin for the first time, "You have got to be kidding. Even this place wouldn't stoop so low. Just bring me a whole wheat bagel no butter."

Justin would have been thrilled with Brian's sarcastic reply if he hadn't looked at his eyes. There was an emptiness there Justin had never seen before. Michael was right; something was very wrong. He quickly took Michael's order and left the table to regroup.

"Here you go. Enjoy and let me know if you need anything," Justin smiled again as he set their plates down in front of them.

"Why the fuck are you so damn cheerful?" Brian asked.

"Just trying to get into the holiday spirit."

Brian snorted, "More likely angling for a big tip. Go bother your other costumers."

Justin started to laugh, but then he saw by the look on Brian's face that he was serious. Not sure what to make of the comment, he walked away and kept his distance until they left. Michael shot him a worried look on the way out. Justin was even more confused when he saw the fifty dollar bill Brian left for him on the table. If he was going to figure out what was wrong, he was going to need more help. Lindsay should be at the GLC tomorrow; Justin would make sure he ran into her.

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DECEMBER 1

"Lindsay, hi. How are you?" Justin asked when he found her.

"Justin, how nice to see you honey. What are you doing here?" Lindsay gave him a quick hug.

"I needed to drop some things off for the Christmas auction."

"Can you believe it's December already? Between Hanukkah and Christmas, I don't know if I'm coming or going."

"Debbie said Gus didn't make it for Thanksgiving. He's not sick, is he?"

"No, Brian was supposed to pick him up, but he canceled at the last minute. We ended up taking him to my parents. You can just imagine how much fun he had there."

Justin laughed, "If they're anything like my family, I'm sure he would have been better off at Debbie's."

"We all would have been. I just don't know what to do about Brian. Maybe Mel is right."

"What do you mean?" Justin was getting good at making his interest seem casual.

"I can't remember the last time he came to see Gus. He's always willing to contribute financially in fact he sent extra money for the holidays. But beyond that, he doesn't seem interested anymore. Maybe I was pushing for more of an emotional commitment than he's ready for. I'm sorry Justin. I don't know why I'm telling you all of this. I've got to run, but don't be a stranger."

"I won't. Say hi to Melanie and give Gus a kiss for me." Justin watched her leave. The feeling of unease he had about Brian was continuing to grow.

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DECEMBER 2

Justin woke up early in order to continue his investigation. He breathed a sigh of relief when his first telephone call was answered. "Cynthia, hello. It's Justin. How are you?"

"Justin? Oh my God, it's so nice to hear from you again. I'm sorry, but Brian's not here yet," she sounded both surprised and pleased.

"I know, but I didn't want to talk to him. I'm calling for you."

"Don't tell me it's my lucky day and you've decided to give women a try."

"No," Justin laughed. "I wanted to know if anything strange was going on at work."

"I take it Michael's been talking to you?"

"I guess I wasn't his first choice for information."

"Well, I wasn't much help to him. Unfortunately, there's not much I can tell you. Everything is fine here. Brian is still great with the clients. Vance has even backed off a little."

"So his mood has nothing to do with work?" Justin had hoped business was all that was bothering Brian even though he knew better.

"No, like I said business is great. But something is wrong. He seems really down which isn't like Brian. Of course he won't tell me anything. Every time I ask, he tells me to go away. But he doesn't actually yell at me which makes me worry even more. I would have thought if you two were seeing each other again, he'd be in a better mood."

"We're not so don't tell him I called. Thanks, Cynthia. Hopefully things will improve soon."

Justin waited until after his first class to call the comic book store. "Michael, it's Justin."

"It's about time you called. So what do you think?"

"You're right, Brian is definitely upset about something. I have no idea what it is."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I'm not going to do anything. You know as well as I do Brian wouldn't appreciate me interfering. But you can do something. You are his best friend." Lord knows you told anyone who would listen often enough, Justin thought to himself. "But don't push him, you know how Brian hates that. Just keep an eye on him. Maybe spend a little extra time with him. He may tell you what's bothering him eventually. Just be there for him. Sorry I couldn't be more help."

"That's OK. I don't know what I was expecting."

"Can you tell me one quick thing? When did you notice there was something wrong?"

"I think it was around the middle of October. I have a customer so I have to go. Thanks for trying."

"Sure," Justin answered before hanging up. That should keep Michael off his back. Once he figured out what to do, the last thing he needed was Michael hovering and offering advice. Now he just needed to figure out what could have happened in October. He couldn't forget the look in Brian's eyes. The only time he's seen anything close to it was when his father was dying and after his mother found out he was gay. Fuck! His mother's birthday was in October. Well, it looked like he had one more stop to make today.

"Mrs. Kinney?" Justin asked the slight, grey-haired woman who answered the door.

"Yes, can I help you?"

"I'm Justin Taylor"

Before he could say anymore, he watched a look of horror come over her face, "I know you. You're the one who's living with my son."

"I'm not living with Brian. He was just helping me out after I had some problems. We were friends, but we don't see each other anymore," he awkwardly tried to explain. "May I come in?"

"Of course, where are my manners." She led him into a room she called the parlor. "Now what can I do for you?"

"I know Brian came to see you on your birthday. I was wondering if something happened."

He saw her stiffen before she answered, "What do you mean?"

Justin realized she was getting defensive. He would have to try another approach. "Since then he's seemed contemplative. I think he's considering making some changes in his life, and I wondered if you said anything to him."

"I most certainly did. I told him the same thing I told him after I found out about his lifestyle. He needs to stop rejecting God and start living his life the way the Bible tells us to. Until then his life will be empty and meaningless. He will have no one in his life he can count on, and no one will be able to count on him. A life of sin isolates him from everyone. Look at how he drove his family away. His father only saw him when he needed money. He and I rarely speak. He has allowed himself to become completely unlovable."

Justin couldn't believe the moral certainty he heard in her voice. As much he wanted to lash out at her, this wasn't the time. "Did you share all of this with Brian?"

"I had to. I reminded him that his only salvation was through God. I hope he took my words to heart."

"I'm sure he did. Thank you for your time, Mrs. Kinney." Justin had to get out of there before he said something he'd regret. He was beginning to understand why Brian never talked about his family.

Well, now Justin knew what was wrong with Brian. He was looking at his life through his mother's eyes. Although Brian would never admit it, Justin knew he wanted his family's approval. For some reason, he was allowing his mother's judgmental attitude to affect him. If you looked at Brian's life on the surface, Justin could see how it would look shallow. But Brian should know better than that. He should realize how many people depended on him and cared about him. But then again, he could have gotten hung up on the remark she made about his father only wanting his money. That might explain what was going on with Gus and why he left such a big tip. Justin was as guilty as anyone in this area. He had received a letter over the summer from Brian's attorney reminding him of their arrangement regarding Justin's tuition. It had said that if Justin attempted to break the contract Brian would pursue legal options. Justin had signed the necessary paperwork without ever contacting Brian. At the time, he'd been hurt that Brian choose to handle it that way, but he should have at least called to thank him. Well, Justin was going to have to remind Brian of how many good things he did have in his life. He just needed to find a way to do it without giving himself away.

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DECEMBER 5

Brian walked back to his office after another boring meeting. Cynthia smiled at him as he approached.

"So how did it go?"

Brian's only response was to throw the signed contracts on her desk before entering his office and shutting the door. He needed to block out the annoyingly happy Christmas music she was listening to. God, he was tired of this. He was tired of fucking everything. And all this Christmas bullshit was making it worse. Just what he needed, more reminders of how fucking empty his life was. Not that he should be complaining; it's what he wanted after all. Brian closed his eyes for a second and tried to focus on something less depressing.

When he opened them, he noticed for the first time a small wrapped package on the corner of his desk. Figuring it was from some client, he reached to open it so he could have Cynthia send an appropriate thank you note. Once he opened it, all he found was a plain white box. Inside, however, were an assortment of green and red condoms and a small card. The card read: "It's time to spread some holiday cheer. Just remember to always be safe." Santa

Brian laughed for the first time in weeks. He went out to thank Cynthia for the gift. "Very cute, Cynthia," he said with a smile.

She looked up from her work, "What are you talking about?"

"The present," Brian held the box up.

"Oh, that's not from me. It was dropped off by a courier while you were in your meeting. So what was it?"

"Never mind," Brian went back to his office, amused but slightly puzzled.

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DECEMBER 7

Brian walked up the stairs to his loft after spending the morning at the gym. Usually working out relaxed him, but today he was more tense than when he left. He knew what the problem was. Spending time with the boys was

becoming more and more irritating. Brian was finding it harder to play the role they all expected of him. He had the uncaring, sarcastic, sex machine image down pat, but it was wearing a little thin. But anytime he tried to be more than that, they reacted with suspicion and disbelief. To be fair, Michael did realize something was wrong, but he was completely clueless as to what it could be. His main concern seemed to be that Brian wasn't having enough fun. Christ, as Debbie once pointed out, hadn't they had enough fun. Was it so hard to believe he wanted more than a string of nameless fucks in the backroom? Considering how much time and effort he had put into establishing his reputation, the answer was yes. Even Brian didn't believe he could have more. He tried it once and look what happened.

When Brian reached his door, he saw a present sitting in front of it. It was wrapped in the same paper as the condoms had been. Maybe he'd get a new dildo this time, he wondered. He sat down on the couch to open it and found another plain box. This one contained an eight inch carving of a man holding a small boy's hand. The card read: "If Gus could, he would thank you for all you have done for him. He is very lucky to have three parents. You made sure he would grow up in home filled with love. Remember that a child can never have too much love." Santa

Brian sat there for a long time tracing his fingers over the figurine. Sometimes he did question his place in Gus's life. Melanie and Lindsay were raising him. What did they need him for? He wasn't sure he would be more to Gus than a sperm donor and a checkbook. But he did love him. Brian gently set the carving down and reached for the phone. He decided to call Lindsay and see if he could spend some time with Gus this afternoon.

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DECEMBER 10

Brian returned from lunch to find another present on his desk. He was puzzled to find an ABBA CD until he looked at the track listing. It included the song he had danced to with Justin at Pride. He was almost afraid to open the card. "You are capable of acts of great kindness and healing. Don't forget the power of a touch." Santa

Brian tried never to think about those days when Justin came to live with him after the bashing. He tried to forget his fear that Justin would never truly recover and ignore that fact that he knew he never would. Pride had been a good day though. He had started to believe that Justin was finally getting stronger. When they danced, it felt so good to hold him like that. Justin told him once that when Brian touched him he felt safe. Brian sighed and put the CD in a drawer before reaching for his messages.

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DECEMBER 13

Babylon was busy; apparently no one had been frightened off by Friday the 13th superstitions. Brian turned back toward Emmett and Ted, "I'm going to get a drink. You guys want anything?" After they both shook their heads, Brian made his way over to the bar. While he was waiting for his drink, the other bartender signaled for his attention.

"Hey Kinney, someone left this for you today," he shook his head and handed Brian a package wrapped in what he now thought of as Santa paper. "This has got to be a first. Tricks leaving you Christmas presents."

Brian quickly finished his drink and headed back to his jeep to open the gift. Maybe he's head out early. No one had caught his attention so far. He knew Mikey would be pissed that he didn't wait for him, but he was getting pretty bored. He unwrapped the package and pulled out a sexy black shirt that was perfect for Babylon. He couldn't help but laugh when he read the card: "Clothes don't make the man, but good packaging never hurt." Santa

Brian smiled and decided to head back into the club. Maybe things were starting to look up.

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DECEMBER 16

Brian returned from work to find another present waiting for him. He would never admit it, but he was starting to look forward to these packages. He refused to analysis his anticipation or the improved mood he'd been in. Today's box contained a Rage action figure. Brian knew a few prototypes had been made because Michael had shown them to him. But since Michael refused to work with Justin, Rage became a one hit wonder, and nothing ever came of the marketing items. "Michael may never realize it, but you pushing him into David's arms was the best thing you could have done for him. It helped him let go of you a little and mature. That is what gave him the strength tp pursue his relationship with Ben. You will always be his superhero." Santa

"Jesus," Brian muttered. The gifts were really starting to get to him. Santa seemed to know him way too well. As annoying and dense as Mikey could be, he did try to always be there for Brian. And Brian hadn't been making it easy on him lately. Maybe the next time Michael asked him to do something, he'd actually say yes.

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DECEMBER 18

"So when are you going to tell me who your secret admirer is?" Cynthia asked him as soon as he walked in.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Brian tried to sound uninterested, but he couldn't stop the smile that spread over his face.

"Well that present on your desk came from someone."

Brian didn't answer, but he made sure to shut his office door. He studied the package for a few minutes before opening it. He was surprised to find a PIFA alumni magazine. Noticing a page was marked, he turned to it. There he found a write-up on the fall show that mentioned Justin as one of the featured artists. The card was clipped to the page. "Giving Justin his art back is a gift that will never be forgotten. Your faith in him helped him to believe in himself." Santa

Brian remembered the show. Debbie had told him about, and he had wanted to go. He would have loved to see how Justin's work was progressing, but he knew it wouldn't be a good idea. He had blown things so badly with Justin; he had hurt him so much and so often. He couldn't be part of Justin's life expect from a distance. He could make sure he had a chance at the future he wanted, but Brian had to hope that other people would step in to take care of Justin. He read the card again. It was hard for him to think of the time he spent with Justin as anything but negative, but maybe something good had come of it.

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DECEMBER 20

Brian had one bitch of a day. The last few days before holidays were always bad, but today had been ridiculous. He had a horrible headache and wanted nothing more than to have a drink and forget the day had ever happened. He unconsciously relaxed a bit when he saw the package outside his door. When he picked it up, he noticed a small note taped to the outside telling him not to open it before seven. He knew that wouldn't be a problem since it had to be close to nine.

Once he entered the loft, he threw his coat on the couch and opened the present. Inside were two of his favorite gourmet cookies and a card that simply said: "Live a little." Santa

Brian laughed and decided to do just that. Once he was seated at the counter with a glass of milk, he couldn't help but wonder where the gifts were coming from. He'd already eliminated most of the obvious choices. It was way too subtle for Debbie. He considered Lindsay and Michael, but there were problems with both of them. Lindsay didn't have the sense of humor for some of the gifts. And Michael never would have been able to go this long without giving himself away. The biggest problem was that he couldn't think of a single person who could have come up with all the gifts. He never let anyone get that close. His friends were allowed to know different parts of him, but

no one got the whole picture. There was one person he thought of, but he quickly dismissed the idea as being impossible. He decided he had no choice but to let it remain a mystery. He would simply enjoy the gifts and the rare moments of contentment that came with them.

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DECEMBER 21

Justin hated to do this, but he had no other choice. He had one more planned gift for Brian, but he wanted to do something special for Christmas Eve. He hadn't seen Brian since the morning at the diner so he had no way of knowing if the presents were helping. He could only hope he'd come up with the right plan. Now if he wanted to pull off this last surprise, there was only one person who could help him. He shifted nervously while he waited for the door to open. "Mrs. Kinney," he greeted Brian's mother again.

"You again."

"I'm sorry to bother you, but I need to ask you a few questions."

"Come in," she didn't look happy, but she once again led him to the parlor.

"I was wondering if you could tell me what Christmas was like when Brian was growing up."

"I imagine it was like everyone else's Christmas. Nothing different," she answered.

"Mrs. Kinney, I know that Brian's childhood was not a happy one. I know that Mr. Kinney was a difficult and sometimes violent man. You don't have to pretend with me," Justin knew he was running the risk of offending her, but he needed to know the truth.

"Young man, I don't see how that's any of your business."

"It's not except for your son. I'm trying surprise him for Christmas, and I need your help."

"I tried to focus on the meaning of Christmas, on the religious aspect. Jack worked hard to support us, but he could be harsh. He did not have patience for children or their dreams. If you and my son are no longer," she paused as if looking for the right word, "close, I don't understand why you need to know all this."

"Brian did a lot to help me this year, and I want to do something special to thank him. Can you remember what he wanted Christmas to be like or if you ever had a special Christmas?"

"It's been such a long time, but I may be able to help you. Wait here." She was gone for about fifteen minutes. When she returned, she handed Justin a bundle of papers. "Brian would never believe I still have these, but I kept the letters the children wrote to Santa Clause. Claire wrote for a long time, but I think Brian stopped when he was seven or eight. There may be something in these."

"Thank you so much," Justin gave her his brightest smile and prepared for a glimpse into Brian's childhood.

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DECEMBER 22

Brian was about to leave the diner when Deb stopped him, "Hey Kiddo, I have a present for you."

He turned back, a bit puzzled, "Thanks Debbie, but I'll be at the house on Christmas."

"It's not from me. Someone dropped it off for you earlier."

Brian took the package wrapped in familiar paper and headed to the jeep. He opened it and pulled out a framed picture of the whole gang. He remembered when it had been taken. Debbie had a huge party for the Fourth of July. Not only had she insisted everyone attended, she conned them into letting Carl take a group picture. Brian had never seen the result until now. They were all smiling and looked happy to be together. He smiled and opened the card. "Family is not about DNA. Never forget that you are loved." Santa

Brian pulled away from the diner, but instead of going back to the loft, he drove to the mall. He decided to do his own shopping this year instead of sending Cynthia for gift certificates.

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DECEMBER 23

Justin walked into the comic book store and waited until Michael finished with a customer before approaching him. "Hey Michael, are you all ready for Christmas?"

"Mostly, what are you doing here?" he asked, clearly surprised.

"I wanted to see how Brian was doing."

"Great," Michael smiled, "I think I overreacted a bit. He never told me what was bothering him, but it must have worked itself out."

"I'm glad. Also, I need a favor. I realized I left some Christmas stuff my mom loaned me in storage at the loft. I need to get it back before Christmas. I was wondering if I could borrow your key and go over while Brian's at work tomorrow."

"I don't know."

"I really hate to bother Brian especially if he's doing better. This way he'll never even know I was there. I'll bring the key right back; I can slip it under the door if you're not open."

"I guess you have a point," Michael reluctantly handed over his key.

"Thanks, Michael. Just make sure Brian doesn't come home before two, and everything will work out." Justin smiled as he left the store. Michael was so easy to manipulate.

.....
DECEMBER 24

Brian sighed in annoyance as the phone rang again. He had sent Cynthia home early and had no one to screen his calls. He glanced at the clock. Who would be calling after five on Christmas Eve? "Kinney."

"Brian, it's your mother."

"What do you want?" he asked not even bothering to disguise his irritation.

"I wanted to wish you a Merry Christmas and invite you to Midnight Mass. You can bring your friend if you like."

"Michael?" That was a new one. She'd never cared for Michael in the past.

"No, not the Novotny boy. Justin, the one who was at your loft."

"Mom, Justin and I aren't together anymore. Besides, I didn't think God approved of fags."

"Brian, don't be difficult. And Justin tells me the same thing about you two, but I don't believe him either. His eyes just light up when he talks about you."

"When did you talk to Justin?" Brian had no idea what was going on, but it couldn't be good.

"Oh dear," his mother sighed. "I shouldn't have said anything. I hope I didn't ruin his Christmas surprise. Well, if you change your mind about mass, you know where to find me."

Brian held on to the phone long after his mother hung up trying to process what she said. Justin had been talking to his mother. Justin was planning some kind of Christmas surprise. That meant? Fuck! That meant Justin was Santa. Brian had known for a while, but he couldn't bring himself to believe it. It made perfect sense yet there was no way it could be true. It had to be Justin, but it couldn't be. Why, after all this time? Suddenly, Brian needed to get home. He wanted to reread the cards to see if there was some clue he missed.

The wreath on his door was the first hint that his Christmas surprise had arrived. He walked into the loft and stood staring in shock. A large, beautifully decorated tree dominated the living room. Garland was draped across the edge of the counter. As stocking hung from one of the glass panels. Candles and more garland covered the tables. There was Christmas music playing quietly, and the whole loft smelled like pine. Brian never thought he'd see something like this in his home. It was more than he'd ever let himself imagine. He spotted an envelope propped up the counter. It instructed him to open his gifts before reading the card.

His stocking contained some small treats, a Babylon keychain, and a travel size grooming kit for his office. There were more packages stacked under the tree. They included a "Dirty Dancing" DVD, a gift set of his favorite hair care products, the new book from one of his favorite authors, and silk sheets. He hesitated a moment before finally reading the card. "It's never too late to be happy. I'm sorry I couldn't grant all your wishes or fulfill all your dreams, but you can. Give yourself the life you deserve." Santa

It was all too much for him. Brian turned the lights off and laid on the couch. He stayed there for a long time watching the lights on the tree still holding the card in his hand. Finally he decided it was time to find his Santa and get some answers.

Brian knocked on the door and waited impatiently for Justin to answer.

"Brian?"

"Are you sure?"

Justin tilted his head and looked at him questionably, "Brian, are you drunk?"

"No, I'm not drunk. Now let me in." He waited until they were both seated on the couch before asking again. "Are you sure?"

"Am I sure about what? What are you talking about?"

"Are you sure it's not too late for me to be happy?" Brian asked quietly. He watched Justin try to hide his surprise before turning away. He reached his hand out and gently turned Justin's face back toward him. "Did you mean all those things that you wrote?"

"Brian, I don't know what you're talking about."

"Justin, don't. No one has ever done anything like that for me. Don't deny it." This was too important to Brian; there was no way he going to let Justin pretend it didn't happen.

Justin sighed, "How did you find out?"

"That's a long story that I'll tell you later. First I want to know why and how. And don't forget to explain how my other was involved." Brian saw Justin wince when he mentioned his mother. He definitely hadn't plan on getting caught.

"I want you to understand that you were never supposed to know. This wasn't some plot to manipulate you or try and get you back."

Brian could sense Justin's nervousness. He reached for his hands to calm him and help him realize he wasn't upset. "I don't think that. Now stop stalling and tell me."

"Michael came to see me after Thanksgiving. He was worried about you and wanted to know if I knew what was going on. I thought he was exaggerating until I saw you at the diner. Then I knew there was something wrong."

"How?" Brian asked.

"Your eyes. You said all the right things, but the look in your eyes was all wrong. I asked around, but no one seemed to know anything. Once I figured that everything started after your mother's birthday, I decided to go see her. She told me what she said to you. I just wanted to show you that she was wrong. I wanted you to stop letting her decide how you saw your life."

"That explains the how, but I still want to know why. And don't try to bullshit me; I want the truth." He knew Justin would try to downplay what he had done, but Brian needed to understand why he had gone to so much trouble.

"You've done so much for me, for everyone really. I wanted to remind you of that. You work so hard at maintaining your image; sometimes I think you even forget who you really are. You forget about all the wonderful things you do to make other people happy even at your own expense. You forget how much people depend on you and also how much they admire you. We don't tell you enough. Partly because you try to hide what you do, and partly because it makes you uncomfortable so you make it difficult. But those are poor excuses. Everyone needs to know how important they are. I wanted to find a way to remind you, and I wanted to make you smile." Justin looked away when he finished as if embarrassed by what he revealed.

Brian didn't know what to say; he was completely overwhelmed. What Justin had done for him was so far beyond anything he ever imagined, he didn't know where to begin. How do you thank someone for helping you see your life the way it really was instead the way it looked from the outside? How do you tell someone they brought you more joy in the last few weeks than you've felt in your entire life? How do you let them know the make you feel things you didn't even know you were capable of? Brian had no idea so he did what he always did when words failed him. He pulled Justin to him and began to kiss him.

He was surprised when Justin pulled sharply away. He panicked for a moment and wondered if he'd read too much into what Justin had done. "What's wrong? Is there someone else?"

Justin laughed, "Since when do you worry about competition? No, there's no one else. But when I told you I never wanted you to know it was me, I meant it. I haven't been part of your life for a long time. I don't want you to feel obligated to me. I don't want anything to happen out of gratitude or some weird idea you might have about owing me. I just wanted you to be happy. I don't need anything from you."

"Justin look at me. I am happy because you made me happy. My biggest fear when we were together, the main reason I pushed you away was that you could never really love me. I thought you loved my image or some idea you had of me in your head. But I never thought you could love me if you knew the real me. You've shown me that you know me better than anyone, maybe even better than I know myself. And if your actions are any indication, you still care for me," he looked up and saw Justin's answering smile. "I can't tell you what that means to me. All I know is that I feel safe with you; I don't have to hide from you. I feel closer to you than I ever have to anyone. Let me show you how happy that makes me."

Justin only response was to lead Brian into the bedroom. Once they were seated on the bed, he reached for Justin again. He wanted to memorize the feel of his lips; he wanted to relearn the taste to his mouth. He slowly undressed them both then leaned Justin back against the pillows. He finally left his mouth to run a line of kisses along his jaw up to his ear. He traced his tongue down Justin's neck, across his collarbones until he settled on one nipple. He licked and nibbled on one while rolling the other in his fingers. He felt Justin arch toward him and reach for him.

He looked up briefly, "No touching until I say so."

"But Brian."

"No, now stop interrupting me." Brian returned his attention to Justin's nipples. As much as he loved having Justin touch him, he wanted this to last longer than a few minutes. He worked his way down Justin's body until he reached his very hard cock. He teased it with gentle licks from his tongue loving the way it jumped in response to his touch. Then he slowly slid it into his mouth. After just a few minutes of continued teasing with his tongue and lips, he felt Justin shoot down his throat. Brian rested his head on his stomach for a minute before turning his attention to his inner thighs.

He heard Justin start to speak. "Shh," he whispered between kisses, "Just relax and enjoy." He rolled Justin over and nipped at his hip before heading for his destination. He gently parted Justin's cheeks and ran his tongue between them. When he reached his hole, he licked around it a few times before pushing his tongue inside. Justin gasped and pushed up toward him. He slid his hands underneath him and began to play with his nipples in the same rhythm he used with his tongue.

"Oh my God, Brian please," Justin pleaded with him.

Knowing this could easily push both of them over the edge, Brian reluctantly pulled away. In a reversal of his usual rimming technique, he moved up Justin's spine. Nuzzling his neck and ear for a while before turning Justin to face him. He kissed him deeply then asked, "Please tell me you have a condom in here."

Justin fumbled with the nightstand drawer before turning back to Brian. He handed him the lube, but held on to the condom. Brian closed his eyes when Justin slowly slipped the condom over his aching cock. He lingered for a few minutes and gently stroked Brian's balls before pulling his hands away. Brian kissed Justin one more time before carefully entering him.

It wasn't until he was all the way in that he realized he'd been holding his breath. He couldn't believe how good it felt to be inside Justin again. He had never felt anything like this before. He began to move loving the friction of Justin's tight heat against him. Justin reached for Brian. Running his hands through his hair, stroking his chest. Justin kissed him roughly trying to bring him even closer. He met him thrust for thrust until Brian was dizzy from the pleasure.

He never wanted it to end, but he saw the flush come over Justin's face and knew he was close. He reached down to stroke Justin's cock and quickly felt him begin to explode. Brian thrust deeper into Justin and kissed him as his own climax began. After a few moments, he reluctantly withdrew. He pulled Justin tightly toward him and buried his face in his neck. He couldn't imagine ever letting him go.

A few hours later, Justin turned toward him. "How did you know?" He asked quietly.

"I thought you were asleep?"

"No, just drifting. Now answer the question."

"It couldn't be anyone else unless there really is a Santa Claus. No one else knows all of the things you mentioned, and no one else would have gone to so much trouble. I stopped thinking about who it was a while ago because I couldn't believe you would do that for me. You were the only person it could be, but also the one person I couldn't let myself think of." Brian sighed; he knew he wasn't making much sense.

"I tried not to give myself away. If you didn't believe I would do it, why did you come here?"

"My mother gave you away. She called to invite me to mass, and she asked me to bring you. She said something about you wanting to surprise me. I couldn't deny it anymore after that. Then I saw the loft, and I had to come to you. It is so perfect. How did you know?"

"I'm sworn to secrecy. All I can tell you is your mom helped me. I'm glad you like it. I was afraid you might be mad."

Justin smiled at him, and Brian could help but smile back. "It's wonderful. I can never thank you enough."

Justin traced his fingers over Brian's lips, "This smile is thanks enough."

Brian pulled him closer and decided to find more interesting uses for his mouth.

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DECEMBER 25

Brian woke up and found Justin still asleep in his arms. He kissed him lightly. "Good morning."

Justin stretched and smiled, "Good morning.. Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas." Brian noticed the bright sunlight in the room, "What time is it?"

Justin turned away and then started scrambling out of the bed, "Fuck! It's after ten. I have to be at my mom's in less than an hour."

Brian got up and started to dress as he watched his panicked lover dart around the room. "What are you doing after that?"

"Nothing."

"Come to the loft and then we'll go to Debbie's together."

All of Justin's movements stopped, "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure," he reassured him quietly. He grabbed him for a last kiss before pushing him away. "Go get ready. I'll let myself out."

It was after three before Brian heard a knock on the door. He opened it to find Justin carry two large grocery bags.

"My mom sent you leftovers," he said in way of explanation.

Brian took the bags from him and raised his eyebrow questioningly, "You mother sent me food?"

"Yeah, she asked me where I was going and I told her I was coming here. You don't mind do you?"

"Of course not, I just wouldn't think you'd want to ruin her Christmas that way," Brian joked. He was rewarded by seeing the sparkle come back to Justin's eyes.

"Shut up," Justin lightly slapped him on the arm. "She was glad; she likes seeing me happy."

Brian wrapped his arms around Justin's waist and held him there. "And I make you happy?"

"Very," Justin answered before kissing him.

"Good, now come with me." He led Justin to the couch and sat down next to him. "I didn't get a chance to get you anything for Christmas."

"Brian, I don't want anything," Justin interrupted.

He put a hand over Justin's lips, "No talking, just listen to me. I want to give you something, but this is as much for me as it is for you." Brian took a deep breath; he couldn't afford to screw this up. "I want us to try again. Only really try this time. You gave me so much these last few weeks, but mostly you've shown me that love can bring happiness not just pain. I love you, Justin. I always have, but I was always afraid to let you know. I never wanted you to have that much power over me. I'm ready to trust you with my heart." He saw the tears come to Justin's eyes and rushed to caution him. "Now, don't expect miracles here. I'm still a selfish asshole. I'll still screw up all the time. I may never be good and telling you how I feel." He didn't get to say anymore as Justin launched himself into his arms.

Justin kissed him passionately, "Stop it, stop doubting yourself already." He ran his hand along Brian's face. "I never thought I'd hear you say that to me. Tell me one more time."

"I love you," Brian whispered in his ear.

"If you never tell me again, I'll always have this moment."

"How about if I at least tell you every Christmas?" Brian asked with a smile.

"Whenever you want. I love you Brian more than you'll ever know. I know you don't trust words, but listen to me." He kissed Brian again. "I love your mouth with all the funny little expressions you make. I love it when you really smile at me. I love all the wonderful things you do to me with your mouth, especially your tongue."

He placed gentle kisses on Brian's eyelids, "I love you eyes. When you let them they tell me everything I need to know about how you feel."

His mouth moved down Brian's neck. "I love your neck," he whispered as he sucked on his pulse point. "I love feeling your blood pounding."

Brian watched mesmerized as Justin unbuttoned and removed his shirt. He ran his hands over every inch of Brian's chest. "I love your chest. It's so strong. I love to lay my head against it at night and listen to your heartbeat. I love your nipples. I love how hard they get when I play with them." Justin stopped talking and did just that.

Justin carefully removed the rest of Brian's clothing. Brian closed his eyes as Justin began to massage his thighs. "I love your legs. They're so strong, and I love to feel them wrapped around me." Brian sighed as Justin's mouth replaced his hands.

Brian's eyes flew open when Justin wrapped his hands around his erection. "I love your cock. The feel of it" He continued to stroke it. "The taste of it," Justin muttered before reaching for it with his tongue. He licked every inch of it and gently sucked the head into his mouth for a moment. "But mostly, I love to feel your cock deep inside of me." He gave the tip one more kiss.

Justin stepped off the couch and knelt on the floor. Brian allowed him to push him onto his side. Justin reigned kissed all over his back. "I love your back and shoulders. Such perfect lines to draw. I love to stand behind you and lean against you."

Justin moved his head so his mouth rested against Brian's ear. He traced the outside with his tongue before speaking. "I love your ass." Brian felt Justin run his hand along his crack. He began to suck on Brian's earlobe and gently teased one finger into his hole. Brian moaned and leaned toward Justin's hand. "I love the pleasure you feel

when you let me touch you there." He continued to play with Brian's ear in time to the movements of the finger carefully exploring him.

Finally Brian had enough. He pushed Justin's hand away and turned toward. He smiled when he realized Justin was still dresses. "I want you naked. Now!" He growled. Justin quickly complied and Brian pulled him back onto the couch. He kissed Justin deeply and pushed their bodies against each other. He was pleased to feel Justin was as aroused as he was.

He positioned Justin underneath him and began an urgent but thorough exploration of his body. Before long they were both sweating and gasping for breath. "Brian, please," Justin pleaded.

That was all Brian needed to hear. He motioned for Justin to roll over while he got the lube and condom. He didn't waste any time preparing himself and entering Justin. He began rapid deep thrusts wanting to be as far inside Justin as possible. He reached a hand around to Justin's chest and tugged at his nipples as he continued to thrust into him.

"Oh my God, Brian. I love you so much," Justin gasped as he began to cum. As soon as Justin constricted around him, Brian felt his own release begin. They collapsed against the couch together not sure when they could move again.

Brian found himself on the couch again late that night. This time Justin was asleep, his back pressed against Brian's chest. Brian lightly stroked his hair as he watched the lights on the Christmas tree. He couldn't ever remember a better Christmas, and he wasn't ready for it to end. Things had gone well at Deb's. He knew Justin had been worried about what everyone would think. They had been shocked to see them together after so long. Brian figured they were mostly shocked to see how happy he was about it. Before Justin came in, he told them they were back together and gave them a stiff warning. He had told them Justin was responsible for helping him out of the mood he'd been in, and if anyone gave him a hard time, they wouldn't live to see New Year's. That led to a lot of questions Brian refused to answer. As far as he was concerned, Justin's time as Santa was something special and private between them. He couldn't imagine anyone else understanding. Mikey did figure out Justin lied to him about not doing anything. He'd come over later and thanked Justin for knowing how to help Brian. He was relieved Michael was going to be alright with this. As much as he loved him, he wouldn't put up with Michael trying to 'protect' him from Justin.

Brian pulled Justin closer and closed his eyes. He didn't want to think anymore. He had everything he wanted right now, and he planned to enjoy it.

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DECEMBER 31

"Brian, hurry up! People are going to be here any minute," Justin yelled in exasperation at the bathroom door.

"Will you fucking relax? I'll be there in a minute. I'd be ready now if someone hadn't distracted me in the shower."

Justin sighed and walked into the kitchen to make sure the food was set out properly. Brian had insisted on having a New Year's Eve party to show off Justin's Christmas decorations. They would be coming down this week before Justin went back to school, and Brian wanted everyone to see them. He promised Justin no dramatic gestures at this party, but Justin was still nervous.

Justin still couldn't believe he and Brian were back together. He had never been so happy. Brian was more relaxed this time, less worried about what everyone else would think. Even Michael seemed supportive. A part of him couldn't help but wonder if it would last past the holidays. Before he could dwell anymore about that, he felt Brian's arms wrap around him from behind.

"You're finally ready." Justin turned his head back for a kiss. When he turned back around, he noticed Brian holding a package wrapped in Christmas paper. "What's this?"

"Your belated Christmas present."

"Brian, I told you I didn't want"

Brian gestured for him to be quiet, "I want to give to you. So shut up and open it."

Justin smiled brightly. He loved presents and gifts from Brian were rare. He quickly opened it and found a large padlock. Puzzled, he looked at Brian.

"It's for the door. It's time don't you think?" Brian asked looking a little unsure of himself.

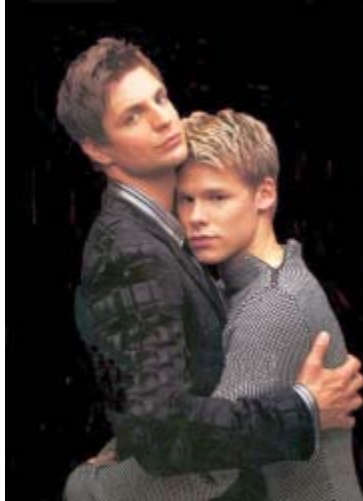
Justin was speechless. He couldn't comprehend what Brian was trying to tell him. He kept looking back and forth between Brian and the lock.

Brian shifted nervously and spoke again, "I'm not promising complete monogamy. I'm not ready for that and may never be. But not here, not in our home, and not in front of each other." Brian took the box from Justin and placed on the counter. He stepped closer and looked at him intently, "I want you to come home. I don't want to spend another year without you."

"Damn, I love you," Justin whispered. Brian was offering him more than he ever hoped for. He moved into Brian's arms. They kissed and held each other close as they prepared to face the New Year together.



# Judas



Series of short post-Rage stories alternating between Justin and Brian's POV.  
Where to they go from here?

## Difficult Decisions (Justin's POV)

I woke up the morning after the Rage party and had no idea where I was. I knew I wasn't in the loft, but I was afraid to open my eyes and face whatever was out there. The events of the previous evening started to come back to me, and my eyes flew open all on their own. Probably from shock. It took me a minute, but I realized I was on Ethan's couch. I could tell from the sound of his breathing that he was still asleep in his bed. Thank God.

I wasn't ready to face him yet. He hadn't understood why I insisted on sleeping on the couch. Hell, I'm not sure I understand it. I mean I had no problem fucking him while Brian and I were together, but last night I just couldn't. I was saved from following that train of thought when my cell phone rang.

"Hello."

"Sunshine, I'm on my way to Brian's to get your stuff. Be home in time for dinner."

"Debbie?"

"Who else would it be? Listen, you're coming home and that's that. No arguments."

"Why?" I couldn't help asking.

"Honey, you fucked up. Probably more than you know. But you didn't do it alone. Besides, you're family, and family sticks together."

"Thanks."

"Don't thank me yet. Old rules still apply. See you tonight."

I stared at the phone after she hung up, grateful one problem was solved. I had somewhere to live. I knew I couldn't stay with Ethan. I was nowhere near ready for that. And my mom's was out of the question. I know my mother loves me, but it pretty clear she has no idea what to do with me. She's already handed me over to Brian twice and Debbie once. No point in going down that road again.

"Who was that?" I heard a sleepy voice ask.

Fuck! Ethan was up. I slowly made my way across the room. "Debbie."

"Debbie?"

"Yeah, Michael's mother. The one I work with at the diner," I tried to explain. Ethan never figured out the relationships in my makeshift family.

He wasn't really interested in the life I had away from him.

"What did she want?"

"Do tell me what time to be home for dinner," I answered smiling.

"Home?" I could hear an edge of anger or something creeping into his voice.

"I lived there before. Remember, I told you about that. She wants me to come back. She's getting my stuff from the loft for me." I threw that last part in hoping he'd be happy I wasn't planning on seeing Brian.

"But I thought you'd be living here now. We could finally watch the sunrise together."

"Ethan," I sighed. "It's too soon. I'm not ready for that and either are you."

"But,"

I put my fingers on his lips to silence him. Years of trying to appease everyone kicked in, "I want to take things slowly. I want to do this right."

He nodded, "I understand. But do you have to go back there? Can't you live with your mother or something?"

"Debbie is a mother to me. Besides, my mom still treats me like I'm ten. I could never go back there. This is the best place. Trust me." I knew what he was thinking. Debbie was still a connection to Brian. But neither of us was willing to actually mention his name. We preferred to dance around it for now.

"I'm going to take a shower. Want to join me?"

"Not know. I need to call my mom and Daphne, let them know what is going on. But I have the rest of the day free. Do you want to go to a movie or something?"

"Sure."

He smiled and headed off to the bathroom apparently satisfied that I wanted to spend the day with him. God, I hoped it would always be that easy to make him happy. Maybe for once in my life something will be simple. I knew better than to count on that.

I've been staring at the same stupid motorcycle for at least twenty minutes. Deb and Vic have been asleep for hours. I just can't seem to let go, to stop thinking. I've counted these damn motorcycles in French, Spanish, and German. I've tried breathing techniques. But nothing works. Maybe I'm just not used to going to sleep without sex. I'm sure Ethan would have been happy to oblige. But other than a quickie in his apartment before we went out, I put him off all day. I don't know what's wrong with me. We had a good day together, a nice day. I should be happy, excited, something. But I'm not.

Before, I was enthralled by Ethan, almost hypnotized. I wanted to fall into him. Let his passion and devotion surround me. I wanted disappear into what he was offering me. But today, I felt distant from him. It was like he couldn't touch me. Nothing could. I don't feel anything. I'm just numb.

The one thought that keeps running through my head is what now. I mean the only constant in my life in the last two years has been Brian. Not my family, not school, not even my art, just Brian. From the first moment I saw him, it was all about him. I was either with Brian or trying to be with Brian. That's been my life. And now it's over. Not over like when he threw me out after the robbery, or when my mother told him not to see me again, or even when I left because I thought he kept me around out of guilt.

This time it's really over. I walked away from Brian, and there is no going back. I'm not stupid. I knew if I left that party, it was forever. So they'll be no chasing him this time, no showing up at Babylon when I know he'll be there, no pumping Michael for information, no hoping he'll come after me.

Despite what anyone might think, I did not leave Brian for Ethan. If it were just about the two of them, I think it's pretty obvious where I would be right now. Ethan happened to be there when things finally fell apart. At most he was a catalyst. I suppose I owe it to him to try and make this thing between us work. But truthfully, if I thought for a minute Brian and I had a real chance, Ethan would have left the party alone. But we don't.

I can't believe I finally admitted that. Brian would be proud. It just took me a while to catch on. Not that he cares. And tomorrow it starts. First I'll have to face all the sympathy and the "I told you so"s. Mom went fairly easy on me today, but that won't last. Mostly she was disappointed I wasn't coming to live with her. Oh well. I guess I'd better get used to disappointing people; I seem to be pretty good at it. I think the easiest way to shut everyone up will be to admit they were right, and I was wrong.

What else is there to say? The reasons don't matter; there is no point in cataloguing all our failings. I left; it's over. End of story.

Besides, it doesn't matter what they think. What I really have to face is life without Brian. That sounds so strange. Life without Brian. I should be devastated. But I'm not. Maybe I'm in shock. Maybe I'm just not ready to face it. Life without Brian. I just don't feel a damn thing. Un, deux, trois. . .

### Is Simplicity Best (Brian's POV)

The first thing I heard was ridiculously loud pounding on my door.

"Justin, answer the fucking door," I mumbled. I reached over to shove him out of the bed, but felt nothing there. Then I remember that he wasn't there and wasn't going to be there again. Ever. I stumbled out of bed and answered the door to find Debbie standing there in all her red-wigged glory holding a couple of boxes. She brushed past me before I could muster the energy to ask what the hell she was doing.

"You alone?" She paused long enough for me to nod and then continued, "Good. I'm here for Justin's things. I won't be long."

I raised an eyebrow at that. I guess the little shit didn't want to face me. "He ask you to do that?"

"No, I volunteered. I want to have his room ready before he comes home tonight."

As much as Deb drives me crazy, I have to love her for giving me the information I want without making me ask for it. So Justin wasn't moving in with his new love. He was going back to Deb's. That was probably the best place for him, not that I cared. I pretended not to hear her and headed for the bathroom, "I'm going to take a shower. Wander freely. You always do."

I stayed in the bathroom as long as I could, hoping to avoid a lecture from Debbie. There was no point in dwelling on last night. What's done is done. Justin is gone just like I always knew he would be. Talking about it or remembering the exact circumstances of his departure won't change anything. So why bother? Time to move on. Now if I can just get everyone to let it go, I'll be fine.

I walked out to find Debbie in my bedroom neatly folding shirts. This was eerily reminiscent of another time she came to loft to pack up someone's belongings. Of course, I had Justin to fix that situation. There was no fixing this one. I silently handed her a bag of Justin's toiletries and moved to living room to sort out his CDs and DVDs.

"Boy, considering how long he lived here, there's not that much to take."

I bit my tongue to keep from reminding her that his stay here was supposed to be temporary. Just until he was better. I guess he needed violin music to heal. I didn't say any of this. I settled for a warning "Debbie," and continued sorting.

"I know, I know. Stay out of it. Don't worry I have no intention of interfering this time. No real point, is there? He expected too much of you, and you expected too little of him. In the end, you both got what you wanted. Congratulations."

I rubbed my temples in a futile attempt to stop the headache already forming. Then I turned to glare at Debbie, "I thought you were staying out of it?"

"I am." She smiled at my look of disbelief. "I've had my say, and now I'm done with it. But I love you both, so don't expect me to take sides."

I didn't have a response for that last remark so I ignored it. "Make sure you have all of his sketchbooks. There should be five. And don't forget his computer."

"You'll have to get the computer for me. I can never figure out how to unhook those electronic gadgets."

I packed up the computer and then endured another twenty minutes of Deb searching every corner of the loft for Justin's possessions. Finally, I couldn't take it anymore. "Jesus, Deb if I find anything else, I'll send it right over."

I shooed her to the door and managed to force her out after only one hug and a promise to take care of myself. Sometimes Deb makes me remember why I don't mind my own mother's absence. I always hated being fussed over.

Once I had the loft to myself, I unplugged the phone and decided to spend the rest of the day relaxing. I deserved it. It was certainly better than dealing with Lindsay's sympathy and Michael's outrage on my behalf.

I'll face all that tomorrow. A few well placed "fuck off"s and a full return to Babylon should get everyone off my back. I wish I could believe that. Unfortunately, I know my friends better than that. Justin leaving is far more interesting than anything going on in their dull pointless lives.

It will be discussed, dissected, and analyzed a hundred times over. Until I'm ready to kill every last one of them. But fuck it, let them have their fun. Because they can't touch me. I am the heartless shit Ted once described me as. Justin barely made a ripple in my life when he was here; I'm sure as hell not going to let his disappearing act bother me. Eventually they'll see not a God damn thing has changed. If I let them live that long.

I should be going to bed now, but I'm restless. I got quite a bit of work done already. What else is there to do on a Sunday afternoon. Besides, I never was good at relaxing. At least not alone. The couple of drinks I had with dinner haven't hit me yet. Maybe I'll hook up with someone online. For some reason, the thought really doesn't appeal to

me. I'm tempted to plug the phone back in because the silence is killing me. But I really don't want to talk to anyone yet. Maybe some music. I really need to get some new CDs because there isn't a damn thing here worth listening to.

I'm reduced to wandering around the loft. Just looking at everything. This is ridiculous. There's not even anything to straighten. Everything is perfect. The loft is back to the way it should be. Quiet, peaceful, orderly. The way it's supposed to be. There are no books on the counter, no couch cushions on the floor to be used as pillows, no open cupboard doors. God that used to drive me crazy. I mean how hard it to close a door after opening it.

I told Justin once the loft was only big enough for me. I guess we both should have listened. Deb said he didn't have much stuff here. Maybe she was right, but it felt like I was always tripping over his stuff. His clothes, his books, his toothbrush, him. I hated that. I was always meant to be alone. There's a reason Michael lives with Emmett and not me. I need my privacy and my space. Not to mention my tricks. Now I have it all back. I can bring tricks home whenever I want. But no way in hell is anyone ever spending the night again. I learned my lesson.

Looking around the perfectly uncluttered loft, I start to feel more at home. This is my home after all. And now everything is back normal, to the way I like it. I feel in control again. I have my life back. No more pretending to be concerned with someone else's feelings. That was never me. I live my life my way, my rules. No more compromising or second guessing myself. I look around the loft again and realize I'm free. Deb really did me a favor this morning. There is nothing left of him here. It's all me. No reminders, no traces of him, no regrets. Right. One more drink then I'll head for the bedroom. MY bedroom. My perfect, quiet, peaceful bedroom. Just the way I want it. Maybe I'll take a few extra minutes and put the new silk sheets on the bed. Then it really will be perfect. Neat, clean, quiet, peaceful. Empty.

The Narrowest Path (Justin's POV)

"So what did you do today?" Ethan asked as he gave me a kiss on the cheek.

I was tempted to tell him I spent the day perfecting my new career as a pool shark. That was a lot more interesting than what I really did which was go to school, go to work, and then come here. Which is the same thing I've done pretty much every day for the last three weeks. But Ethan doesn't always appreciate my sense of humor. He asked me what my plans were once, and I gave him my 'download porn and smoke weed' spiel. He didn't get it at all. He looked at me like I'd lost my mind which made me wish those had actually been my plans. So when I opened my mouth a perfectly appropriate answer came out, "Not much. I'm trying to finish a project for school. The diner was busy so I made a lot of tips. Oh, Daphne stopped by and invited us to a party next weekend."

"Daphne? She's your friend from school right? I don't think I've met her."

"No, you haven't met her, but you'll like her. I've known Daphne my entire life." Translation-Daphne has no connection to Brian. But we still don't mention his name. I noticed his violin was out and decided to change the subject. "How is practice going?"

"Good, well fantastic really. I'm working on a few new pieces. Would you like me to play them for you?"

"Sure," I answered as I sat down on the couch. Listening to Ethan play meant no talking for a while. Always a good thing.

Ethan leaned down close to me and gave a seductive look I swear he must practice in the mirror. "Remember, I play only for you. You're my inspiration," he whispered.

I smiled and barely refrained from rolling my eyes. I know I'm not being fair to Ethan, but I can't help it. I still feel so disconnected from him, from everything. So instead of being charmed by his romantic gestures and devotion like I was before, I'm irritated. They don't seem real to me anymore. Half the time he doesn't seem real to me. Which is ridiculous.

He's everything I ever wanted. He gives me everything I could ever want.

And I don't come close to measuring up. I don't have anything to give him but my time and my body. There's just nothing left. Ethan either doesn't mind or doesn't notice. I'm not sure which is worse. He seems perfectly content with what little I can give him.

It's not even about Brian. I don't even think about Brian. To be honest, I don't let myself think about Brian. There's no point. I have to put him and the life I had with him behind me. And I have. When I walked out of that party, I walked out on all things that came with the life I shared with Brian-the clubs, the alcohol, the drugs, the tricks. Those things are all gone. Now my life is about my art, working, and Ethan. It's simpler, easier. Which is good, right? But there's no center. I have all these nice, neat parts of my life with nothing to hold them together. It can't be Ethan; I won't let it be. There is no way I'm going to cut most of my life away in order to move on again. Maybe that's my problem. I left too much of myself behind at Babylon. But as I've said before, there is no going back. So I'll just deal with this constant numbness. I just need time to adjust. Then I can start looking at my life as more than a series of hours to get through. Maybe then I'll feel something again.

"Justin," Ethan's quiet voice snapped my attention back to him. I realized he had stopped playing. "What do you think?"

"Beautiful," I told him. I'm sure it was. Everything he plays is beautiful. I need to remember that.

"Justin?"

Fuck! I have to stop drifting like this. I could tell by the way Ethan looked at me that he was starting to realize something's wrong. He smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes. They were full of questions. Questions I wasn't prepared to answer.

"Are you all right?" he finally asked. "You seem"

I cut him off before he could ask any of those questions. "I'm fine," I told him. "It was busy at the diner. I'm just tired. The music helped. I already feel more relaxed." I could tell by the way he looked at me that he was satisfied with my answer. He always was.

"I know better ways to help you relax," he lowered his eyes suggestively and reached for my hand. I closed my own eyes for just a minute before I stood up and let him lead me to the bed.

When I left Ethan's, I decided to stop by Liberty Avenue. I knew it was a mistake, but I couldn't help myself. As much as I told myself I didn't belong there anymore, I couldn't quite make myself believe it. There had to be a way to keep some of my past. Because I was suffocating in my present. I'm nineteen for God's sake. I can't be serious all the time. There's nothing wrong with wanting to have a few drinks and dance for a while. It doesn't mean I'm reverting or regressing or whatever the hell word you want to use. I just need a break. There has to be some balance between where I was and where I am now. It doesn't have to be all or nothing.

I promised myself I wouldn't go to Woody's or Babylon. There are plenty of other places to go. I was walking down the street trying to figure out where I was headed when I saw him. The hustler from my birthday. He was on

the other side of the street talking to some people. Probably scheduling his next personal appearance. And it all came crashing back to me. I remembered that it was all or nothing, and I needed to make up my fucking mind.

There he stood; the embodiment of everything I walked away from. I will never forget opening my eyes and seeing him lying on the bed. The absolute crushing disappointment. That's what I was leaving behind. For every exciting moment in my life there had been a hundred disappointments. For all the color and lights, there was so much blackness. It was all about highs and lows. Pharmaceutical and otherwise. Who was I kidding about balance?

There is no middle ground here. You're always on the edge of the greatest rush ever or complete disaster. Maybe that's what keeps everyone coming back.

I was as guilty as the rest of them, but somewhere along the line it got to be too much. I can't do it anymore. Not when I know the price. I never cared before. I thought it was worth the risk. But it's not. I can't go back. Not with him staring me in the face. I need more out of my life.

I said I would give Ethan a chance, but I haven't. Not really. I haven't tried at all. I've been with him physically, but emotionally, it's like I've been frozen. Afraid to move forward and afraid to look back. No more. I have to stop waiting for my life to magically make sense. I need to take responsibility for the choices I made and stop waiting for someone to tell me what to do. I said I wanted a different life. One without all the drama. Well, now I have it. I said I wanted someone who could love me, who could be satisfied with me. I have that too. Ethan loves me. So what if my heart doesn't speed up every time he looks at me. It doesn't get ripped out of my chest every time he decides to hurt me either. I can make this work.

I suppose it's rather ironic; I have this great revelation while standing on Liberty Avenue. Everything started here; I guess it should end here too. I'm half tempted to go over and thank the hustler for making me see what I have to do. But I'm just another nameless trick to him. He wouldn't remember me, and he sure as hell wouldn't understand his significance in my life. So I don't go over there. Instead, I turn around and head back the way I came. Ethan will be happy to see me. I think it's time we finally watch that sunrise together. I can do this.

Suffer Some Misery (Brian's POV)

"Brian, why don't you come over for dinner tonight. I'm making pot roast. I know Gus would love to see you. Call me."

I press delete and erase the sound of Lindsay's soft, sympathetic voice. When exactly did I become a fucking object of pity? Lindsay calls at least three times a week to invite me over. I went to dinner once. That was enough. She stared at me with her big sad doe eyes the whole night. I felt like she was looking for something in me. Something that's just not there.

I don't know what she promised Melanie, but even she was nice to me. And then every two minutes, she was trying to put Gus in my lap. It was so nauseating; I don't know how I managed to eat anything. It's bad enough I have to put up with her constant questioning: how am I, am I eating enough, am I sleeping? There is no way I'm going back in that house.

Debbie is just as bad. She keeps sending food over. And God forbid, I try to order for myself at the diner. It doesn't matter what I ask for; she brings me whatever she wants. I walked out once when she told me it was comfort food. Give me a fucking break. I do not need comfort food. I don't recall losing the ability to take care of myself in the last month. I managed just fine for twenty-nine years all on my own. And for Christ's sake, what do they think he really did for me. Let's take a good hard look at who was taking care of who. He was a child. I was the one who made sure he had somewhere to live, a job, a way to draw, money for school. But no one is tripping over

themselves to make sure he can survive without me. What did he ever give me that I can't get somewhere else? Exactly. It's not like I'm falling apart here. Everything's back like it was. Almost as if the last few years never happened. I work, go out with the boys, trick. It's a good life. Hell, most men would kill for my life. I know they are all waiting to see if I'd end up out of control like last time. But this is nothing like the last time. I don't think my reaction was too out of line considering. I'd like to see how any of them would have handled it. I mean he almost died in my arms. I held him and felt the life slipping out of him. Fuck! I press my hands into my eyes and try to block out the image. I am not going down that road again. There is no fucking point.

No, this is nothing like that. This is just two people finally having enough sense to walk away. Right? No one thought it would last as long as it did. I know all about their little bets. So why make a big deal out of it? Why is Michael the only one not watching me like I'm a fucking time bomb ready to explode? At least he understands. OK, so I'm probably giving Mikey too much credit here. His life makes more sense if I don't care. He wants me to act like nothing happened. He wants to believe there's no gaping hole in my life. He needs to see me go on as if nothing ever happened. That's not so much to ask. This is how Mickey and I operate for the most part. We make things easier for each other. He accepts whatever act I put on at face value. No digging for something deeper, no questioning. And I let him believe that my life will never change, that I will always be the Brian Kinney of his dreams. Maybe it's fucked up, but it works for us.

I wouldn't mind everyone else's concern so much if I actually thought it was genuine. But it's not. They're not worried about me. They don't want to help me get over him. They aren't looking out for my emotional well-being. They might even believe it themselves, but I know better. What they really want is to see me suffer. For their own screwed up reasons, every last one of them wants me to be miserable. This is some kind of sick entertainment for them. They're all dying to see what I'll do next. If I'm not interesting enough, one of them will usually be brave enough to try and force a reaction out of me. They'll make some veiled reference to him or make some bitchy comment about how I'm back to my old ways. Then they all hold their breath and wait to see what I'll do. It's all such bullshit.

Lindsay, Debbie, and Emmett want to see me heartbroken. They want to see me devastated. They keep asking how I'm holding up. Like I'm just putting on some brave face to hide all the pain I'm in. Talk about delusional. But that's what they want. They spent the last year whispering to each other about how in love I was. Trying to guess when I'd finally admit it to myself and him. Well it never happened. So now the only way they can prove they were right is to convince themselves that I'm lost without him. Somehow if I was sad, they would be happy. It would give them some proof that I'm capable of all those higher emotions they are all so fond of. Well, no matter how hard they look; they aren't going to find any. What you see is what you get.

I am the heartless shit Ted once called me. Why do you think he left?

Ted and Melanie just want to see me bleed. They want more than anything for someone to hurt me. Frankly, I can't blame them. Look at it from their perspective. For Ted, I'm a constant reminder of everything he's not: young, hot, successful. And then there's Melanie. She will never be completely sure of Lindsay as long as I'm around. In their place, I'd be out for my blood too. But I wish they would quit poking me to see if they can hit a vein. They get this gleam in their eyes when they think someone has hit a nerve. I can tell they are hoping I'll break down right in front of them.

Maybe confess that my life is empty without him, that I'll spend the rest of my days lonely and unloved. If I ever did, they'd jump up and down from joy.

And people think I'm cruel.

Sometimes I wonder what they are like with him. He's living with Deb again so I'm sure he gets the same fussing from her. Of course, he probably likes comfort food. I wish I had been there when Michael found out about the new living arrangements. Knowing Mikey, he bitches every chance he gets. I think he still sees Gus. I'm not sure; I do my best not to listen when anyone talks about him. I imagine Lindsay smothers him with concern. She probably alternates between comforting him over his broken heart and encouraging his new romance. I'm sure she thinks she knows more than anyone about giving up on me. I bet Mel couldn't wait to congratulate him on finally wising up. She must love reminding him of what an asshole I am. I wonder if he finds them as irritating as I do. Not that it's any of my business. He's on his own now.



The phone rings, and I see from the caller ID it's Lindsay again. This is fucking ridiculous. God, I need a drink. I glance at the time and see it's too early for Babylon. I guess I'll start at Woody's tonight. I grab my jacket as the machine picks up. I'll call Mikey on the way; he'll be happy to join me. Lindsay's voice fills the loft as I leave. This time she's a little more urgent in her desire to check up on me. I slam the door on her concern. I don't need anyone's fucking sympathy.

#### The Harshest Conditions (Justin's POV)

Spending the night with Ethan was the biggest mistake I'd ever made. And when I consider my life for the last two years, that's saying a hell of a lot. I really thought it was a good idea at the time. It was my way of moving forward and closing the door on the past. I thought it would make things better for me and for us. We would sleep in each other's arms and watch the sunrise together. I wanted to feel closer to him. I thought it would help me make a real commitment to him. Boy was I wrong.

Perhaps I should have warned Ethan that I'm not exactly a morning person. I don't wake up easily or well. I know Ethan was trying to be romantic, kissing me awake before the sun rose. But I'd never actually slept with anyone but Brian. So I don't think it was too surprising that I mumbled for "Brian" to let me sleep a little longer. It was dark; I was still in that hazy world where you're not quite sure what is a dream and what is reality. But I felt the body next to me freeze, and I don't think I've ever woken up faster in my life. I pretended to fall back asleep, and a few minutes later, Ethan called my name to wake me up. I don't know if he realized I knew what I said. He never brought it up, and it just hung in the air between us. We watched the sunrise in silence. I hated the doubt and suspicion I saw in his eyes, but I didn't know what to say. I knew then in my heart I wasn't ready.

I should have ended things that morning, but I'm nothing if not stubborn. It seemed so important to make my relationship with Ethan work, and at the time, I still believed I could. Maybe I wanted to prove that I hadn't left Brian for nothing, that what Ethan gave me was worth something. Maybe I wasn't ready to give up on being with someone who actually wanted me. I don't know. All I do know, is that it took two weeks of hell for me to admit that it was never going to work.

Ethan changed completely after that night. He had always been kind of clingy. He wanted to see me every day, and he never wanted to go anywhere.

He said he liked to be alone with me. But he became extremely possessive. He really started pushing for me to move in with him. The more I said no, the more he insisted. He wouldn't accept my reasons. If I said I wanted to take things slow, he said I was stalling because I didn't really care about him. If I said I wasn't ready, he said I wouldn't know unless I tried. If I said we needed to get to know each other better, he said we needed to spend more time together. It didn't help that I wouldn't spend the night again. That gave us something else to argue about. I made sure I never brought anything with me so I had the excuse that something I needed for school was at Deb's. After a few days, I stopped saying anything. I'd just slip my clothes on and leave without more than a goodbye.

Ethan also started keeping tabs on me during the day. He'd stop by the diner three or four times during my shift. He never ordered anything; he just came in to check on me. He would call me between classes and show up during my breaks. It was like he needed to know where I was every minute. I didn't know what to make of it. Except for right after the bashing, Brian never worried about what I was doing or where I was. Suddenly I had someone keeping track of my every move. When I saw him at night, he would quiz me on the five minutes a day he didn't know where I was. When I accused him of not trusting me, he got all offended and said he just wanted to share everything in my life with me. Sadly, I already knew not to believe things like that. I knew he really wanted to make sure I wasn't still seeing Brian, whose name we had yet to mention.

Handling Ethan turned out to be fairly easy. I'd keep the information I gave him about my day basic and simple. There truly wasn't much to tell. I'd smile and nod in all the right places and then steer the conversation to him.

Ethan liked to talk about himself. If all else failed, a few well-timed kisses were a good distraction. Then on the way home or when I was trying to fall asleep, I'd imagine fifty ways to tell him to get the fuck off my back. I'd tell him to stop being so God damn insecure and let me fucking breathe. I'd tell him that I left the most amazing man I'd ever met to be with him and that should count for something. I'd tell him that I had been drawn to his passion and laughter and understanding, and he was letting his need to control me destroy all those things. I'd tell him that by holding on so tightly, he was losing me inch by inch. Of course, I told him all these things when I was alone.

These mental conversations didn't start with Ethan. I'd been having them for years. Let's face reality, neither my parents nor Brian were interested in emotional honesty. And I always had something to tell them that they didn't want to hear. For years, I imagined different ways of telling my parents I was gay. None of them came to be. Mom figured it out on her own, and then she told Dad. But that gave me a new challenge. I'd lay awake at night in the weeks before I moved in with Brian and craft these perfect arguments to make my father accept me. I'd convince him that nothing was different because he knew I was gay. I'd make him see he could still love me. In the hospital, waiting for the meds to kick in, I'd confront him about not coming to see me. I'd ask him what kind of father abandons his child after he's almost killed. I'd let him know that he destroyed whatever scrap of love I'd had left for him. I'd tell him exactly what he lost. Then I'd make sure he understood he could never hurt me again.

And Brian, there were hundreds of things I wanted to say to Brian but never did. Namely, I love you. He was never ready to hear those words. I regret more than anything not saying them to him. But there were other things. After the bashing, when I woke up after a nightmare, he'd hold me. Which was wonderful, but if I tried to tell him about the dream he'd always stop me. He'd tell me not to think about it which translated into him telling me not to talk about. Some nights I wanted to scream at him. Was I supposed to not think about it like he didn't think about it? What a joke. I saw it in his eyes every time he looked at me. It was all he thought about.

Sometimes it made him hold me closer, but sometimes it made him pull away. But I never said any of that. Instead, I'd close my eyes and try to fall asleep in his arms. And of course the last few weeks we were together, it seemed like the only conversations I had with Brian were in my head. Then I could tell him how I felt. I could explain to him why I needed him to say that I mattered to him. I could make him understand why the words meant so much. I failed miserably when I actually had the chance to tell him.

I learned a long time ago that in never quite works in person. Somehow the words that sound so perfect in my head come out of my mouth garbled and wrong and too fast. Maybe it's because I put all my emotion into my art, that the words I say seem so ineffectual and meaningless. I should try drawing people pictures to explain these things. OK, so drawing my father a picture to show I was gay would probably have been worse than telling him. Especially if I put Brian in it. But something has to work better than words. It is so frustrating to know exactly what you want to say and how you want to say it, but when the time comes you screw it. Honestly, I stopped trying. I vent my feelings in my imaginary conversations and figure that will have to be good enough. They probably work because no one else really gets to talk. I write the script so I get all the lines. The other person is there to listen. And I mean really listen to me. And I make perfect sense every time.

On very rare occasions if I'm pushed hard enough, I can actually say what I want to. The key is not thinking about it. It worked the time my father threatened to send me to boarding school. I don't think he ever recovered from hearing me call myself his queer son. And I did it when Brian came after me at Babylon, and we set up our rules. The rules turned out to be a disaster, but the point was I stood my ground and told Brian what I wanted.

Today was one of those days. Ethan stated the minute I walked into the apartment.

"Where were you?" he asked in a really accusatory tone.

"At work, I came here right after my shift," he'd seen me twice at the diner so I didn't know where this was coming from.

"Don't lie to me! I was there an hour ago; you weren't there. That woman was no help at all. She wouldn't tell me where you went."

I knew by "that woman" he meant Debbie. She had been supportive of my relationship with Ethan in the beginning, but she hadn't like how possessive he'd gotten. And since he was always rude, she gave it right back to him. I think the way he kept calling her "that woman" finally pushed me over the edge. Instead of explaining that he must have been there when I'd run to the store for the cook, I looked him right in the eye and said, "You must have stopped by while I was in the bathroom sucking Brian's dick."

In other circumstances, the look on his face would have been comical. He sputtered for a few minutes before finding his voice. "I knew you couldn't stay away from him. I never should have trusted you. I heard the rumors, but I ignored them. You'll always chase after him. You are such a"

"Don't," I stopped him right there. I knew where he was going, and I wasn't going to listen. "The fact that you would actually believe that is so beyond me. I haven't seen or spoken to Brian since I left the party with you. I've barely even thought about him. He isn't the problem here; you are. I am so tired of you checking up on me every five minutes and all your constant questioning. I've had enough."

"But it's only because I love you. I just want to be with you."

"If this is your version of love, I'm not interested. This is never going to work Ethan. I don't love you. I thought I could, but I can't. And you don't love me either. You want someone to worship you, to hang on your every word, and be content to just be by your side. That's not love, and that person is never going to be me. Goodbye Ethan." With that, I turned around and walked out the door.

So it's over. My big romance lasted all of six weeks. I should feel sad, but I don't. I'm glad I finally told Ethan how I feel. The words didn't come out perfectly and there was a lot more I wanted to say, but I think he got the point. I don't think I'll ever talk to him again, in person or in my head. And that's OK. Ethan turned out to be way more trouble than he was worth. The last two weeks have been horrible. I was always so tense, trying not to say the wrong thing, trying not to rock the boat. But no more. Mostly, I'm relieved. I finally feel free.

#### So Walk On Barefoot For Me (Brian's POV)

I thought I was prepared to see Justin again. Maybe if it had happened like I'd imagined, but it didn't it. I thought I'd see him in the diner one day or run into him on Liberty Avenue. I was ready for that to happen. He'd already been gone for two months, and we couldn't avoid each other forever. But I never saw him in any of those familiar places, and then he blindsided me. I had just stepped out of the elevator into the lobby of some anonymous office building. I was in a good mood; my meeting had gone well, and I had a new contract to show Vance. Then I saw him.

He was coming across the lobby toward me. I could tell he hadn't spotted me so I had a minute to study him. He looked stunning. He was dressed in the high end version of what they call business casual: tailored black pants and what looked to be a blue-grey silk shirt. It's not a style I care for; personally I prefer suits. But on Justin, it was perfect. He has this casual elegance that lets him carry it off. Also, it made him look older.

The few times I'd seen him in a suit, he looked like a kid playing dress-up. Now he looked like an adult. A very fuckable adult. He was carrying a portfolio, and he was in his own world as usual. It would have been so easy to let him walk past. He never would have noticed me. But as he approached, I found myself calling his name.

"Justin," his name sounded strange to me. I hadn't said it out loud or even let myself think it since he left.

"Brian?" he turned toward me. He looked surprised but not shocked to see me.

He stared at me for a minute, the way he used to before he started a drawing, then he smiled. It wasn't a big smile or a nervous smile; it was more like the kind of smile he gave the customers at the diner.

"Wow, this is a surprise."

Then he did the strangest thing; he held out his hand to me. It took me a minute to respond because I couldn't believe him. I wanted to drag him into the bathroom and fuck him into oblivion. Actually, the bathroom was too far away; the elevators were a lot closer. So while I was envisioning a round of hot, illicit sex, he wanted to shake my hand? What the fuck was that?

Finally, I took his hand and shook it politely, resisting the urge to pull him against me.

"What brings you here?" he asked when it became clear I wasn't going to say anything. He moved into the small reception area and sat down. "Your offices are still across town, aren't they?"

"Yeah," I answered absently as I followed him and sat down across from him.

"I had a meeting upstairs. New client."

"How did it go?"

"Fine," I patted my briefcase. "Contract signed, sealed, and delivered. That should keep Vance off my back for a week or two."

He laughed a little before he spoke, "I'm sure you were your usual brilliant self. They never stood a chance."

This encounter wasn't going at all the way I thought it would. Justin was entirely too at ease. I decided to try and rattle him a bit, "So now that we've accounted for my presence, what the hell are you doing here?" I expected my directness to make him nervous; I was disappointed.

"I had an interview for a summer internship," he named some local magazine I was vaguely familiarly with. "It's in their graphics department. A lot of it would be basic layouts, but I would be able to design some of the illustrations."

"So when do you start?"

"It was just an interview, Brian. I should hear in a week or two, but I'm not getting my hopes up. I'm sure they have plenty of candidates way more experienced than I am."

I shook my head. Sometimes his modesty just killed me. Did he honestly think they would find someone half as talented as he was? Or half as charming? If he made any effort at all to sell himself, the job was his. He can be very persuasive. Hell, look at all the things he convinced me to do.

And in this one case, the problem with his hand could work in his favor. All his computer experience will give him another edge. If it wouldn't be hideously awkward, as well as way too revealing about my private life, I'd get him to come work for me.

"Deb will miss you at the diner," was all I said.

"Oh no, I'd keep my job there. It would be easy to switch all my shifts to nights. Internships don't pay much so I'll still need the money. I wouldn't want to give up the tips anyway."

For some reason, a vision of him showing me the money he made dancing at Babylon flashed before my eyes. I wondered if he was worried about next year's tuition. I didn't want him doing anything stupid like that again, but I wasn't sure how to broach the subject. We never talked about what would happen after he moved out. Hell, until now we hadn't talked at all. Justin kept reminding me to have a legal agreement drawn up, but I always put him off. It hadn't seemed necessary. I guess we both assumed we'd still be together when he graduated. What the fuck! Did I just think that? When the hell did I start assuming he'd still be with me? When did I start thinking of him as a permanent fixture in my life? Right before he walked out the door, apparently. I reached a hand up to ease the tension forming behind my eyes. I could feel Justin staring at me.

"Justin, if you're concerned about tuition, don't be. We have an arrangement. Nothing has changed."

He met my gaze steadily, and I could hear the determination in his voice when he answered, "Look Brian, I'm not some fucking charity case. I can take care of myself." I sat up straighter and gave him a look that let him know I wasn't pleased. He sighed and continued, "I'll be eligible for some scholarships after this semester. If that doesn't work out, I can take care of it."

"Just promise you'll talk to me before you do anything, all right." I decided not to push him too much right then. Mostly because he'd given me an idea. Scholarships. If he got too stubborn, I could endow some anonymous scholarship and make sure he got it. I could always throw in some extra money if the school doesn't want to go along with it. Satisfied that I could take care of this one way or another, I let him off the hook.

He seemed a little irritated, but he nodded and said, "Fine."

"Where have you been hiding? I haven't seen you around much." Justin looked at me in total disbelief, and I can't say I blamed him. I'd been avoiding him like the plague, and now I was asking him where he'd been. Of course it's not my fault if his shifts at the diner fall while I'm at work. And if I haven't stopped by to see Deb or Vic in the last few months, it's only because I've been busy. So let's see how he likes a little interrogation.

"Where have I been hiding?" he echoed. "Nowhere, Brian. I work and I go to school. That keeps me pretty busy."

Hmm, no direct mention of the fiddler although it was implied. He had school and work when he lived with me, and he still had plenty of time to spend with me. He must be spending all his free time with his starving violinist. I settled more comfortably in my chair. "Too busy for Woody's or Babylon?"

What have you been doing with yourself?" I asked in my most sarcastic voice.

He leaned back, crossed his arms over his chest, and looked me right in the eye, "Nothing that would interest you."

What the fuck! When did I lose control of this conversation? Justin should have been flustered seeing me for the first time. After all, I had every right to go off on him. I expected him to avoid my eyes and stammer out replies to my questions. I thought he would be uncomfortable at the mere hint or reference to his boyfriend. I even imagined him begging for my forgiveness. But instead, he was perfectly calm. He wasn't the least bit disturbed by my questions. Somehow, I ended up being the one off balance.

Well, enough of this. I was going for the jugular.

"So how is the new lover? Evan or Ian, what is his name again?" I clasped my hands in my lap, sat back and waited.

### Walk The Line For Me (Justin's POV)

I knew my day was going too well. I had just finished an interview for an internship, and despite my lack of experience, I knew I had a good shot at it. Actually my whole life had been going well. In the weeks since I'd left Ethan, I'd been really happy. For the first time in years, I had no one to answer to. I wasn't trying to please anyone but myself. School was going well. I was having a good time. I should have known it couldn't last. I should have been prepared for something to happen, but I wasn't. I was walking along thinking about calling Daphne to tell her how great the interview was and to see if she wanted to go out tonight when I heard it.

"Justin."

My name that was all, but it was enough. I knew that voice. Hell, I would have known it anywhere. I wanted to freeze; I wanted to run. I didn't know what to do. I was so not ready for this. For him. It would have been easy to keep going, to pretend I never heard him, but that's not my style. I turned toward the sound of his voice and knew I only had a few seconds to decide how to play this. With Brian, it's always a game. My best strategy was to play it cool. Never let them see you sweat, right? The only way to survive was to make sure he thinks I'm completely over him. No emotion, no reactions, I have to act like I am in complete control.

We exchanged the normal pleasantries. I did my best not to stare at him. I'd managed to forget what just the sight of Brian does to me. He looked sexy as hell. I always did love him dressed for work. He has the whole predator image done to perfection. He looked surprised when I reached out to shake his hand. What the hell did he expect? I wasn't going to hug him.

Maybe he thought I'd be afraid to touch him. I should have been. I quickly found somewhere to sit. The simple feel of his hand left me weak in the knees. If we had stayed there much longer, I would have ended up in a puddle at his feet. I would do whatever I had to in order to convince Brian my feelings for him were dead. But any illusions I had about my own immunity to him were shattered with that one touch.

Initially, the conversation went well. We acted like acquaintances or former friends who haven't seen each other for years. He threw me by telling me he still wanted to pay my tuition. There was no way I was going to let that

happen. I already owed Brian too much. I didn't want to think about the day I finally agreed to let him lend me the money. It seemed so long ago.

I politely, but firmly tried to let him know I had it handled. He didn't like it, but he let it go.

I had been holding my own with Brian so far. I could tell that annoyed him because he tried to put me on the defensive by basically accusing me of avoiding him. I wanted to laugh in his face. I wasn't going out of my way to see him, but I certainly wasn't avoiding him. I still worked at the diner; I was living with his best friend's mother, for God's sake. If I was hiding, it was in plain sight. He was the one who dropped off the face of the Earth. He didn't like my answer so he kept pushing.

"Too busy for Woody's or Babylon? What have you been doing with yourself?"

Snide bastard. Brian and his loaded question. Well, two can play at this game. I met his gaze calmly, "Nothing that would interest you."

Let's see what he can make of that answer. As soon as I saw the gleam in his eye, I knew I made a mistake. Brian hates to be challenged. He never backs down; instead he goes in for the kill.

"So how is the new lover? Evan or Ian, what is his name again?"

Fuck! What was Brian's angle? I knew he wanted to rattle me; that was a given. Maybe he hoped to embarrass me by reminding me of what I'd done. I wondered if he knew we'd broken up. He had to. Debbie practically took out a full page at announcing it when I finally gave Ethan the boot, as she liked to put it. Was he trying to force me to admit Ethan was a mistake? I decided it didn't matter. Whatever his agenda was, as long as I stuck to my game plan, everything would work out.

"Ethan, his name is Ethan. As to how he's doing, you'll have to ask him."

"I don't think so, Sunshine. I've always found conversations between former and current lovers to be so awkward. I wouldn't want to make dear Ethan uncomfortable," he was the picture of sincerity. God, he was good.

"But I've heard conversations between former lovers can be so much fun. You two can compare notes about what a pain in the ass I turned out to be. Then you could commiserate about what an ungrateful little shit I am. I think you'd have a blast." If Brian hadn't known about Ethan, he did then. From the brief look of shock on his face, I'd say he had no idea. I raised one eyebrow expectantly and waited for his comment. He may have started this, but I was determined not to back down.

Whenever I think I've mastered one of Brian's games, he changes the rules. I was prepared for some sarcastic remark about love and romance not lasting long or being bullshit, etc. Instead his eyes softened, and he leaned toward me before he spoke, "If he hurt you, I'll kick his ass."

I didn't know whether to laugh or cry. I settled for shaking my head. "No, he didn't hurt me. I never let him get close enough."

"Good boy. Now let's see what you have there," he replied gesturing to my portfolio. I knew Brian well enough to know what the change of subject meant. He was pleased with my answer, but he wasn't willing to continue with the discussion. It had gotten too personal for him. I didn't object because I was relieved. I wasn't ready for Brian to be nice to me.

I handed the portfolio to him and willed myself to be silent while he went through it. Brian's approval still mattered to me, but I didn't want him to know that. Luckily, there were no pictures of him or Ethan in there. Not exactly interview material. He paused at one drawing for a while. I knew he recognized it. He'd once offered me five thousand dollars for it. I wish I had taken the money; I wish I hadn't been so hard on him for trying to help me. There were a few drawings of Rage in there. I hoped that wouldn't set him off. It wasn't a time I particularly wanted to remember.

"These are good, but you already know that," he half smirked at me. I knew he was waiting for me to agree so I smiled at him. "Have you started working on the next issue of Rage yet? Maybe you can get your magazine to do a feature."

"I don't think there's going to be a next issue. At least not with me as the artist."

"Bullshit. If you're worried about Mikey, I'll take care of him," he waved his hand in the air as if he could magically fix everything.

I rolled my eyes at him, "That's all I need. You telling Michael to play nice. Like it's ever worked before. I don't have the heart for it anyway."

"Find the fucking heart." He stood over me and tilted my chin up so was looking at his eyes. "I don't want to see you give up on your dreams, ever." Then he gave me one of those looks that told me he meant what he said, and I was expected to listen, "The next issue had better be fucking fabulous. I've got to go. See you around, Sunshine." And then he was gone.

I was left sitting there wondering what the hell happened. Twenty minutes with Brian and I remember every reason I ever loved and hated him. He went from politeness to sarcasm to kindness in the space of one conversation. I'd kept my promise to myself and managed to remain in control of my emotions. At least externally. But inside, I was more confused than I'd ever been. I'd survived round one with Brian Kinney. Now I needed to brace myself for what would follow. Whatever the hell that was.

#### Cheating Judases (Brian's POV)

I can't get my last conversation with Justin out of my mind. The whole thing was off. He was off. I can't figure out where it all went wrong. Our shaking hands were not exactly a good start. But it went straight to hell when I switched from being a sarcastic bastard to being protective. Threatening the fiddler. What the fuck was that? I am not supposed to care if Justin gets hurt. Shouldn't he deserve it after falling for all that romantic bullshit? But instead of being happy, I found myself wanting to strangle the strolling violinist. Who the fuck is he to disappoint Justin?

Hasn't he been disappointed enough?

And that's the real issue. I don't want anyone else disappointing Justin. I did it enough; I hurt him enough. Hell, half the time I did it on purpose. But he knew what he was getting into with me. I made sure he went in with his eyes wide open. Any illusions he developed about my character were his problem, not mine. I won't apologize for anything I did to him, but God help anyone else who hurts him. It might be fucked up, but that's how I feel. He doesn't deserve to be hurt anymore. Between his family and me, he's been damaged enough. No one else gets a free shot at him. Not even Mikey.

Mikey, half that conversation could have been avoided if he had just told me Justin and the fiddler had broken up. It's not like he didn't know. The more I thought about it, the more it pissed me off. Which led to an interesting little confrontation at Woody's the other night:

"I ran into Justin then other day."

He had been watching the door for Ben, but the mention of Justin's name got his attention. "Where?" his head snapped back in my direction.

"Downtown somewhere, we were both in the same office building," I shrugged.



"Oh, I thought maybe he went looking for you," he seemed to relax once he knew it was a chance meeting.

"We had a nice little chat. When the fuck were you going to tell me Justin was no longer the fiddler's greatest fan? And don't even try to pretend you didn't know. He's living with your mother for God's sake. I know she must tell you all about him whether you want to hear it or not. So what the fuck happened?"

"How would I know what happened? I try not to listen when Ma talks about him. He probably cheated on Ethan too. What the fuck do you care? He's out of your life now. Why would I tell you anything about him?" He crossed his arms over his chest. Mikey always gets defensive when he knows I'm pissed at him.

"Oh, I don't know. You seemed very interested in keeping me updated on Justin's activities a few months ago." Michael's whole attitude after he saw Justin with Ethan still bothered me. He never should have interfered on what went on between Justin and me.

"That was different. I was trying to protect you. You needed to see what he was really like."

"I know more about what Justin is really like than you ever will." This conversation was doing nothing but aggravating me so I decided to switch gears. It was Mikey's turn on the hot seat. "So when is the next issue of Rage coming out?"

I could practically see the wheels turning in his head over that change of subject. Finally he gathered himself enough to answer, "I'm not sure. I have to find a new artist first."

That floored me. I thought he would bitch about working with Justin. Maybe even tell me there wouldn't be a next issue. But I never thought he'd seriously consider replacing Justin. "Are you out of your fucking mind? Do you honestly think you can find an artist who can draw Rage the way Justin can; who will understand Rage the way Justin does? You are not getting a new artist."

"It's not up to you. I am not working with that lying cheating bastard."

I could almost hear the "and you can't make me" following that statement. I rolled my eyes at him, "Jesus Christ, Mikey will you grow up already. Justin didn't do anything to you. And what happened between us is none of your business. I'm going to tell you the same thing I told him. Rage is your dream; don't fuck it up. And don't sell it short by doing some half assed job because you're mad at Justin. Rage deserves better, and so do you. Find a way to work with Justin." Ben chose that moment to walk in allowing me to make a well-timed exit. "Enjoy your evening with Buddha, but don't forget what I said."

Looking back on it, what bothers me is how Michael kept harping on the idea that Justin cheated on me. Even at the time, he seemed so angry about it. I don't know why. All he saw was Justin kissing Ethan, and he didn't know about the no kissing rule. I never discussed any of that with him. He certainly knew I was still fucking other guys. He watched me go to the backroom with countless men and never batted an eyelash, but he sees Justin kissing someone and it's a federal offence? It makes no sense.

Maybe that's what bothered me about what Justin said to me. He seemed to think I would enjoy badmouthing him with the fiddler. Like I'd let the piece of shit say one bad thing about Justin. But Justin seemed to expect it. He called himself an ungrateful shit. It was like he was placing all the blame for both breakups on himself. What kind of bullshit is that? Is that how he sees things? He can't possibly think that everything that happened between us was his fault. I could have stopped all of it if I wanted to. His leaving was my choice, and it wasn't because of anything he did.

But the more I think about it, everyone seems to blame him. All the same people who bitched at me for not treating him better were the first ones to rush to me with sympathy when he left. Instead of being glad Justin finally had enough sense to leave the Big Bad Wolf, they were all appalled that he actually left me. They fussed over me and my imaginary broken heart, but acted like Justin didn't exist. Except for Debbie, she's the only one who realized that whatever went wrong between us, we both played a part in it.

The rest of them are hung up on the image of Justin leaving the party with Ethan. Somehow that is the great betrayal even though I was fucking Rage in the backroom. They can't believe Justin would dare cheat on the great Brian Kinney.

But did he? Was it even possible for him to cheat on me considering how open things were between us? I know we had the rules, but those were for him. I agreed to them so he'd feel a little more secure about his place in my life without me having to make some big declaration of love. I never cared about what Justin did with other guys. He could have fucked Ethan fifty times for all I cared as long as he kept his heart out of it. But that's Justin's problem. He still can't separate sex and emotion. He wants it all tied together with a neat little bow. The only time he ever really tricked was with me. He could focus his emotions on me, and all the other guys got was sex. I can take the sex by itself any time, but Justin can't.

That's how he ended up breaking the rules in the first place. He felt guilty about taking that sweet frat boy's virginity, and he ended up kissing him. I know Justin; he couldn't stand for it to be impersonal. And he had to justify running around with Ethan behind my back by convincing himself he had feelings for him. It couldn't be about sex and attraction; it had to be about all the emotional things Ethan offered him.

I guess you could say he cheated on me emotionally. He let his feelings get involved in something that should have been purely physical. He never belonged to me physically; the fact that I survived his blessedly short career as a go-go dancer is proof of that. He could share his body with anyone he wanted to, but the rest of him belonged to me. That's where he failed me. He let Ethan have more than just his body. Or at least he thought he did. Now I'm not so sure. He said he never let Ethan close enough to hurt him. What the hell kind of relationship is that? If Justin cared at all about him, Ethan would have been able to hurt him without trying. So if he couldn't cheat on me physically, and he never really gave himself to Ethan emotionally, how did we end up here?

As much as I want to believe I don't care; I do. Suddenly I need to know what he thinks. I pick up the phone and dial a still familiar number.

"Hello."

I freeze for a second when I first hear his voice. "Why did you leave?" No point in wasting time with pleasantries. Let's get right to the point.

"Brian?" he asks confusion evident in his voice.

"Who the hell else would it be? Don't you ever use your caller ID? Now answer the question. Why did you leave?" I can't bring myself to say 'why did you leave me.'

"Because you didn't want me to stay."

"So it wasn't because of"

"Ethan, no it really wasn't about him," he answers before I can finish the question.

"Goodnight Sunshine," I say softly and hang up the phone. I shouldn't have called him. He didn't tell me anything I didn't already know. He left because I didn't want him to stay. He said it quietly, but with certainty. Like there is no doubt in his mind that I wanted him to leave. I don't know if that makes me feel better or worse.

## Doubting Thomases (Justin's POV)

I was working on a painting when my cell phone rang. Irritated at the interruption, I grabbed it and answered without looking at it. I wasn't prepared for the voice I heard on the other end.

"Why did you leave?"

"Brian?" I asked more out of shock that he was asking the question than any doubt about who it was.

"Who the hell else would it be? Don't you ever use your caller ID? Now answer the question. Why did you leave?" He was already getting impatient. I could hear it in his voice.

"Because you didn't want me to stay." That's really the best answer I can give him. Brian made it clear it was time for me to go. I would have found a way to stay if I thought for a second it was what he wanted.

"So it wasn't because of"

I don't let him finish that sentence. I'm not sure if I'm more afraid that he would remember Ethan's name or that he wouldn't. Either way, I decide to interrupt him. "Ethan, no it really wasn't about him."

"Goodnight Sunshine." His voice gets all quiet and almost gentle. Then he hangs up the phone, and I'm left sitting there wondering what the hell just happened. I'm tempted to call him back and demanded to know why he called, but I know Brian. He already regrets calling me so he would try to pass the whole thing off as nothing.

But it's not nothing, at least not to me. I'm amazed Brian would even ask the question. He should know why I left; maybe better than I do. I've always known in some way he orchestrated the whole thing. He may not have arranged for me to meet Ethan, but as I said it was never really about him. I would have been gone sooner or later; Brian saw to that. I'm not blaming Brian for what happened between us. I'm just finally accepting that my leaving was what he wanted. All Ethan did was make it easier for me to see that.

Which is why I don't understand how for one second Brian could think I left him for Ethan. One thing Brian never lacked was confidence. He should know Ethan could never compete with him. I practically begged Brian to let me know he was still interested. He had to realize what was going on. He had to realize that one sign from him, and I would have forgotten Ethan ever existed. So why ask the question?

What if Brian doesn't know; where does that leave me? If Brian didn't push me out the door, why did I leave? I said it was because Brian didn't want me to stay, but maybe that's not true. Maybe I am trying to push the blame onto Brian instead of admitting I failed. It's easier to believe Brian didn't want me than to accept that I couldn't make it work. The one thing I wanted more than anything in the world, and I walked away. I told my parents all I wanted was to be with Brian, and it was true. I always thought if I wanted something badly enough, I could find a way to have it. So how the hell did I end up here?

I never thought being with Brian would be easy. I'm not stupid. And it's not like everyone didn't try to warn me. And I mean everyone. I can't think of a single person who ever believed Brian and I could make our relationship work, including Brian. But that never bothered me because I believed.

I thought I believed enough for everyone. I thought I could see something in Brian no one else did. All Brian's friends were so sure they knew exactly who he was. They never gave him a chance to become something else. I wanted more from him, and amazingly enough, sometimes I got it. And since I wasn't conditioned to see Brian as

an uncaring asshole, I saw through a lot of his games. I still can't believe no one realized he pushed Michael into David's arms, that he gave up Gus because he loves him, that he saved Lindsay and Melanie's wedding because he wanted them to have their perfect day. I knew Brian was capable of love. But I guess when it came to being in love, I didn't know him as well as I thought I did.

There was a time when I didn't just think Brian loved me, I knew he did. And there was nothing in the world that could have made me leave him. After Gus's birthday party, after we made love that night, I felt closer to Brian than I ever had. There was a kindness and gentleness in him that for once he didn't try to hide. He wasn't trying to disguise his feelings. I could feel how much he cared for me. Things were good for a long time after that. Brian showed me over and over again that he loved me. I can remember him walking down Liberty Avenue with me when he was helping me get used to crowds again. He wasn't worried about anyone seeing him hold my hand or put his arm around me. He made me feel safe when nothing else could. And then there was Pride. Trying to replace the dance I lost was probably the sweetest thing Brian ever did for me. After Brian fell asleep that night, I stayed up for a long time just looking at him. I remember thinking that it didn't matter if Brian could ever tell me he loved me. I had seen it in the way he looked at me, and that was all I needed. I was so sure that as long as I knew he loved me everything would work out.

But instead it all fell apart. I wasn't strong enough to live without the words. I couldn't believe enough for both of us. I'm not sure when I started doubting him. Maybe it was when Michael told me he kept me around out of guilt. I could never get that idea out of my head. Everything I thought of as love was a way for Brian to punish himself. I should have been so happy when he came after me. Instead, I came up the stupid rules. They were my way of making Brian prove he wanted me. But the damage was done. Everything he did took on such significance. I was constantly judging his actions. Looking for proof that he loved me or that he didn't. More and more he started showing me that he didn't. Looking back, I think I really gave up after he destroyed the drawings of Rage. He knew how hard I had fought to get my art back. In so many ways, he was the one who gave it back to me. Which is why it hurt so much that he would do that. I don't think he ever understood exactly what he did.

Sure he apologized; he even said he was jealous of the time Michael and I were spending together. But he never realized why I was so upset. Brian had hurt me before. But it was usually about him. Mostly, he would hurt me to protect his own feelings. But this was different. He watched me struggle to find a way to draw again. He knew more than anyone what it meant to me. But he was willing to take it away from me. He did take it away from me. I guess what that told me was when Brian lashed out, nothing was off limits. He'd go right for the jugular and never give it a second thought.

Nothing was the same after that. There was my birthday, Vermont. In other circumstances, they wouldn't have mattered so much. I would have either told Brian how I felt or just let it go. But I couldn't stop listening to the voice in my head telling me Brian didn't give a fuck. Somehow it became about pride. I wouldn't let Brian see how disappointed I was. I didn't want to give him anything to use against me. As soon as I started worrying about protecting myself, I started moving away from Brian.

That's when Ethan came along. He told me everything I wanted to hear; he offered me all things Brian never would. He had a way of constantly reminding me of all the things Brian didn't give me. I never told him about all the things Brian did do for me. For some reason, I couldn't remember them when I was with Ethan. I think I was glad Brian found out about Ethan.

I felt like I would finally know how he felt about me. It was our moment of truth. If he wanted me, he would have to tell me. I didn't get the answer I wanted.

Until that day, a part of me still believed. I hadn't completely given up on the idea that Brian loved me. There was a song I heard once that said "hanging on to hope when there is no hope to speak of."\* That's what I was doing. I stood there and told Brian Ethan love me, but I still gave Brian an out. I said Ethan loved me in ways Brian couldn't. I was just like Michael; finding ways to make excuses for him. Clinging to the thought that Brian did love me; he just didn't know how to show it. Trying to convince myself that he gave me everything he could and that it could be enough. But Brian shattered that illusion. He looked at me and told me Ethan loved me in ways that he wouldn't. In that second, all the fight went out of me. Brian told me he could love me if he wanted to, but he didn't.

It was his choice not to love me. He wasn't being held back by his past; he just didn't want me. No matter how much I believed, I couldn't make Brian love me.

So why did I leave? I guess I should have told him it was because I gave up. I couldn't hold on tight enough. I couldn't hold it together by myself. I hate to admit it, but I did fail. I stopped believing in Brian and I. And once we both stopped believing, we never stood a chance. But what did I give up on? Did Brian love me, and I just stopped being able to see it? Or did I just stop seeing what I wanted to see and started actually listening to what Brian was telling me? It doesn't matter anymore. All I know is that I gave up on Brian. I gave up on us.

### Risk Your Health For Me (Brian's POV)

I've been accused more than once of being a control freak. I guess there is some truth in that. I like things to go a certain way, my way. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't stop today from happening. I did, however, manage the next best thing. I made it perfectly clear to everyone that no one was to call me or attempt to see me today, and under no circumstances was anyone to mention the significance of the day. In exchange, I allowed a small birthday celebration at Woody's last night. I may not have been able to stop today from happening, but I could keep it from meaning anything.

So far the only person having any trouble with my orders is me. That's why it's after eight, and I'm still at the office going over contracts. It's so quiet now that everyone is gone. I sent Cynthia home at noon after making her cry for the first time in years. I should leave, but I can't think of anywhere to go. There's always Woody's or Babylon, but I have a suspicion the boys might be keeping an eye out for me there. I could head back to the loft for a nice bottle of Jim Beam and pray that Mikey has enough sense not to be waiting for me. For some reason, I don't feel like getting drunk. I can control the memories better when I'm sober. Drunk, too much slips in – his smile, the kiss. Things I can't allow myself to remember. It's bad enough I can hear myself call his name; I can hear the bat connect with.

Fuck! I am not going to do this again!

I'm saved from my thoughts when my cell phone rings. I feel a flash of fear when I realize after the lecture I gave last night no one would be calling unless it was an emergency. I answer cautiously.

"Brian, have you seen him?" I hear Debbie's panicked voice and wish I hadn't answered.

"Debbie, I told you to leave me alone."

"Listen here you fucking asshole, I don't have time for your games right now. So set aside whatever you're drinking or fucking and pay attention. Have you seen Justin today?"

I know she's upset so I try not to snap at her, but this is exactly the conversation I wanted to avoid. "No, I haven't seen him. I'm the last person he'd be with."

"He left this morning, and we haven't heard from him all day. Neither have his mother or Daphne. What if something happened to him?"

"Debbie, calm down," I really can't deal with hysterical women. "I'm sure he's fine. He probably just wants to be alone."

"Brian." I don't like the way she says my name. She takes a deep breath before speaking again. "He's having nightmares again. He calls for you."

"Fuck! Why didn't you tell me?"

"He told me not to. He said it was no big deal." She sighs again. "But Brian, I'm worried about him. I don't think he's as strong as we pretend he is."

I wish she would stop talking. I can feel the walls closing in on me. This is more than I need to know, more than I can stand to know. And now she expects me to fix something I fucked up so royally in the first place. There is nothing I can do; there never has been, but once again, I'm forced to try.

"I'll look for him, but no promises. I'm sure he's fine."

"Oh thank you, Brian. I knew I could count on you."

I manage not to laugh at her before hanging up the phone. When has anyone really been able to count on me? Especially Justin. Unfortunately, I'm all he's got. No one else even knows where to begin. It's been two months since the night I called him. Since then, we've run into each other three or four times. But I've heard his name mentioned more often on Liberty Avenue so I have a few ideas of where he may have gone.

I find him on my third try. He's at one of the quieter bars on Liberty, one where people actually come to drink more than cruise. I see him at a table in the back. Empty shot glasses in front of him, and a full one in his hand.

When he notices me walking toward him, he throws the shot back and smiles. It's a bitter smile, and I want more than anything to turn away.

"Brian, come join me. We can have a toast."

"Justin," I push his hand down before he can get anyone's attention. The last thing he needs is another drink.

"Come on, we really need to have a toast. Of course, Chris should be here. I wonder if I have his number? This really isn't his kind of place, but he needs to be here. We can't celebrate without him. And don't tell me there's nothing to celebrate." He turns his bitter, pain filled eyes on me.

"Justin, stop this. Please." I hate that I added the please, but I can't stand this. I could never stand to watch him in pain. There is something so wrong about it. He was supposed to be the golden child, the one who had everything. He was never supposed to learn to suffer the way he did.

"But there's so much to drink to. It was my very own personal version of Dickens. You know the whole 'it was the best of times, it was the worst of times' thing. All in the space of an hour. But I don't remember the best of times part," he falls silent then.

Justin looks like he's about to cry and just this once I want to cry with him. How cruel is it that all he can remember of that night is the end? He told me it was the best night of his life, and it's gone. All that's left of what was supposed to be a ridiculously romantic night is the tragic ending. More Shakespeare than Dickens if you ask me. Justin can't remember anything else, and I won't allow myself to. All he has is the pain, and all I have is the fear and his blood. Everything good about that night, the happiness, the joy, the love, is gone. Obliterated from his memory and buried too deep in mine. It would be different if Justin remembered. I know that. He would make me remember the good parts. He would help me feel them again, but he can't. And I've never known how to share them with him.

He's staring into space, lost in his own world. I take advantage of his distraction to stand him up. After throwing some money on the table, I herd him out of the bar to the jeep. He gets in quietly and closes his eyes. On the way to the loft, I call Debbie and tell her I have Justin. She doesn't ask for any details, and I don't offer any. What would I say?

Justin doesn't say a word to me the whole ride or on our way up to the loft. We are sitting on the couch before he ever really even looks at me. Finally, he speaks, "Brian why am I here?"

I don't have an answer for him so I ask a question of my own. "Tell me about your nightmares." He looks surprised, and I can't blame him. I never wanted to know before. I always told him to forget them, to go back to sleep. But it's different this time. I need to know what's driving him.

He looks away before answering. I can tell he's seeing them. "It's like what I remember only different. I hear you call me, but your voice sounds funny, far away. When I turn around, I can't see you. You're not there, and I'm looking for you. That's when Chris hits me. Then I can't see anything; I just hurt. I can't move; I can't see. I'm waiting for you to come to me, but you never do. You're not there. I want to call you, but I can't."

The pain in my chest is crushing me. I haven't felt pain like this since that night. Since I saw him laying there with all that blood. He thinks I would leave him there alone. I can handle him thinking any horrible thing about me, but that. I couldn't, I would never leave him. I open my mouth, but no words come out. Justin is just sitting there looking so lost it breaks my heart even more. He has to know I would never have left him there.

I gather him in my arms like I did them. Only this time he isn't lifeless; this time he can hear me say his name. I hold him tightly to my chest, and I can't imagine how I'll ever let him go.

Lose Your Inhibitions (Justin's POV)

"Tell me about your nightmares."

Nothing Brian could have said would have shocked me more. We never talked about my nightmares. Ever. That was one of the rules of living with Brian Kinney. But now he's asking. I don't know what to make of it. My first instinct is to play stupid, to tell him I don't know what he's talking about.

There's no reason to drag both of us into the hell my nights have become. But the slightly drunk and reckless part of me says fuck it. I'm tired of protecting Brian, of protecting everyone. I'm tired of pretending everything is fine when it so clearly isn't. Mostly, I'm tired of pretending I can handle something I am completely unequipped to deal with alone. So if Brian wants to know about my nightmares, I'll tell him.

I look away from Brian because I know I'll never get through this if I can see him. Just thinking about the nightmares kills whatever buzz I had going. I try to keep my voice steady when I speak. "It's like what I remember only different. I hear you call me, but your voice sounds funny, far away. When I turn around, I can't see you. You're not there, and I'm looking for you. That's when Chris hits me. Then I can't see anything; I just hurt. I can't move; I can't see. I'm waiting for you to come to me, but you never do. You're not there. I want to call you, but I can't."

I make the mistake of looking at Brian when I finish. I wish more than anything I could take the words back. He's never looked so hurt. He starts to say something but doesn't. I don't know what to say. I've gone too far. Crossed lines that never should have been crossed. We just sit there and stare at each other.

Then he puts his arms around me and presses me against his chest. He holds me so tightly I can barely breathe. He starts to quietly whisper my name over and over again. I wrap my arms around him no longer sure who is comforting who. We stay that way for a long time.

Finally, he pushes me slightly away. He starts running his hands through my hair, over my face. "I didn't leave you. I didn't leave you there alone," he says softly. Brian's eyes are so full of pain it hurts to look at him. I couldn't speak if I wanted to. Instead, I lean up and kiss him.

Brian takes the kiss over, pushing his tongue deep inside my mouth. His hands leave my face and begin to stroke my back. I slip my hands under his shirt. As much as I want to enjoy the feel of his skin, I'm too busy trying to figure out how to get his shirt off of him. Brian gasps when my fingers brush against his nipples. I take advantage of the brief separation of our mouths to run kisses along his jaw and suck his earlobe into my mouth. Before long we're both shirtless. I close my eyes when he pulls on my nipple ring. His hands reach for my zipper; then he stops.

Brian looks at me intently, "Justin, how drunk are you?"

"Not drunk enough. Unless I'm imagining all this, then I'm in way worse shape than I thought." When he smiles and laughs, I think my heart is going to explode. He pulls me toward the bedroom, and we shed our remaining clothing on the way.

I lay on my back in his bed. Brian is on his side next to me. He's staring at me and lightly running his hand up and down my chest. It's just enough contact to make me shiver, but not enough to satisfy anything. I want more; I need so much more. But I can't do more than stare back at him. He's mesmerizing in the blue light. So fucking beautiful, I can't turn away. He kisses me and my paralysis is broken.

We make love for hours. It's slow and beautiful and perfect. It is a passion that keeps building until it takes you higher than you ever thought possible. But you are never out of control because someone is there to ground you. Brian touches me everywhere. He strokes, caresses, and massages. I mimic the movements of his hands with my mouth and tongue. I can't get enough of the taste of Brian. I don't know how I lived so long without it. Our exploration is gentle, intimate, and thorough. The curve of an ear, the line of a shoulder, the tip of a cock, the back of a knee.

Nothing is left untouched.



Finally, Brian reaches for the lube. He carefully slips one finger inside me, then two. I push against him wanting so much more. He brushes the hair back from my face, smiles, and whispers, "Wait, let me touch you." I try to relax and just enjoy the sensations his fingers are creating. When I think I can't take any more, he pulls away, and I watch him put a condom on.

He enters me slowly, and once he is all the way in, he looks into my eyes.

"Justin, if you ever need me, I will be there."

Then he kisses me, and all thought stops. Each thrust brings me closer to him until I can't tell where I stop and he begins. We kiss over and over again. His mouth on mine feels like home. He begins to play with my nipples and I lose all control. I scream his name as my climax hits. I feel him push even deeper inside me, and I force myself to open my eyes. I want to watch him. I love seeing Brian have an orgasm. One unguarded moment of pleasure. He is so incredibly beautiful. Before long I am rewarded with my favorite sight.

After we clean up, Brian pulls me to him. My back rests against his chest; his arms wrap around me. "I didn't leave you, Justin. I couldn't have done that."

"I know Brian." I reach for his hand trying to offer some comfort.

He continues as if he didn't hear me, "When I got to you, there was already so much blood. I called your name, but you didn't answer. I wanted to hold you, but I knew I couldn't move you. I held your hand. I laid down next to you and talked to you until the ambulance got there. They wouldn't let me touch you, but I didn't leave. I went with you to the hospital, and I kept talking to you. I wanted you to hear me. I stayed with you until the doctors took you away."

I can't imagine what it cost Brian to say these things to me. I hate more so much that I hurt him so much. I hate that I opened my mouth tonight. But I can't be sorry that I'm finally hearing what happened that night. I'm finally finding out how much he cared. I'll cherish these words even if it makes what I lost so much worse.

"I'm sorry, Brian. I never should have said anything to you. I know you didn't leave me. The dream, it's not about that. I think it's about what I lost of that night. The memories, the feelings, our night together. Daphne tries to explain it to me, but I'll never understand. It's all gone."

Brian lays his head against mine. His chin rests on my shoulder. When he speaks, I can feel his breath on my ear. It's a soft and comforting feeling.

"When I walked into that room and saw all those kids, I was so tempted to turn around and walk back out. Then I saw you. You looked so amazing, and there was no way I could leave without seeing you, without touching you. I will never forget the look on your face when you saw me coming toward you. It was magic. No one has ever looked at me like that."

Brian tells me about every moment of that night, every step, every word, every kiss. For the first time, I feel like I was there. I feel like it really did happen. While he talks, one of Brian's hands tightly clutches mine, the other gently strokes the scar on my temple. He pauses when he reaches the end of the night. I wonder if he'll stop there, but he continues. "You smiled at me one more time before you headed back to Daphne. It was such a beautiful smile; I swear you were glowing. We had so much to look forward to that night. I got in the jeep to leave, but I couldn't take my eyes off of you. I watched you in the mirror. I watched you walked away, and then," he stops again and his thumb stills against my scar. "And then, they lived happily ever after."

I think my heart stops for a minute when he says that. I want so badly to believe that. It's what we deserved; what we should have had. I turn so I can look at Brian. There are tears in his eyes, and I kiss them away.

I want to thank him, but I don't know how. He's given me what I told him was the best night of my life back. He let me see how beautiful it was, how happy we were. Even if I never get my memory back, Brian gave me his. No one can take that away from me. I want to tell him how much that means to me, but I can't find the words. For once, I am speechless. I pull him to me and show him instead.

Your Wildest Ambitions (Brian's POV)

The first thing I did when I woke up was reach for Justin. It took me over a month to break myself of that habit, but apparently only one night to fall back into it. But just like all those mornings after he left, my hand finds nothing but air. For a moment, I wonder if I imagined last night. Maybe I did get incredibly drunk and dreamt all of it. Then I hear the shower running, and I know he's still here. Last night did happen. The sex, the tears, the comfort, all of it. I start to remember the things we said to each other, and that's when panic sets in.

It would have been so much better if Justin had been with me when I woke up. Then I wouldn't have time to think; I would have to go on instinct. Instead, I'm left waiting for him. With nothing to do but think. What the fuck was I thinking last night? Obviously, I wasn't. I just wanted to erase that look from his eyes. I did that, but at what cost. I shared things with him I promised myself I'd never remember let alone speak of. I did things with him I swore I'd never do with anyone especially Justin. Now what?

I am so fucked. I don't know what it is about Justin that makes me break all my rules. Maybe it's because he didn't know any better. He didn't know I came with demons and hang-ups and a long list of things I don't do. He knew what he wanted and saw no reason I couldn't give it to him. Too often I did or at least tried and came close enough

to give him hope. He's going to come out of that bathroom and look at me like our being together is the most natural thing in the world. And I don't know how I'll stop myself from believing him.

It must be more than that; it must be something special about him. I mean look at poor Mikey. He's loved me forever; he's wanted me forever. But I have never broken any of my rules for him. He looks at me with those adoring eyes and nothing. I'm not even tempted. Mikey would make it too easy. He'd take whatever I gave him, put up with all my bullshit, and never miss a beat. I'd go crazy in a week. But Justin's not like that. He expects something from me; he expects me to be something. I think that's what kept me coming back to him. He actually believed I could be more, that I could have more than the pathetic life I created for myself. I never thought I'd be as disappointed as he was every time I failed.

But no more. It all ends today. Last night was special. It's something I can hang on to and know that I did one good thing for him. But now I have to destroy it. I have to crush him. Justin has to leave here knowing there is no hope for us. We will never be. I thought when he was finally strong enough to walk away from me that it would be OK. I should have known it was too easy. When he didn't come back to me after he left the fiddler, I thought I was safe. But then I had to fuck everything up. I had to try and rescue him one more time. I told him everything about that night.

Justin must realize how I felt about him. He's going to want to fight for that. I won't do that again. So no matter how much it kills both of us, I have to convince him that any feelings I had for him are gone.

I hear the water turn off and brace myself for a confrontation. Despite what people may think, it's not easy for me to be cruel to Justin. It's a long time before he comes out fully clothed. He walks past the bed without a word or a kiss and starts to put his shoes on. "What are you doing?"

He answers without looking at me, "Leaving."

"What?"

He turns toward me now and looks annoyed at having to repeat himself. "Leaving, Brian. You know walking out the door, going somewhere else. It's a pretty basic concept."

I should be pissed at him for talking to me like a child, but I'm too busy being confused. This isn't like Justin at all. He's acting like nothing happened. I should just let him go, but for some reason, I can't.

"Why?"

"It's time," he shrugs. "I should have left last night; I know that. But we fell asleep." For a moment there's something in his eyes, but it's gone before I can figure it out. "Don't worry Brian; I'm not going to start stalking you again."

"So that's it? You're just leaving?" I could kill myself for saying these things to him, but I can't help it. I bared my soul to the kid, and he's just going to walk away. Jesus Christ, what the hell does he want from me? I refuse to acknowledge the absurdity of me being upset with Justin for doing exactly what I want him to do.

He looks at me for a few minutes, and I swear he's reading my mind. I always hated it when he did that. He walks over, kneels by the bed, and reaches for my hands. There's a glimmer of tears in his eyes when he speaks.

"Brian, last night was perfect. I wanted to thank you, but I was afraid you'd be upset. I can't tell you how much it meant to me. Now next year and every year after that, I'll have last night to remember, and my memories can be good ones. I can never thank you enough for that."

He starts to walk away again. I find that I am incapable of letting him walk through the door.

"Justin, stop."

He turns and looks at me. Unfortunately, I have nothing to say. I don't know why I stopped him. Except once again, our conversation is going all wrong. I'm supposed to be taking hope away from him; not the other way around.

Justin finally breaks the silence, "Brian don't. Please don't ruin this. Last night was what it was. An aberration or a moment out of time. Maybe it was our chance to say goodbye. A chance to let go of all the bitterness. Leave like that."

"How exactly would we ruin it?" I can't help the hint of sarcasm that slips into my voice. It's always been my best defense.

"By making it more than it was. By pretending we have a chance when we don't."

When the fuck did he become so cynical? "How do you know we don't?" I see the look on his face, and I know he thinks I'm playing a game. But the only mind I'm fucking with is mine.

He sighs sadly, "Brian, I had my one chance with you, and I blew it. I know that. OK? I know there's no going back, there's no trying again, there's no second chances. It's a miracle I got what I did from you; I knew what it meant when I walked away. What do you want me to say? I fucked up. I couldn't be enough for you, and no matter how much I loved you, I couldn't live with what you were willing to give me."

Well, he got half of it right. He deserves so much more than I can give him; I'm glad he finally realizes it. I should let it go at that, but still I don't. "What do you want?"

"I want someone who can love me freely. Someone who doesn't see their feelings for me as a burden, who doesn't see me as a burden. I'm not as naive as I was before. I know it's not about saying the right words or making grand gestures. It has to be about feelings. Feeling like you belong to each other, like you are in it together. I want someone who can see me as a partner, who can look at me and be glad I'm in their life. I want to be happy."

I want to tell him that he's wrong. He wasn't a burden to me. I did think of him as my partner even if I didn't treat him that way. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell him I can try. But I don't because we both know better.

And it would be crueler to pretend then to admit defeat now. "I can't be that someone."

"I know Brian. It's not who you are." He smiles, but it's hollow.

For some reason, that pisses me off. What does he know about me? He doesn't know what I want, what I'm capable of. He thinks he understands me, but he's clueless. He thinks I don't believe in love, that I don't want to share my life with someone. The more I think about it the angrier I get. Maybe it's time Justin understood exactly what happened between us. Maybe he needs to know why I didn't ask him to stay.

So Open Yourself For Me (Justin's POV)

Brian looks at me, eyes blazing, and I know he's mad. I just can't figure out why. But since I have no idea what has been going all morning that comes as no surprise. All I wanted to do was leave. Preferably before Brian woke up, but that didn't happen. Nothing's gone as planned since. Every time I try to leave, he stops me. Now here we are. I'm halfway between the bedroom and the door, and he's glaring at me from the bed.

He's still not speaking so I have a few minutes to try and decide what I did. He should have just let me go; I know that's what he wanted. I understand Brian enough to know he was trying to figure out ways to convince me that last night changes nothing, that we still have no future together.

What he doesn't realize is that I understand that all too well. Which is why I was leaving. I'm glad I at least got a chance to thank him. I want him to know that even though last night can't mean anything for us, it meant everything to me. When he asked me why we couldn't be together, I thought he was trying to punish me. Then I realized he wanted to be sure I knew. He needed me to say we were over for good. And I did, but he still wouldn't let me leave. He asked me what I wanted. I gave him the best answer I could with shouting that all I wanted was him, any way I could have him. As hard as it's been, I've finally let go of that fantasy. So I told him what I want as honestly as I could. He told me he could never be the one to give it to me. He didn't need to; I already know that. Doesn't he know that his limitations and boundaries are burned into my soul? I did the only thing left to do; I acknowledged the truth of what he said. And now he's staring at me like he wants to kill me. I think I'll leave now. Maybe he'll let me go this time.

"You said you left because I didn't want you to stay. Why?" His voice rings out loudly in the unnatural silence that had fallen between us.

Without thinking, I take a step toward him. "I know I said that, Brian. But I don't think it's true. I left because" that's as far as I get before he interrupts me.

"No, I didn't want you to stay. Tell me why."

"Because you didn't love me?" I know it's a pathetic answer, but he has me too stunned to think properly. Is this some new way to torture me? Let's list the reason he wanted to get rid me. Not exactly how I wanted to spend the day.

He waves his hand in the air dismissing my answer, "Love has nothing to do with anything. It never has. Try again."

I feel like I'm on Jeopardy or something. "I was in your way. You were tired of having me around. I was only supposed to stay for a little while."

"Jesus Christ, Justin. Is that the best you can do? And to think I gave you credit for being smarter than the rest of the morons that surround me. So help me God, if you spout any nonsense about my thinking you would be happier with the fiddler, I'll kill you where you stand. Last chance Sunshine. Use your fucking head."

I look at Brian carefully. As much as I hate to do it, I try to remember the last few months we spent together. I know my answer is important. Maybe more for Brian than for me. He's not rushing me, and I'm grateful for that. I

don't want to screw this up. Then it hits me. I don't know how I didn't see it. I'm not sure how far to go with it. If I'm wrong, it could blow up in my face. I make sure I can see Brian's eyes before I speak. I need to see his reaction to my answer. "I wanted too much from you. It didn't matter if I asked; you knew. I told you I didn't want you to change, but you knew I wanted more."

"Not bad, Sonnyboy. It's closer than I thought you'd get. I'll help you out. You told me what you wanted. What do I want?"

Fuck! Just when I start to make some progress, he throws me off balance. How the hell do I answer that? "You want to be free. No expectations, no demands. You want a life that designed for pleasure and convenience."

"Is that what you think I want?" He sounds disappointed.

"No, it's what you think you want. It's what you try and convince everyone that you want."

Now he looks surprised, but he laughs, "So what do I really want."

"The same thing everyone else does. You want to be loved and accepted. You want someone you can feel safe with, who you can be yourself with. But you'll never let your guard down enough for that to happen." It sounds so sad when I say it aloud, but I know it's true. Brian's spent too long building walls to let anyone in.

"Maybe you do know me after all," Brian says quietly.

"So it that what went wrong? I got too close. I fell in love with you and that made me a threat. I'm not like Michael. I'm not content to watch your life from the sidelines. I was always pushing to get closer."

And just like that the anger's back. "Fuck you! Who do you think you are? Did it ever occur to you that I have all those rules for a reason? That I keep people at a distance for a reason? But you wouldn't stop. You were so sure I was what you wanted. You wouldn't listen when I told you I didn't believe in love, that I could never give you the life you dreamed of. And damn you, sometimes you made me believe to. Look where that got us. Your fucking prom."

"Brian, stop it. What happened wasn't your fault. You know that." I hate that we always seem to come back to that. It won't leave us alone.

"It's not about blame, Justin. I should have learned my lesson, but I let you back in. Not because it was better for you, but because I wanted you. You need to understand that; it's always about me. I did things with you, for you that I knew I had no business doing. But I made excuses. It was to help you get better; it was only temporary. All bullshit. Then there was your birthday. Don't look at me like that; I don't mean the fucking hustler. I was going to buy you flowers. I had them in my hand, but," he looks away and shakes his head. "And when I made partner, all I wanted was to celebrate with you. To come home and share it with you."

"What's wrong with that?" I see now that Brian cared for me more than he ever showed me. More that he would ever admit.

"It's not me, Justin. It's not who I can ever be. Emmett, Debbie, Lindsay, they all have these romantic notions about me. They think I let you go so you could have a better life. They think I wanted to save you from me. They couldn't be more wrong. I let you go so I could save myself."

The anger is gone from his voice. But there is a note of desperation that scares me even more. "From what, Brian?"

"From you and everything you wanted me to be. People looked at us and thought you were turning into me. But what was really happening is that I was turning into you. I couldn't let that happen. Every day, I was losing more of myself to you. There wasn't going to be anything left. I couldn't let that happen."

"I don't understand." And I don't. I'm not even sure I want to.

"Of course, you don't. You can't. To you, love is a good thing. But I know better. I survived, God how do I make you understand what I survived? I survived my parents. I survived being unapologetically gay in a straight world. In order to do that, I became who I am. I created Brian Kinney. That's all I have in my life. All I can count on. I can't give that up. I won't let you take that away from me."

While he was talking, I kept moving closer to Brian. Now I'm standing right in front of him. I swear I can feel the desperation and pain radiating from him. I finally understand why he made me leave. While I saw Brian's love for me, and I know now more than ever that he did love me, as something to draw strength from, he saw it as a weakness. It was his enemy. Our being together was destroying him day by day. The closer we got, the more threatened he felt. He was surviving the only way he knew how. By being alone. I found the one thing I'll never be strong enough to fight. Brian's past.



I look at Brian and it kills me to see him so vulnerable. I love him more than anything, but I have to let him go. I kiss him one last time, "I won't ask that of you, Brian. Ever again." This time when I go to leave, he doesn't stop me.

Idle Talk (Brian's POV)

I couldn't stand the loft anymore. It was too quiet, and I'd run out of busy work the night before. With nothing to do but think, I can't get him out of my mind. I keep seeing the look in his eyes right before he left. We keep coming back to this. Justin walking away, and me standing there helpless, paralyzed, unwilling to ask him to stay. How many times are we destined to play out this scene?

I know that answer to that. It won't happen again. Justin has finally left me for good. He may think the last time he left was forever, but I know the difference. When he left the party, he left out of defiance, anger, and a need to prove himself. Today he left out of defeat. Ethan was about showing me he could find someone who would love him and making me realize he was worth all the things I wouldn't give him. He didn't realize I already knew all of that. His leaving was about him and about making a statement to me. But this morning, he left for me. He left to save me. I finally made him realize that love can't heal all wounds. That we were never going to have a fairy tale ending. He finally saw what loving him cost me. And he walked away because he knew it was what I needed. He will never come back; I made sure of that.

But dwelling on it won't change anything. I can't take back what I said, and I wouldn't even if I could. I can't take the pain from his eyes. So if you can't fix it, forget about it. And the first step to wiping every moment of this morning from my mind is getting dead ass drunk. At least that's the plan as I step into Woody's. If that doesn't work, there's always Anita and the backroom.

The first person I see is Emmett. He's sitting in a corner looking like he lost his best friend. I'm tempted to ignore him, but he'll probably spot me and make a bigger scene. I stop at the bar for a refill for Emmett and a couple of drinks for myself. From the looks of things, this could be a long night. Emmett barely looks up when I set his drink down. I should ask him what's wrong, but I really don't care. Hopefully, Ted will show up soon and rescue me. Those two are living proof that misery does love company. Eventually, the silence begins to bother me. "So where are the rest of the boys?"

"Michael and Ben are at Debbie's. Ted has some live show to direct."

All this is said without any inflection or gesturing.

"So Ted has a new star to replace Fetch Dixon?" The only thing stranger than Ted as a porn king is Emmett as a porn star. Porn is generally the domain of the Zach O'Toole's of the world. Big beefy men who are clearly tops. Yet somehow, the queen of nelly bottoms took the porn world by storm. I guess a big dick makes up for a lot. Not that I would know. One image I did not need stuck in my head was Emmett jerking off, especially in costume.

Instead of answering me, Emmett bursts into tears. "Dammit Emmett stop that. I'm sure Ted will take you back."

"It's not that," he sniffs while dabbing his eyes with a napkin. "Today is, well would have been, George's birthday."

Christ, just what I need a weepy, mourning Emmett. "Just missed the century mark, did he?" So I'm a bastard. No one in their right mind would come to me for sympathy. And so what if I piss him off. Anger's a hell of a lot better than depression.

"No, I wish he had lived that long. Then we would have had years together instead of a few short months." Emmett sighs and resumes staring at his drink.

I look at the door hoping Ted will magically appear. For once in my life, I actually wish Ted was around. I turn back around and find Emmett looking at me oddly. I don't know what the look means, but I'm glad he's stopped crying.

"You know what I was thinking Brian? What if I had a fairy godmother? What if right after I met George, my fairy godmother came to me and said 'Emmett, you are going to fall madly in love with this man. And he will love you too. You will be very happy for a few months, but then he will die.' What do you think I would do?"

This conversation has gotten way too weird for me. And while I refuse to even attempt to think like Emmett, I do try to come up with an appropriate response. Maybe I've had more drinks than I remember. "You would say it's better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all or whatever the fuck that saying is. Then you would have enjoyed the time you had with George." It's all bullshit as far as I'm concerned, but it sounds like Emmett.

"God, no. Even I'm not that pathetic." He shakes his head and laughs. "I would have said fuck that. What do I want with some old coot who's going to drop dead on me? There are plenty of fish in the sea. I'll go fall in love with

some young stud who can keep up with me for a long time. And I would have missed out on all the happiness George gave me. Now, I wouldn't trade my time with George for anything. But then, why take the risk? That's why we don't have fairy godmothers."

"Good point," I answer hoping he's done with this particular flight of fancy. But if his increased animation is any indication, Emmett's on a roll.

"Even if I had decided to take the chance, it never would have worked. Every day I would have wondered if it was the day George was going to die. I would have held back. I would never have let myself love him completely, and I wouldn't have appreciated his love. I would have cheated both of us." He looks away and falls silent.

"Another strike against fairy godmothers," I reply weakly. Here I am trapped in another conversation I have no control over.

"You know what your problem is, Brian?"

"Do you want them listed alphabetically or in order of severity?"

"Your problem is that you listened to your fairy godmother."

"Emmett, exactly how much have you had to drink? I could swear two minutes ago you said we don't have fairy godmothers."

He looks at me like I'm the one who's lost my mind. "I'm speaking figuratively. Of course you don't have a fairy godmother. You don't need one because you're too busy being your own fairy godmother."

Now, either I'm totally drunk or I've slipped into some alternative universe. I can't think of any other reason Emmett would compare me to a fairy godmother. "What the fuck are you talking about?" And where the fuck is Ted when you need him? How long does it take some loser to jerk off?

"I'm talking about Justin. You listened to the little fairy godmother voice in your head that said he would eventually leave you. So you never gave him a chance. You were always pushing him away and hurting him. You kept at it until he finally did leave you. Then you and your fairy godmother could say I told you so. You just had to be right. Exactly where did that get you and Justin?" He crossed his arms and looks at me accusingly.

"Right where we are supposed to be-apart," I growl at him. He'd better understand my warning. Justin is never up for discussion.

"I'll never understand you. Didn't his prom teach you anything? Didn't almost losing him make you tell your fairy godmother to fuck off? That you weren't going to worry about the future, but instead enjoy every second you had with him. Didn't it make you want to hold him tighter and never let anything come between you again?"

"Fuck you!" I get up to leave and try to ignore the image of Justin's broken body. Emmett grabs my wrist with surprising strength and pulls me back down to face him.

"One thing George's death taught me is that life is too short. There's no time to worry about what might happen or what people will think. You have to grab happiness wherever you find it and to hell with everything else. So what if you get hurt later, at least you get some joy along the way. I'd give anything for a few more minutes with George, and you throw Justin away. Maybe you think it's my own fault for falling in love with an old man. But you know better than anyone that youth is no guarantee. So what happens in two years or five years when Justin gets hit by a car? Will you stand at his grave and thank your fairy godmother for warning you about him? Or will you regret every minute you spent apart, will you miss every chance you should have had to touch him and laugh with him? Will you remember every chance you had to tell him you loved him, but didn't?"

"What does it matter as long as he was happy?" I try to ignore the pitying look Emmett gives me.

"I know you happiness means nothing to you so I won't even try to argue that point. But what about Justin? You know he loves you. You know he would do anything for you. And don't for one minute fool yourself into believing he'll be happier away from you. So let's turn the tables. What happens when three years from now you die from an accidental overdose? What will Justin think when he watches them lower your coffin into the ground? Will he thank you for pushing him away? Will he be glad he lost three years with you because you were afraid he'd leave you in five? I think he'll blame himself. He'll feel guilty for leaving you even though we all know that was your choice not his. He'll hate himself for missing a second of your life. He'll never get past the idea that his weakness cost him all the days he should have spent with you. Do you think your death would hurt him less if you were apart? Do think losing him would destroy you less if he's not with you. You gave up what you had because you were afraid of what might happen. But it's not too late. Fix it before it's too late."

This time when I pull away, Emmett doesn't stop me. I look away so he can't see what his words have done to me. And finally, I see Ted walking in the door. Back under control, I turn to Emmett. "Look, there's Ted. You can practice your psycho babble on him now."

Emmett gives me a knowing smile and shakes his head, "Just think about what I said."

I walk out without another word. Unfortunately I'm not sure there's enough Jim Beam in the world to wipe the picture of Justin's grave from my mind. And as much as I don't want to, I can't help wondering if there is something to fix.

#### Hollow Promises (Justin's POV)

I found myself outside the loft with no idea of what to do or where to go. I just wanted to forget. I wanted to forget the way Brian looked at me like he was desperate for me to understand. I needed to forget that I had walked away from Brian again. Once again I'm facing life without Brian. Only now it's so much worse. Now I know what I'm losing. But it doesn't matter because I don't have a choice. The only way to love Brian is to let him go.

Standing here thinking about it isn't going to change anything. I need to go. Somewhere. Anywhere. It's Saturday so I don't have any classes, and I took the weekend off from the diner. I could go home, but Debbie and Vic would ask too many questions. Debbie knows I was with Brian, and I'm not ready to talk about him. Daphne's probably not even up, and she's nosier than Debbie anyway.

I end up going to see my mom. She seems like the safest bet since I can't imagine her wanting to talk about Brian. I didn't call her yesterday, and I know she must be worried. The truth is I guess sometimes you just need your mother. I can tell she's happy to see me. She hugs me for a long time before taking me into the kitchen. Thank God for her natural inclination to feed me.

"So where's Molly?" I ask once she has me settled with coffee and muffins.

"She's with a friend today. Justin, are you sure you're OK? I was so worried when I didn't hear from you yesterday. What did you do?"

I'm sorry Mom. I know I should have called, but I needed to be by myself. I didn't do much. After classes, I just walked around for a while. Then I went to a bar and tried to get drunk."

"Tried?"

"Yeah, Brian found me and put an end to that." I can't help smiling. It still surprises me that Brian didn't want to drown the memories in booze right along with me.

"So you were with Brian last night?" She tries to hide the shock and fear in her voice, but I can sense it.

"Mom, it's fine. It was good for both of us. Really. Brian talked to me about that night. Other people have tried, but he's the only one who was there for all of it. I needed to hear it. I finally felt like it was real, like I didn't make the whole thing up." I look at her face for some sign that she understands. I don't know if she can, but I need her to. "But don't worry I won't be seeing Brian again. We needed each other last night, but it was just that one night. Nothing has changed." I don't know why I rushed to reassure that Brian and I are still apart. Maybe in hopes of avoiding another lecture about him, or maybe to keep reminding myself.

Her face tightens for a moment, but she lets me change the subject. We talk about our plans for the summer. Then, out of the blue she asks me, "Why did you break up with Ethan?"

Shit! The one person I want to talk about less than Brian. "Mom, I know you liked Ethan, but it just wasn't going to work."

"I'm not trying to judge you. I want to know."

"Ethan wasn't who I thought he was, who I hoped he was. He said all the right things. He promised me everything I wanted, but he didn't mean it. They were just words to him. He was possessive and controlling, and I didn't love him." I think that sums it up pretty well. A six-week relationship reduced to three or four sentences.

"Do you regret leaving Brian for Ethan?"

"I did not leave Brian for Ethan!" She smiles at my defensiveness, and I force myself to relax. "Yes and no. I love Brian, and I miss him. It bothers me that I couldn't make things work with him. But my leaving was the best thing, especially for Brian. He isn't meant to be in a relationship. He tried for me, but it wasn't fair to him. Why all this sudden interest in Brian?"

"I know I was never very supportive of your relationship. But I am your mother, and I want you to be happy. As hard as it is for me to admit, you were happy with Brian. When I met Ethan, I thought he was perfect for you. I thought he would give you everything you deserved. But you never really smiled while you were with him. When you told me about the time you spent with Brian last night, there was a look in your eyes you never had when you talked about Ethan. So I just think, if there's a chance."

I stare at her in disbelief; I can't help it. My mother, of all people, is encouraging me to be with Brian again. I want to be angry. Where was her understanding while we were still together? If I thought she would understand, I might have been able to come to her for advice. Now that it's too late, she wants to help. "There's no point in trying again. Brian and I aren't meant to be."

"Why? You said you love Brian, and you miss him. Isn't that worth fighting for?"

I can't tell her truth; I won't betray Brian like that. Instead I go for the easy answer, the one I know will get her off my back. "Brian doesn't love me. He never will."

She gives me a sad smile, "You're wrong, Justin. He does love you."

"Mom, have you lost your mind? You've been telling me for years that Brian doesn't love me."

"I haven't lost my mind. I'm just trying to face the truth. You know I tried to keep Brian away from you. I'm sure you thought it was because I blamed him for your being hurt. I tried to believe that, and I even told Brian that. But that wasn't the reason. And when I said he didn't love you, I knew he did. That's what scared me. Brian was safer when I thought he didn't care for you. I figured he'd eventually break your heart, and you would move on. Just like Debbie said. I knew Brian couldn't love you the way you wanted to be loved. He couldn't give you the life you wanted and deserved. But if you saw even the tiniest hint of love from him, you would never give up. You would cling to that, and it would give you enough hope that you would stay with him no matter what. I didn't want that for you. I didn't want you to settle for what Brian could give you."

"I did leave. Just like you wanted me to. But you're wrong, Mom. Brian didn't love me." I hope she'll let this go. I don't want to have this conversation. The wounds from this morning are still too fresh.

"He told me, Justin, and I believed him. When I asked him to leave, he said he cared for you. It was as close to an admission of love as I'd expect from him. But I already knew. There's something I never told you. I still think it's Brian's place to tell you, but that's not the only reason I kept it a secret. I didn't want to encourage your attachment to him."

She looks so guilty. I can't imagine what she wants to tell me, and I don't want to know. Can't she see this is killing me?

"Mom, don't. Whatever it is, it doesn't matter. If Brian didn't want me to know, let it go. It's too late."

She doesn't acknowledge that I said anything, and I know she's going to ignore my request for silence.

"When you were in the hospital, Brian came to see you every night. He'd wait until visiting hours were over and stay until morning. The nurses told me he never came into your room or spoke to you. He'd just stand by your window and watch you. They said he was broken. They said they never saw anyone hurt for another person the way he hurt for you. He never missed a single night the whole time you were there. That's how I knew he loved you."

I try to breathe, but I can't. Why did she have to tell me? I don't need more proof that Brian loved me, and I don't need more proof of how much that hurt him. She thinks this will make me feel closer to him, but all it does it push me farther away. I want to tell her it was guilt not love, but I can't bring myself to say that lie out loud. Brian watched over me because he loves me. He wanted to protect me, to make sure I wasn't alone. But he stayed outside my room to punish himself. That's where the problem is.

Finally, Mom takes pity on me and breaks the silence.

"Honey, one of the things I always admired about you is your determination. When you want something, you go after it, and you never give up. But sometimes that determination can blind you. You have a vision of what you want, and you won't be happy with anything else. Maybe that's what happened with Brian. You had a vision of what love would look like. Brian doesn't fit into that vision, but it doesn't mean he doesn't love you. If you could find a way to see the love he has for you, maybe you could find a way to be together. Maybe it is different for two men; I don't know. I know it's not the love I wanted to see for you, but it seems like Brian is what makes you happy. Ethan offered you all the words you wanted, but you found out they were meaningless. Brian might not say he loves you or even show it the way you expect, but I know he feels it. Don't worry about what love is supposed to be like, and figure out what Brian's love feels like. I can't believe I'm saying this, but I think he's worth the trouble. I know you are."



I just shake my head at her. There's nothing to say. As much as I want to believe learning to accept Brian's way of loving me would solve our problems, I know it won't. It's not what I want or ask for; it's what Brian wants to give me but can't. No matter how accepting I am, I can't change the fact that Brian feels like loving me is taking something away from him. I promised him I wouldn't ask that of him. I have to keep that promise, at least for a day. I just hope I'm strong enough.

Mom reaches out and touches my face then flashes me the smile I inherited, "Forget all this serious discussion. Let's go shopping!"

I smile back at her, relieved she's willing to let this go. Shopping is just what I need to take my mind off everything. There's nothing I can do about it anyway.

Make Up Your Mind For Me (Brian's POV)

The phone wakes me up. I look at the clock before answering. Who the fuck would be calling me at three in the morning? I reach the phone just before the machine kicks on. "Hello," I mumble.

"Brian, it's Debbie."

"Do you know what fucking time it is?"

"Honey, I don't know how to tell you this."

That's when I notice she sounds like she's been crying. "Did something happen to Vic?" I pray the answer is no, but I can't imagine what else could be wrong.

"No, Vic's fine."

"Michael?"

"No, Michael's fine, and so is Ben."

"Debbie, I'm not going to play twenty questions. What is going on?"

"It's Justin. He was leaving the diner, and this car, it just came out of nowhere."

"How badly is he hurt?" I ask her as I'm searching for my clothes. I have to go. I have to get to him.

"Brian, he's gone. There was nothing they could do. The doctor said it was instant; he never felt a thing."

Her voice fades to a whisper, or I've stopped being able to hear her. I must still be breathing, but I don't know how. All I can think is damn Emmett. He told me I would lose him. I can't speak so I just hang up the phone. Then I unplug it and head for the liquor cabinet.

The days before the funeral pass in a blur. All I remember is silence. There are so many sounds I will never hear again; I can't bear to think of them. Except for work I speak to no one. The phone stays unplugged, and I refuse to answer the door. I changed the lock after Lindsay used her key. She left when I refused to even look at her. Cynthia was threatened with severe bodily harm if she allowed anyone in my office again after I found Michael waiting for me. He wisely chose to leave while I was still on the phone with security.

And now I stand here in this room with all of them. In this room where I am supposed to say goodbye. But I can't. It's already too late. I can't say goodbye to someone who's already gone. I can't say anything to him. I can't even see him. Closed casket. Too much facial damage or at least that's what Deb said in one of the messages she left me. So the last image I have is of him walking away. Of him looking at me with all the love I won't accept and all the pain I cause, telling me he won't ask me to be strong enough to love him. What kind of fucking shit is that? Maybe it's my punishment for all my sins. Maybe it's my punishment for being so God damn weak. But why does he have to be brought down right along with me?

I can feel their eyes on me, but I won't acknowledge them. It's like they don't exist anymore. I didn't even bother to offer my condolences.

Jennifer probably wouldn't accept them, Molly doesn't know who I am, and I'm certainly not going to explain my relationship with him to the rest of his family. His father's not even here. Fucking prick. The fiddler made a brief appearance, but one look from me and he made a hasty retreat. He doesn't deserve to breathe the same air as. Of course, no one can now.

I can feel them moving closer to me. I need to get out of here before someone touches me or speaks to me, but I can't leave him. I know it's stupid. He's not here. But I know when I leave this room. I'll never be with him again. So I stay and try not to be suffocated by their concern or the flowers. So many fucking flowers. His allergies would be giving him fits. I didn't send flowers. I'm sure that's another point against me, but why bother. I can't give him anything now. I wouldn't give him anything when I had the chance.

Someone is speaking now. I don't know who it is so I don't bother listening. I'm sure they're talking about how wonderful he was. Telling stupid little stories and pretending they knew him. What do they know? Do they know what he smells like first thing in the morning? Do they know where he likes to be kissed? Do they know that he can look at you and make you think you're his whole world? Do they know how brilliant and funny he is? Do they know what it's like to look at a piece of paper and see yourself through his eyes? Do they know how strong he is? How hard he fought to get his life back? They don't know him at all.

Next they'll speak of the tragedy and how deeply they'll be affected by his loss. Fuck them. These people probably haven't spoken to him in years. How exactly will they feel his loss? Do they look at their lives and see nothing but darkness ahead of them? I doubt it. Even Jennifer has Molly to live for. I can't see past this room. I can't see anything beyond the reality of walking out of here without him. What else is there?

Emmett catches my eye, and I want to strangle him. I want to scream at him. Fuck you! How dare you be right?! Losing him this way isn't any easier because I already lost him. It is so much worse. Not because of what I lost. I'm not ready to think about that. But because of what he lost. He never got the words he wanted or the life he wanted. Not because he didn't deserve them. But because I was too much of a coward to give them to him.

All I can think of is everything I cheated him out of.

They tell us it's time to go. It's time to say our final goodbye. They line us up to pay our respects. I manage to avoid everyone I know. I try not to watch as they file past crying and whispering last words. The closer I get the harder it is to breathe. Each step takes me closer to where he is. Where he lies there silent and still. I can't imagine him like that. I cannot do this. I close my eyes for a moment, and when I open them.

What the fuck? I'm in my loft. What the hell just happened? It couldn't have been a dream, could it? I want to believe that, but I'm afraid to. No dream, not even the nightmares I had after his prom, has ever been this real. There's only one way to know for sure. I reach for the phone.

"Hello?" his sleepy voice greets me.

My heart starts to beat again, and I'm tempted to hang up. But I don't.

"Justin, are you OK?"

"Brian? It's the middle of the fucking night. Are you drunk?"

"I need to see you." I'm sure it sounds like an odd request, but it's the truth. I need to see him for myself. I need to touch him.

"Now?"

"Yes, come to the loft. I wouldn't ask if it wasn't important." That's as close as I'll ever come to begging.

"Fine. I'll be there soon," he sighs before hanging up.

I wait for him to get here and wonder what on earth I'm going to say to him. I have no idea, but I'm not sure it matters. Right now I just need to be with him. And as afraid as I am of letting him back into my life, I'm more afraid of living without him.

## Don't Just Stand There and Shout It (Justin's POV)

The cab stops in front of Brian's loft, and I'm half tempted to tell the driver to turn around. But I don't. Instead, I pay him and try to figure out what the hell I'm doing here. I don't want to play games with Brian anymore. This morning I told him goodbye yet here I am back already. The sad truth is I'll never be able to say no to Brian. I try to convince myself I heard something in his voice. Something must be wrong for him to call me. Of course, it could be that he found something I left behind, and he wants it out of the loft now. For Brian, clutter can be a major emergency.

I let myself in. It seems ridiculous to deal with buzzers and knocking at this time of night or morning. Brian's pacing in the living room and doesn't hear me come in. I know now this has nothing to do with a forgotten sketchpad, and I'm glad I came. I speak softly so I don't startle him too much, "Brian, what's wrong?"

He stops and stares at me. He seems surprised, almost shocked, to see me. He doesn't move at all; he just keeps looking at me. Finally he stands up straighter as if he's gathered himself. "Nothing, there's nothing wrong."

"Then why am I here?" He'd better have an answer. I didn't drag myself out of bed so he could dismiss me.

"Come here. I need," he looks away. "I need to know you're real," he finishes quietly.

I go to him now. Mostly so I can check his pupils. He keeps avoiding my gaze. "What did you take?" I ask him in exasperation.

"Not a God damn thing. Maybe that's my problem," he laughs.

I don't have the energy for this. Brian wanted me to let him go, and I did. I can't let him do this to me. "I'm going now. Call Michael the next time you get bored."

I turn to leave, and he wraps himself around me from behind. His arms go around my waist, and his head rests on my shoulder. I hear him whisper against my ear, "Damn you, Emmett. I can't let him go."

I turn to face him, but he doesn't relax his hold. I try to read his face. He looks tired and maybe a little sad. "What does Emmett have to do with anything?"

He pulls me over to the couch. Once we sit down, he reaches for my hand. He looks at our intertwined fingers for a while before he says anything. "I need you to listen to me. Some of this won't make a lot of sense, but please try. Emmett and I had a very strange talk earlier. I won't bear you with the details. He asked me if I learned anything from your prom. He was mad at me for always pushing you away. He said it should have taught me to hold on to you. To not want to lose you. But things are never that easy with me." His hand tightens slightly against mine, and I squeeze back.

"What I learned it that I'm going to lose you. It doesn't matter how or why; someday you would be gone from my life. I guess I already knew that. But what I didn't know was how much it would bother me. I'd never felt that way before. I hated it; I hated not being in control. I promised myself that I would never feel that way again. First I tried to control how I felt about you. I tried to put you back in the safe place I had for you. The place that let me be with you without it meaning anything. But you never did fit there. So then I tried to control how you left me. I wanted it to be on my terms, in my time."

"Brian, why are we doing this again? I already know that you couldn't stand to be with me anymore. I know you needed me to leave. I understand all that. I promised you I would let you go forever. Wasn't that enough?" If he would just let go of my hand, I could leave. I'm so sick of saying goodbye to him. It never gets any easier.

"Justin," he makes me look at him. "I'm not trying to hurt you."

You never had to try I want to yell at him. But I stay silent and stop trying to pull away.

"We talked about George and how Emmett wishes they had more time together. You're going to die someday, you know. I hope it's a long, long time from now, but someday I'm going to lose you forever. It won't matter how many times I'll have lost you between now and then because that time I won't be able to get you back." He falls silent and looks down at our hands again.

I have no idea what to say to him. I hate that he's spent time thinking about my death and what it will mean to him. Mostly, I hate Chris Hobbs for making all of us realize I won't live forever. Part of me wants to make a stupid joke about my outliving him. Anything to make him smile. But I know it won't work so I move closer to him. I want to reassure him that I'm here, and that I'm with him. At least for now, and that's all we really have.

"Justin, you know me. I don't believe in regrets. They're a waste of time." He smiles and for the first time since I arrived, he looks like himself. "When I lose you, I don't want to think about the time I could have spent with you. If you lose me, I don't want you to think that you could have done more or tried harder to make this work. Do you understand?"

This time I do pull away but in anger. "Yes, Brian I understand. How many fucking times are you going to tell me? I need to walk away and never look back. I still remember the first time you told me that. There is nothing left to say or do. It's over, and nothing is going to change that. I get it, OK?"

"Justin, you aren't listening to me. I didn't call you over here to repeat this morning. Neither one of us needs to do that. What I'm trying to tell you is I can't walk away and not look back. I'm not even sure I want to anymore. I'm already looking back or looking forward I suppose. The only way I know to stop that is to not walk away. Do you understand now, Justin? I don't want to walk away from you. Not now. Maybe someday we'll walk away from each other because whatever we have has run its course. And that will be fine if it's what we both want. But that's not true right now, is it?"

I should throw myself in his arms and claim him before he changes his mind. I should get down on my knees and thank God for giving me another chance. But I don't do anything but stare at Brian. I'm trying to read something in his face. I need to know where this is coming from. Because when I said I gave up on the fantasy of having Brian anyway I could get him, I meant it. I tried that before and ended up hurting us both. We deserve better. So I need to be sure. I need to know that he really wants this. I have to be sure it's not some new twisted form of guilt or panic over some horror story Emmett told him. This time it has to be for both of us. I take a deep breath and plunge ahead, "Brian, do you love me?"

Do Something about It (Brian's POV)

"Brian, do you love me?"

Fuck! I should have known he'd ask me that. What the hell am I supposed to say? I don't want to lie to him, but I'm not sure I know the answer. I just wanted to see him, to find some way to keep him with me, and already I'm blowing it. He's waiting for my answer. I have to tell him something. "I don't believe in love."

He tilts his head and looks at me closely, "Do you believe I love you?"

"Yes." Well that makes no fucking sense, but it's true. I really have no idea what love is. It's not something I'm familiar or comfortable with. So I don't think I'm capable of loving someone. I also find it hard to believe anyone could love me. But I know Justin. Whatever love means to him, he loves me.

My answer must have pleased him because he sits back down. "Why did you call me?" he asks quietly.

I shift restlessly. I hate taking about things like this, but he deserves an answer. "This is going to sound stupid. Emmett said something to me, and I couldn't get it out of my mind. I dreamt that you died. I needed to see you."

"So this sudden desire to be with me is because you're afraid I'm going to die?"

Not so sudden I want to argue, but I don't. "Does it matter?"

"Yes."

One fucking word and I see disaster ahead. I was counting my wanting him being enough for Justin. It always has been in the past. I see the determination on his face and know he won't make things so easy for me this time. I just hope he doesn't ask for more than I can give him.

"It matters a lot, Brian. When we were together before I always felt like it was what I wanted, but you were only along for the ride. Like maybe you decided I was convenient, and it was too much trouble to keep pushing me away. I need more than that. I need to know that you want this too. Not out of fear or guilt, but because you want to be with me. You have to do this for you because it won't be easy. There will be times when you still think your feelings for me are costing you too much. You will still wonder sometimes if I'll find someone I want more than you. I promised I wouldn't ask you to put yourself through that again, and I won't. You have to decide if I'm worth it, if we're worth it."

Why does he have to be so fucking smart? It wasn't supposed to be this hard to get him back. I don't know if I'm ready for this.



After a few minutes of silence he gets up again. "Brian, it's a lot to think about. I don't expect an answer now. I'm going to go so you can have some time to yourself. Call me when you figure things out." He smiles sadly and turns to leave.

"Stop walking away from me! There's nothing left to figure out." Did I just say that? I must be more ready than I thought. "Come back here." This time I pull him against me. It's so much easier when I can touch him. "You don't have to ask me to do anything; I'm offering. I never thought I would, but I am. As much as I want to say the reasons don't matter, I guess they do. I realized tonight that I could spend the rest of my life without you. That the way my life has been these last few months could be permanent. I don't want that, Justin. I don't want a life without you in it. I thought I did, but I was wrong. I thought the loft would be perfect again when you left, but it was empty. You bring something to my life I don't have words for. I just know that I've missed it; I miss you. I don't want to be with you out of fear or guilt. Those are the things that make me push you away. I'm tired of giving in to them. I'm tired of being without you."

He leans forward and kisses me gently. "We just might have a chance, you know."

"You think?" I ask as I kiss him back.

"Oh yeah," he whispers against my lips. "Think you can handle having me around for a long, long time?"

"Just try and get away," I growl pulling him closer. "You're mine now."

"God you amaze me," he says smiling brightly.

I don't tell him he's the amazing one because I can't speak when he looks at me that way. Instead, lie back on the couch and settle him against me. His head rests on my chest, and I gently stroke his back. For now, I'm content to feel him against me. How did I ever think I could give him up? I brush a kiss across the top of his head. I must be getting soft in my old age, but I really don't care anymore.

After a while Justin looks up at me and sighs, "This is what it feels like."

"What?"

"My mom told me I needed to stop worrying about how everyone thinks love is supposed to be. She said I needed to forget about the words and gestures we are taught to expect. She told me to figure out what it feels like to be loved by you. Now I know."

I clear my throat before I can speak. "Did she say anything about what it feels like to be made love to by me?" I may never be able to tell him I love him, but I can give him that much.

"I think that's more of a hands-on experience, don't you?" he asks trying to look innocent.

"Let's go find out." I push him off me and head for the bedroom. I strip on the way there. Luckily he follows suit. I don't want to play. I want to feel him against me; I want to feel him around me.

When we reach the bed, Justin surprises me by pushing his mouth against mine. We kiss hungry letting out tongues tangle. I reach my hands down to stroke his ass, the inside of his thighs. He loves to be teased. After a few minutes, Justin pulls away. He smiles mischievously and heads straight for my cock. I can't help but sigh in anticipation. You would think after all the blow jobs I've had; one would be the same as another. But with Justin, it's different. I missed the feel of his mouth on me. I missed the way he strokes the underside of my cock with his tongue. I missed the way he plays with my balls while he sucks on me. "Justin," I moan.

He pulls back enough to look at me. But his tongue continues to trace the tip of my cock.

"Don't stop," I mutter.

His only answer is to wrap his mouth around my cock. His fingers find my balls, and after a few minutes of sucking and stroking, I shoot down his throat. He gives me a satisfied smile as he kisses his way back to my mouth.

"Pleased with yourself, are you?" He just keeps smiling. "Well, now it's my turn to play." I kiss him one more time and push him gently onto his stomach. I nibble on the back of his neck and feel him shiver in response. Then I slowly work my way down his back. I take my time and make sure I kiss and lick every inch of his spine. I wanted the desire to build for both of us.

Finally I reach my goal. I part his cheeks and run my tongue along his crack. I find his hole and trace a path around it. He moans and pushes toward me. I begin to press my tongue inside him. I enter slowly wanting him to feel every inch of the invasion. Once I'm in, I wiggle my tongue around the way he likes it. I reach beneath him for his cock, but he stops me.

"No, Brain. I need you inside me now," he pleads.

It wasn't what I planned, but I hear the edge in his voice, and I can't say no. I want it as much as he does. I turn him back over and laugh when he quickly reaches for the lube and a condom. I hold back a groan as he puts the condom on me and strokes it repeatedly into place. I slip a finger then two inside him. I want to make sure he's ready.

"Brian enough! Stop teasing me."

I smile at his impatience, but remove my hand. I enter him swiftly and deeply. I wanted to take this slowly, but the pleasure I feel at being inside him makes that impossible. He encourages me to give him more, and I do. Each thrust gets faster and deeper. I kiss him over and over again. His hands roam my chest, tugging at my nipples. When he bites down on my lip, I know it's time. I begin to rapidly stroke his cock. He pulls me closer and begins to convulse around me. I bury my face in his neck and let my own orgasm take over.

Later, he falls asleep still holding on to me. I know we still have things to work out, to discuss, but I don't care. He's back in my arms, and that's all that matters.

If You Want My Love 1 of 2 (Justin's POV)

I look at Brian sleeping and can't believe I'm here. Even after more than a week, I still find it hard to believe. For the first time, Brian and I actually want the same thing. We both want to be together. We're letting the rest of it work itself out. I've never been happier, and I think Brian may finally be happy too.

He looks so peaceful. I hate to leave him, but I need to go. Debbie hasn't given me a curfew, but I try to get back around two so she doesn't start to wonder. I slip from the bed quietly so I don't wake him. I almost to the door when I hear his voice, "Hey, are you leaving?"

"Yeah, Brian. It's late. Go back to sleep."

"Kay." Then after a slight pause, "Are you going to be at Vic's party tomorrow?"

"Do you think Debbie gave me a choice?" She planned a huge birthday party for Vic. Last year his birthday got missed between Michael being in Portland and me being in a coma. Debbie is determined to make up for it this year.

"I'll see you tomorrow then."

Shit! Why didn't I think of that? If Debbie's making me come, there is no way Brian could get out of it. That means Brian and I will be there together. We are so fucked.

"Justin," Brian's voice interrupts my thoughts. "It will be all right. I promise." He can't see my face so he must be reading my mind.

"Goodnight Brian," with that I leave.

I don't sleep the rest of the night. I can't stop thinking about what's going to happen at the party. I was already nervous about it before I realized everyone would find out about us. This will be the first time I've seen anyone other than Debbie and Vic since the Rage party. I thought I'd at least run into Ted and Emmett at the diner, but I haven't. I figure Michael must keep track of my schedule and steer everyone away. I tried to convince Debbie to let me skip the party, but she wouldn't hear of it. I knew it would be awkward. It has been easier for me not to see them. I didn't want to think about the life I had with Brian. And since we weren't together, I didn't exist for them anymore. I dread the questions I'm sure to get. I wonder who will be stupid enough to ask about Ethan? My guess would be Ted. This was already a disaster waiting to happen, but now.

The biggest problem is I don't know what to expect from Brian. I'll play along with whatever he does, but I wish I knew what the game was ahead of time. No one has any idea we are back together. I wish we could keep it that way. Not that we've been deliberately hiding it. Brian is never at the diner during my shifts. He goes out on the nights I work late, and we spend the rest of the time at the loft. No one has asked, and we're not volunteering any information. It's been nice having this time to ourselves. We are still trying to figure exactly what we want and how we are going to do this. It's so much easier without anyone interfering.

But we're screwed now. Unless we pretend nothing has changed. Brian might decide to do that. It could buy us more time. But we can't hide forever. Maybe it would be better to get it over with. Either way, everyone's going to be watching us. I can't wait for it to be over.

Thank God for party preparations. I told Debbie I'd help her get everything ready, and she's kept me too busy to really think. Once people started arriving, I found a million reasons to stay in the kitchen. Other than hellos, I've managed to avoid everyone. The party was to start ten minutes ago, and still no Brian. I know he's always late, but part of me can't help hoping he won't show up.

"Sunshine, bring the salad out so we can get started," I hear Debbie shout. "If we wait for Brian, it will be time for Vic's next birthday."

"I'll be right there," I holler back. Debbie decided it was warm enough to eat outside so I head for the backyard. I put the salad on the table and turn to walk to my seat when I feel someone come up behind me. I look to see who it is, and before I realize it, Brian is kissing me. I wrap my arms around him and open my mouth to let his tongue in. After a few minutes he pulls back leaving me breathless.

"Miss me?" he asks.

"Always," I answer without thinking. Then, I remember where we are. My smile fades, and I close my eyes.

"Don't worry. I told you it will be all right," he whispers in my ear before kissing me again. Then, in a voice everyone can hear, "Let's go eat. I'm sure you must be starving by now." He pulls me to the table and sits down next to me. The entire time he never lets go of my hand.

I look up cautiously and see ten pairs of eyes staring at us. Even Gus seems interested. Not surprisingly, Michael is the first to speak. "That's it? You haven't seen him in months, you ask him if he missed you, and now you're back together?"

"No, that's not it. Michael, you know I saw Justin a few months ago. And I was only asking if he missed me since he left my bed last night." He smiles as shocked looks are exchanged around the table.

"Your bed! When did that happen?" Michael practically shrieks.

"A week ago, a maybe more. I'm not sure. It doesn't matter anyway,"

Brian shrugs carelessly. Michael opens his mouth to say something else, but Brian cuts him off. "Leave it, Michael." His tone leaves no room for argument. "So what looks good?"

Everyone scrambles to cover the awkward moment. Dishes are passed around, and meaningless conversations are started. When she thinks no one is looking, Debbie leans across the table, "Do better this time. I mean it." She looks each of us in the eye. I smile weakly, and Brian gives her a mocking salute.

We make it through dinner without any major problems. Vic commands most of the attention telling us stories about his days in New York. Other than trying to sneak subtle glances at us, everyone leaves Brian and me alone. Once the presents are opened, we have nowhere left to hide. Apparently, they decide on a divide and conquer approach, and Brian and I are quickly whisked to opposite ends of the yard.

Mom gets to me first. "I see you decided Brian was worth fighting for after all."

"Actually, Brian did most of the fighting this time," I tell her.

"I'm glad, Honey. I really am. I hope things work out for you this time." She seems like she really means it.

"Thanks." I smile at her and start to relax for the first time all day.

"I'll have to let Brian know I'm glad he's back in your life." I follow her gaze to where Brian stands with a clearly agitated Michael. "Once he's not so busy that is. Should you go rescue him?" Mom asks.

"No, he can handle Michael." And I have no desire to get dragged into that mess.

"If you think so. I need to speak with Vic. I'll see you later." She kisses my cheek and heads off.

Within seconds, Emmett descends upon me and wraps me in a big hug. "Oh baby, I'm so happy for you! I knew love would win in the end," he sniffles.

"Thanks, Emmett." I'd forgotten how over the top he can be.

"Things will be different this time; you'll see. Brian knows what he can lose. And if he starts pushing you away, you just remind him that we never listen to fairy godmothers." He gives me another hug and disappears.

I'm still trying to figure out the fairy godmother comment when I see Lindsay heading my way. Before she can reach me, Brian yells across the yard, "Justin, get over here. Now."

I reluctantly make my way over to where he still stands with Michael. When I get there, he puts his arm around me and pulls me close to him. "Justin, Michael wants to know what I think I'm doing. Maybe you can explain."

For some reason I find the look on Michael's face comical, and I can't resist agitating him. "Right now, I guess you think you're talking to Michael." That gets me a pinch on the ass. I smile innocently up at Brian. "Oh, he means with me."

Michael's getting even more upset. "Brian, this has nothing to do with him. It's between us."

"On the contrary, it has everything to do with Justin. Why don't you tell him exactly what the problem is?" Brian's speaking in a slow deliberate voice which should warn anyone to think before they say anything.

Michael crosses his arms and looks directly at Brian, ignoring me completely. "I just don't understand why you would let him back in your life after everything he did. He doesn't deserve you."

Brian's trying to look amused, but I can feel how tense he is. One more word from Michael, and he's going to lose it. "Michael," I need to get his attention focused on me. "I know I should care what you think about Brian and I, but I don't. In this case, your opinion doesn't matter. I love Brian, and I want to be with him. He wants the same thing. How we dealt with the past, and how we decide to live our lives is no one's business. I know you and everyone else wants to tell us what you think, but fuck that. We spent too much time listening to other people before and look where that got us. I'm not doing that again. It's not worth it. So whatever your problems are with us, get over it."

Michael starts to turn an interesting shade of red, but I can feel Brian relaxing. He turns me so I am facing him. "Michael, I think I know what I'm doing with Justin now." He never takes his eyes off me.

"What?" Michael asks oblivious to the fact Brian is no longer paying attention to him.

"Loving him," he answers softly as he leans down to kiss me. I know then no matter what anyone else thinks, we will be all right.

If You Want My Love 2 of 2 (Brian's POV)

"Justin, wake up," I shake him gently and kiss him on the shoulder.

"No," he mumbles burying his face in the pillow.

"Come on, Justin. You need to get up."

He opens one eye and sees it's still dark. "Tomorrow's Sunday. You don't have to work, and Debbie doesn't care if I come home."

"I don't want you to leave; I just want you to get up." This time I kiss the side of his neck.

"Five more minutes," he pleads before falling back asleep.

I don't argue since I actually built an extra half hour into my schedule for waking him. He hates getting out of bed which why he never stays if one of us has an early appointment. He'll be glad I'm dragging him out of bed today. At least, I hope he will. The closer it gets; the more I wonder if this is such a good idea. But then I look at him, and I know it's what I want.

I never thought being with anyone, especially Justin, could be easy, but the last six months have proven me wrong. Maybe it's because I made the decision to be with him this time. In the past, he was always thrust upon me. I didn't say no, but it was never my choice. I can't deny that I'm the one that asked him to come back this time. Just accepting how much I want Justin in my life has made things so much simpler.

I told Justin I was tired of letting guilt and fear run my life, and I meant it. I've tried to let go of all the bullshit I put between us in the past, and most of the time I can. I've learned to stop panicking every time he gets too close. I try and catch myself before I do something stupid to hurt him before he can hurt me. I still screw up, but Justin can handle it. He's learned to read me again. He calls me on my fuck ups and makes me tell him why I did it. But he doesn't hold on to them anymore.

Justin's so much stronger now. He's so much more sure of himself. He's finally stopped looking for everyone's approval and is living his life for himself. He can blow off Mikey's interference which thankfully is starting to taper off. He's stopped worrying about how people outside Liberty Avenue will look at us. He told me some idiot from his class made a smart remark to him once about living a cushy life as a kept man. He'd seen me pick him up a few times and decided Justin was my plaything. Justin told him that once he got past being kicked out, bashed, and disowned, his life had been pretty easy.

Jesus, I wish I'd been there. One of the first things that drew me to Justin was his determination to live his life the way he wanted no matter what anyone else thought. He lost that after the bashing. But now he has his confidence back, and sometimes he just blows me away.

He smiles in his sleep, and I can't resist kissing him. I love to see him smile; you can just feel the happiness radiate from him. I never let him be happy before. At least not for any length of time. I was too busy trying to keep him off balance, trying to make sure he didn't get too comfortable with me. I regret that now because Justin was meant to be happy. That's a stupid thing to say, but I don't know how else to describe the way it suits him. He's so much more relaxed and comfortable now. With himself, with me.

Seeing him this way, I've been able to stop worrying about him wanting more. Justin always told me I was what he wanted, but I never believed him. I thought he was too young to be sure. That's why I pushed him to trick so much. I was sure he'd find someone younger, easier, and better for him than me. I guess he did, but it wasn't what he wanted. Now that he has me, and I mean all of me, not the little pieces I gave him before, he really does seem satisfied. It's amazing how happy I was once I stopped waiting for Justin to hurt me. It still scares me sometimes, being happy, but Justin is working on convincing me I deserve it.

I look at the clock and realize I don't have much time left. After a few minutes, I manage to drag Justin's ass out of bed. I lead him to where I've arranged a few chairs in front of the window and sit him down next to me.

He looks at me quizzically, "Brian, what are we doing?"

"I thought we'd watch the sunrise together." I can't help but smile when I see his eyes light up.

"Really?" he asks hopefully.

My only answer is to kiss him. He snuggles against me and turns his attention to the sky. After watching the colors blend together, he looks up at me, "God Brian, it's so beautiful. I can't wait to paint it."

I kiss him again and consider asking him to do a large painting for the bedroom. It would be a nice thing to wake up to. Not as nice as him, of course. And that's what I'll be doing from now on, waking up with Justin. I could tell from his expression that he remembers what this means. My second ridiculously romantic gesture. Only this time there's no one lurking in the background to take it away from us.

We talked about Ethan. He told me about their disastrous sunrise. How it was supposed to signify Justin's commitment to him, but it ended up being an empty, meaningless gesture since Justin realized he was never going to love Ethan. It bothered me that he felt that he had to try as hard as he did. It was like he didn't know he deserved so much better. I told him we would have our own sunrise someday, and this time it would mean something. I still don't know what it is about him that makes me want to do these things.

At the time, I didn't know what the sunrise would mean, but I figured it out when we discussed Justin moving in with me. We had been back together for a few months when I asked him if he wanted to come back to the loft. He surprised me by saying no. He told me it wasn't because he didn't want to, but that if he moved back in, he didn't want me to bring tricks to the loft anymore. I wasn't shocked by his request, but it wasn't something I was prepared to do. He said it didn't matter. He didn't care if I was never ready, but to let him know if I changed my mind. I found myself telling him that when we watched the sunrise together, he would know I was ready.

I'm not sure why I waited so long. I knew at the time it was more a matter of convenience than anything else. Sometimes I wanted something more than I quick blowjob in the backroom, and the loft was always available. We had already dealt with the rest of the tricking issues. The first thing we did was get rid of the rules. I told Justin from the beginning I didn't think I could ever be monogamous, and I didn't expect him to be either. He said that was fine, but he didn't want us to trick together or in front of each other. That turned out to be much easier to do than I expected. When I'm with Justin, I don't need anyone else. I hardly notice anyone else. He eclipses all of them. I don't know how much Justin tricks, and I don't want to. I do suspect it's less than I do. Although, I don't trick nearly as

much as I used to. It's not from lack of opportunity. I have plenty of nights on my own, but I'm not as interested anymore.

Which why I don't understand what held me back on the loft issue. Part of it was not wanting to make a promise to Justin I couldn't keep. I could tell it was important to him, and I wasn't willing to screw it up. And then the summer was so busy; I rarely thought about it. Justin did get the internship with the magazine. Between that and his shifts at the diner, we didn't see each other that much. Although, we did manage a few long weekends away from Pittsburgh. I think the few times we got away saved our sanity. Before I knew it, fall was here, and Justin had new school and work scheduled to adjust to. I realized the other day I hadn't brought a trick to the loft in over a month. I'm tired of Justin leaving my bed in the middle of the night or not being there at all. So here we are.

"Thank you," Justin mummurs quietly before kissing me.

I look up and see the sun has indeed risen. I nudge him gently, "Do you want to go back to bed?"

He shakes his head, "No, let's stay here a little longer." He curls his legs under him and lays his head in my lap.

I settle more comfortably in my chair and gently stroke his hair. I have no desire to go anywhere or do anything. I'm perfectly content to sit here with him. This is not the life I thought I wanted. But I'm glad I was wrong because now I can't imagine wanting anything else.

## JUDAS

Is simplicity best  
Or simply the easiest  
The narrowest path  
Is always the holiest  
So walk on barefoot for me  
Suffer some misery  
If you want my love  
If you want my love

Man will survive  
The harshest conditions  
And stay alive  
Through difficult decisions  
So make up your mind for me  
Walk the line for me  
If you want my love  
If you want my love

Idle talk  
And hollow promises  
Cheating Judases  
Doubting Thomases  
Don't just stand there and shout it  
Do something about it

You can fulfil  
Your wildest ambitions  
And I'm sure you will  
Lose your inhibitions  
So open yourself for me



Risk your health for me  
If you want my love  
If you want my love  
If you want my love  
If you want my love