



LOVE WILL ALWAYS WIN

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## Love Will Always Win

### Chapter 1 Living without him

#### Brian's POV

Babylon reopened last week. On the dance floor were the same studs, the same hotties. It was Michael who convinced me to reopen. He said it was better that every fag in Pittsburgh come to Babylon, instead of staying on the streets.

I disagree. There are too many memories in this place. I remember when Justin came here the first time. Alone. To conquer me, to prove to me he could deal with me.

Good memory...

I have one more good memory. It was after the bashing, Justin had moved in a few weeks before. After I had done one trick too many, he asked me why he was there. I couldn't answer. Too afraid to say something gentle, something that would be so out of character, so he left me.

Debbie gave me good advice that night: *Tell him you love him*. And then Justin and I made the "covenant." I remember his attempted constraint, "home by two," and my counter, "home by four." He smiled. I remember his smile as he said, "Three. One more thing, you don't kiss anyone on the mouth but me."

I loved that part of the deal and stuck to it.

**\*\*Sighs\*\***

I danced at the opening alone, my heart and soul with Justin. Despite the distance, I see him every day, through the webcam he had installed in his studio. It was his first investment, he said that he would leave the cam on-line, and I could do what I want. God, I miss him...

Three fucking months... Too long. I've tried to visit him, but every time I try to fly to New York, something comes up.

I remember our last night together. His flight was at 10. That gave us more than 5 hours. 5 hours, to do what? To say that I love him, one more time? To say that I would miss him? Too late. He knows that. I let him go to become someone.

I remember his voice, his look, how I felt as he took the box from the coffee table. Suffering, despair, sadness, love. So much love, I could barely put it into words. I've never been good with words. So, I did the only thing that was right for me, I kissed him. I kissed him, with love...so much love.

I thought, *"Fuck the others!"* They don't need to understand. He's the only one who needs to understand.

He's the only one who needs to know that he's more than just a simple fuck or a little love affair. He's the only one who needs to know that I love him, more than anything, and that I will wait as long as necessary to marry him. Because I **will** marry him, despite the fact that we cancelled the wedding.

That's why that night was different. I knew he was fine. And my final results had come that week. The day we decided not to get married, the day before our rehearsal dinner. Since then, we had spent most of our time together. And I must say, I was satisfied. I always knew that he didn't trick, unless we were betting. And then, it was only to please me. To prove to me he could do it.

Stupid bets. More importantly, stupid me.

But that night would be different. I knew it. I decided as I laid him down on the couch. That night,

I made love to him without barrier, without restraint. He looked at me and I knew it was the right thing to do at that moment. Because I loved him, and he loved me. Slowly and carefully, I slid into him, invading his warm, tight, secret place, claiming it as my own. It was so good, so hot, so him. He tightened his grip on my lower back, accepting my decision. The decision I made for both of us. He wrapped his legs around my waist, and brought his body closer to mine. We came together, in a massive rush of emotions.

We wanted to clean up in the bathroom, but we never managed and ended up staying in bed. We made love again. The most important thing was LOVE. Face to face so we could see every emotion, every feeling. Again, he wrapped his legs around my waist to give me better access, so I could go deeper. I thrust slowly, going even deeper. But it wasn't enough. It's never enough when you love someone.

Like the first time, we came together, with the same rush of emotions and his hands wandering over my body. I looked at him, caressing his face; his beautiful face, all sweaty, with his beautiful blue eyes. He smiled at me as we looked at each other, no need to talk. Everything was written on his face. I wanted to tell him to stay, but I had no right to do that.

So, I grabbed his hair, and pulled him into a tight embrace. I put my head against his shoulder, and stayed inside him. He tightened his embrace, rested his foot on my thigh and we fell asleep in each other's arms.

He must have left while I was asleep because I woke up alone. I knew I had to learn to live without him. It took us so long to be together, really together. And then... Never mind, it's better this way.

## **Chapter 2      Together in a non conventional way**

A few days after Justin left, Michael paid me a little visit. It was near midnight, and I was working. No bars, no tricks, just work to keep my mind busy. He told me he wanted to go to Babylon. Since the bombing, he hadn't seen it. He felt that Babylon should be open forever. That was the moment when he said, "It's who we are, it's what made us. Some things aren't meant to change."

He was wrong. I've changed and he hasn't seen it. He doesn't want to see it. He asked me to dance. I didn't want to. I made my way to the door but he held me back with his 'oh so good monologue.' "You'll always be young, you'll always be beautiful, you're Brian Kinney for fuck's sake." I knew I couldn't argue with him, so I danced with him, and eventually Babylon reopened. Without Justin.

Everybody was there. Ted and Blake, Emmett and his new beau, and Ben and Michael. I hadn't felt so lonely since Justin was in the hospital or when he was with the fiddler. But those times, it was not just loneliness --I was also suffering... and feeling guilty.

The day after Michael's visit, I got an email from Justin. "I moved in, everything is fine, I miss you." In a real Brian Kinney way, I didn't answer. Two days later, I received another one, "If you want to see me, click the link at the bottom of the email." In a non Brian Kinney way, I clicked on the link. Several minutes passed, connection time. And then, I saw him. He was painting. I grabbed my phone and dialed his number.

"Hi. It's me."

"I know, I have caller ID, remember?"

"Right. How's your painting going?"

"Not bad. I'm taking a break."

"Liar." Too late Kinney, you just told him that you're on his website. "Fuck."

He moved towards the webcam, and suddenly I felt warm inside, because he was smiling his Sunshine smile. "You missed me

"Not for a moment." But his smile was even bigger.

"Liar."

We spent 2 hours on the phone. Not even for phone sex. We just talked about his apartment and the fact that the gallery asked him for 35 paintings for their future show in 3 months. Thirty-five paintings! They put so much faith in him, I'm really proud!

He wanted me to make a direct line between our loft and his new place, to communicate. I wasn't really ready for that, but I said I'd try. So, after two days of installation, I had my personal webcam and direct link to Justin. I also bought a new computer, especially for that. Nothing is too good for my prince.

I leave the computer on-line every day, so even though we're far away, we're still together. Nobody understands but I've really changed. And nothing in the world, could keep me away from the loft. I know every evening I have the best company I ever wanted, even if it's through computers. Those moments are really special.

They belong to us and nobody can steal them from us this time. When I come home, I always see him. There's someone here and the loft isn't empty.

We made plans for me to go to New York after a month. He can't come to the Pitts because of the art show, but he really needed a break, so we planned a visit. And then, everything went wacky. A good client of Kinnetik's wanted to go to another ad agency. The architect of Babylon fucked up a whole new readjustment. And I had to stay in Pittsburgh.

He wanted to come home, but he had some delays with his work. So, we decided to move the visit to two weeks later. But it seems everything was working against us. Two weeks later, I got sick. I caught the flu. To keep him healthy, I didn't go to New York. But it didn't help; he got sick anyway. I know my germs didn't travel over the phone lines! His show was planned for a month and a half. He couldn't have any more delays. So I stayed at home but it didn't make any difference."

His show was planned for a month and a half. He couldn't have any more delays. So I stayed at the home

We spent the whole week online. Every minute we were together and away from each other. The problem was not that we weren't together, the problem was not being able to touch him, or hold him, or kiss him.

I realized during that time, that Brian Kinney had become someone else, someone who would get married, who would spend his time with only one person and that person was Justin.

Two weeks later, I decided it was time to go to see him, but Mel and Lindz came through Pittsburgh, so we agreed that I should stay and spend my time with Gus. I was really afraid to see him, but Lindsay had kept her promise, he hadn't forgotten me. But without Justin, the family wasn't complete. I wasn't complete.

Finally after all this shit, Babylon reopened last week, Saturday, the same day as Justin's show. It was a coincidence, his show was planned a week before, but some celebrity couldn't come, and they moved the show to the same day as the Babylon reopening.

Michael tried to convince me that nothing had changed, that I hadn't changed, and that I'm still young and beautiful. But in reality, everything has changed.

Everything is different, because I'm different, I asked someone to marry me, and Michael thinks I didn't change. I'm proud that I could change.

I remember the night of the stag party. I remember I would have stayed home and spent time with Justin, but he dragged me to Woody's for the party. I also remember the stripper dancing right in front of me. I remember he was really hot, but at that moment, it hit me, I didn't want him--I wanted Justin, and only Justin. I asked myself, why I had always gone for someone else, when I have the world's most beautiful man with me.

A few days later, I remember lying in bed. Justin was reading. He put down his book, and came closer to me. That night, I really wanted to prove to him that I cared, that I loved him, that I could spend a night holding him in my arms.

"I had a dream last night that we were in our new house."

I teased him, "Cooking? Gardening? Sitting in front of the fire?"

"Not exactly. You were riding me in the stables, diving into me in the pool, slamming me on the tennis court..."

"Well that gives a new meaning to US Open."

"I better start practicing my serve."

I remember his hands on me, trying to initiate sex, but this time I just wanted to hold him and dropped the wrong line, "Wouldn't you rather just cuddle?"

Justin was under the sheet, kissing my back, making his way to another part of my body, which, I must say, was a really enjoyable process. He suddenly jumped from under the covers, "What?"

"I said, wouldn't you rather just lie here and-"

"No, no, I heard what you said. You said 'cuddle'. "

"So?"

"So? I have never, ever, once heard you even use that word, much less actually want to do it!"

I had no arguments against his anger and chose what I thought was the easy way. "Okay, so, can we just turn the lights out?" But I forgot that when Justin is on a roll no one could stop him.

"No! No! Brian Kinney fucks, sucks, rims, rams... but never cuddles!"

Okay, big mistake on my part, Justin doesn't understand that I just wanted to have a nice evening. "Okay, so I used a word that offends your sensibilities. Forgive me, I apologize. I'll never do it again!"

"No, it's more than just that. Everyday that we get closer to being married, the person I know gets further away!"

He was so right but I could only offer him the truth, "I'm right here."

"But it's not you! Looks like you, feels like you... but you...you would never go to your own stag party and not fuck every hot guy in sight. You would never be more interested in gardening than getting laid."

"I'm just trying to make you happy." That was so right, I wanted to be his only one. But he didn't understand that.

"I want you to do what makes you happy... not me." I took my chance, and asked him about going to New York.

His anger grew even more. "Fuck New York!"

"Conquering the art world..."

"Fuck the art world!" Justin climbed back on to the bed.

And then, I tried honesty, asking..."Why? Because you're afraid?" As usual, he was in total denial... "I'm not afraid." I pressed him a little more, to find the real reason. Finally, he answered me by saying that he didn't want it. I knew it was bullshit.

He finally gave me, "I don't. It means nothing."

Then I knew what he was doing, "Would it still mean nothing if I wasn't here?"

As usual, Justin's answer was elusive, "How do you expect me to give you a rational response when the circumstances you presented are completely suppositional and as such have no basis in reality?"

God he can be such a brat sometimes, I finally managed to keep calm. "Just answer the goddamn question!"

"I don't know!"

So I gave him the answer, the only one I could manage, and which was real for me. "Well I do...I don't want to live with someone who sacrificed their life and called it love...to be with me."

He finally surrendered, and accepted my answer, "Neither do I."

And that night was truly a night of decisions-at that moment we knew that the wedding was off, and that he should go to New York. I also knew that I would not only lose my son, and one of my best friends, but I would also lose my lover. That night I would have given everything to keep my life and my lover with me. But love is sometimes not enough to keep people together.

### **Chapter 3      An unexpected Guest**

The reopening of Babylon was a real success, but I've never felt so lonely in my life. I checked out the dance floor. Perfect. The backroom. Everything was all right. The bathrooms. Clean and perfect. The bar had tons of customers. The thumpa-thumpa was great, all my friends were here, but I got bored. I headed home early, before 2:00 AM.

I stepped into the loft and looked at the screen. Justin wasn't home; the show must be going well. I left him a note in his email, took a long shower, and went straight to bed.

A week after the opening and according to Emmett the club is full every night.

One week, and the only news I'd heard from Justin is that he sold everything and that the owner of the gallery asked him to do a new show in ten weeks.

Ten fucking weeks! When will I be able to see the man I love?

Three fucking months, and now I can add ten more weeks. And on top of everything, his fucking manager found him a great place to paint, so he spends less time at his apartment. Shit!

**\*\*Sighs\*\***

I have to find a way to get to New York for a whole week. Almost 2 more weeks have passed and I had only seen him for a few hours at his place. God I miss him. Now when I come home, he's at his studio. When I eat, I eat alone, no Sunshine on the other end. When I go to bed, he's still at his studio. When I wake up, he's gone or he hasn't come home. Last time I saw him, I told him he looked exhausted and that he might have lost some weight. He told me that it was nothing; he had too much to do and not enough time. He assured me everything is all right. I suspected he was lying to me, but I wasn't sure.

**\*\* \* \* \***

Three more weeks passed. I came home and as always, Justin's apartment was empty. I put my briefcase on the bar, and went to the fridge to get a beer. I checked my emails, one from this morning, one from this evening. He always sent a little news. I answered quickly and went to the bedroom to change clothes. It was 8:00 pm -not really late, and I wasn't hungry. I got a book and sat on the couch.

There was a knock on my door. I opened it to find Daphne.

"Hey, Daph"

"Can I come in?"



"Of course." I let her in. She was carrying some food.

"I brought some Thai, is that okay with you?"

"Yeah ... to what do I owe the honor of your presence?"

She went to the kitchen, took out some plates, and put them down on the bar. I always loved her. Her company is soothing and she never judges me. And she's honest, if she doesn't agree with what I do or what I say, she beats the shit out of me, sometimes without warning.

"Well, I was surprised that you didn't show up at the art show!"

"You know I couldn't."

"No, you wouldn't!" I waited for that outburst - it didn't really surprise me. I tried to explain the circumstances to her.

"Daphne, it's not that ... it's just that... I just can't ...."

"You can't what? Prove to him that you love him?" God, she always asks the right questions. The ones that make you suffer, the ones that really push you to think.

"No, he knows that already... it's just that..."

"What, your friends? They already know that you love him! God, you can be such a twat sometimes!"

"I'm not a twat ... it's just ... I can't explain what I feel."

" Oh yes you can, you're in love, you miss him, you're hurt..."

"Yeah, big deal."

"Yes it's a big deal." She rummaged through the food bags, "Here for you ... I know you like this one," she handed me a box of food.

"No it's not a big deal, because I can handle it!"

"Yeah, great. Just like Justin handles the situation." She was really angry with me now. I looked at her, and could see the pain and the concern in her eyes, and I immediately know there's something wrong. The only time I saw that look in her eyes was the night of the prom.

I stopped eating, and tried to figure out what she was hiding from me. I looked at her.

"What?"

"You tell me, tell me what's going on with Justin, and don't bullshit me, please."

Her eyes grew even darker, and I instantly knew she had bad news for me. "He's too thin, he's exhausted, and he's still sick."

"Sick?"

"Yes, he caught a cold, again, a few weeks ago, and the meds didn't work, and he lost a lot of weight."

"How much?"

"About 15 or 20 pounds, I think."

"What? Fifteen or 20 pounds? That's not possible."

"I told you he's still sick, and the meds he's taking made him sicker, and he won't eat very much."

She was very uncomfortable, but she looked at me.

"Other news?"

"He's homesick and he misses you."

"Well then, I think, I need to go to New York as soon as possible. Wanna come with me?"

"No, I was there last week for an interview, and I have another one in a few days, that's why I know he's still sick."

"Well then, I think, I'll try to catch the first flight I can take. Can you help me with the packing?"

"Yep, I'll clean the kitchen, and come give you a hand."

After cleaning the kitchen and putting the plates in the dishwasher, Daphne helped me pack some clothes and my personal things in a suitcase. Then she dropped down on the bed to watch me rummage in my nightstand.

"I'm going to take a shower...."

"I don't want to come with you!"

"That was not the question, do you want to stay then I'll drive you home?"

"Yeah that sounds good. Thanks."

"Anytime."

I took my shower, and as I walked out of the bathroom, I saw that Daphne was asleep on the bed. I decided that she was better off sleeping at the loft. So, I took off her shoes and put the duvet over her. She looked so peaceful in her sleep - just like Justin.

I returned to the living room to check on Justin's apartment. As usual, no one was there. I left him a message in his mailbox.

*"Will be up early, because I have a big meeting tomorrow, you can try to call me on my cell, miss you, B."*

With that, I went back to the bedroom; Daphne was still sleeping, on Justin's side. I listened to her breath. She was sound asleep. I smiled again and only hoped that she would find someone who would love her as much as she deserved to be loved.

I took off my clothes, except my underwear and my t-shirt and went to sleep on the couch

The next morning, just like every morning since I'd been alone I opened my eyes very early. It was five AM, and Daphne was still asleep. I tried to be as quiet as I could. I headed to the bathroom, put on some clothes, and went to the kitchen to make some coffee, and write her a note.

*"Hey, sleeping beauty,*

*Hope the coffee will be good when you wake up, and that you slept well.*

*I decided to let you sleep. You can stay at the loft as long as you want, it's not a problem. I decided to catch the first flight I can to NYC today. You'll find the keys with the code for the alarm. Please, please, don't forget to set it. The code is on the alarm is set (once again - please don't forget to re-set it).*

*You'll find everything you need in the fridge and in the kitchen. Make yourself comfortable. I'll call you as soon as I get to New York. If you want to change the sheets, leave a message for the cleaning lady.*

*Take care. B."*

I took the keys, my laptop, and my suitcase, set the alarm and left. I decided to go to the office before flying to New York. I planned to take the next available flight, but I had to straighten out some things at the office first.

When I got to Kinnetik, Cynthia was already there, waiting for me.

"Hey, how are you?"

"What are you doing here so early?"

"Waiting for you! Daphne called me last night and told me you're going to New York. Having worked with you for years, I assumed you would be here early to put the most important work behind you. And then take a flight ... here's a ticket for the 3:55 p.m., I checked - it should be on time."

"Well, thanks. Don't know what I'd do without you."

"Thanks. By the way, here..." she handed me a bunch of papers, "You have to sign these, and I'll reschedule every meeting for this week to next week."

"Every meeting for this week?"

"Yes, every meeting for this week plus today's, so you can go, as soon as you've signed all these papers, and this one, and this one, too."

"I can only do so much with my right hand."

"I know, I know..." She left, and I began to go through every page she gave me.

#### **Chapter 4     Like a phone Call**

It was 8:30 in the morning; my cell rang. It was Justin.

"Hey."

"Hey, how are you?"

"Fine thanks, and you?" His voice was hoarse, like he'd been crying.

"You don't seem fine."

"Yeah, well you know, the flu I caught is still hanging on and I'm having some trouble getting over it. But it's nothing that I can't manage."

"Of course."

"Hey, I saw we have a pretty intruder in our home." He must be really tired. Even though he knows that I love him, he never referred to the loft as our home.

"Oh yeah, she fell asleep last night after the movie. And I didn't want to wake her, so she spent the night with me." I replied with my tongue in cheek smile.

"What?"

"Should I repeat?"

"No, no I heard you. Loud and clear. Daph spent the night at our home."

"Mmh. Mmh, so what's up?"

"Just calling to say that I'm fine, busy, and still alive." He really sounded exhausted and annoyed.

"I don't have a lot of time, I'm in a hurry. I have to get to the gallery because the owner, Conrad, wants to meet with me in an hour. Seems he doesn't like my last three paintings."

"Oh." That's great Kinney, nothing more than "Oh!" How could it be possible that this Conroy, Conrad, whatever the fuck his name was didn't like 3 of his paintings? That's practically impossible. God, that must be really hard for him. I heard his little voice.

"Yeah, it seems he didn't like the colors. Or the theme. I need to check that today."

"You know, I'm pretty sure the paintings are amazing, even if the gallery owner doesn't like them. In fact, if you need someone to buy them, don't forget you have a personal buyer." I put all the pride and the confidence I have for him in my voice. But I know it's not enough. I know right now if I were near him, I would pull him in to my arms and tell him that everything will be fine.

"Yeah you could be right. And I don't need your help with the paintings. Thanks for offering though. Well, I just wanted to let you know that I'm fine, and that I will probably be really late this evening." Like usual, I thought.

"Ok, well, then ..."

"Brian..."

"Yeah?"

"Miss you."

"I know, love you." I'm not even sure he heard the last thing I told him because suddenly I heard the click from the end of our conversation.

OK, I was really worried about him. Daphne was right, he must be in a very bad mood, and must be really exhausted. I had never heard his voice sound so defeated and unhappy.

Shit, why now, why him?

## **Chapter 5      Feeling ... lost**

### **Justin POV**

I hung up the phone, and felt like shit. I missed him so much. How could I explain to him that nothing was fine, that I missed him more than anything? How could I explain to him that I had never fully recovered from the flu I had caught a few months ago? That every week I got worse and that the medicine wasn't working so I'm sicker than I was when it started.

I couldn't tell him those things, because I owe him too much. Too much love, too much everything.

Our last night together was more that I had expected. I never thought he would keep the rings. That was the moment I knew he really loved me. I never thought it would be possible, that Mr. "I don't believe in love, I believe in fucking; you get in and out with a maximum of pleasure and a minimum of bullshit" could change for someone. No, he didn't change for someone; he changed for himself, because he knew that no matter what I would be there to love him.

I started thinking about after the bashing, when Michael told me that Brian let me live with him because he felt sorry for me. I remember feeling so lost. I loved him so much; I couldn't believe that he wanted me to stay with him just because he felt sorry for me.

When we made the agreement at Babylon, I knew he would stick to the rules. But I never knew I would break every one of them. God I was such a twat.

\*Sighs\*

I was so angry, angry at Hobbs for bashing me, angry at myself because I couldn't remember the most important moment of my fucked up life. The Moment! Shit. It was so important for me that

Brian showed up at my prom and he did, and I didn't remember anything, only that fucking baseball bat hitting my head. Daphne always told me we were really wonderful. Shit. I tried more than once, to remember, with the music, the pictures, but nothing. In fact, I think I was more angry at my family and friends for not willingly telling me about that part of my life. And Brian was the worst. "I wish I could forget." Why? Those words were so hard for me. We never talked about that part of our lives. He never told me what he felt and I never asked him.

I tried to become a part of his life, but he wouldn't completely let me. I tried to make him understand that I needed more than just his presence and some good moments in bed. I needed to be reassured, to know that I meant something to him. But how do you explain those things to someone, without a real conversation?

I thought that my birthday would be a special moment. I wanted something simple with him, but Ben's birthday was the same day. Michael had already planned something for Ben, and we had all been invited. So the girls decided to take me to a violin concert. The violinist, Ethan, was really good, and after the concert, he hit on me.

I needed so much attention, that I didn't even mind. I remember coming home and Brian telling me he had a surprise for me. The guy on the bed was certainly a surprise! I saw later his uncomfortable look and demeanor. But I never told him that I was disappointed. At Ben's party, I told the girls. I knew that Linds would chew him a new one.

All the missed occasions of tenderness made me even angrier. I wanted a reaction from him, but everything was so difficult and fucked up in our lives; his work, Ben's health, Linds and Mel's marriage, my art work at PIFA, the money, just everything.

He never told me that Ryder had sold the agency and that the new boss, Gardner, had given him an ultimatum - one week to prove that he was the best, or be fired. I learned that afterwards. One week. The week. The week he promised to take me to Vermont. Our week. He didn't give me an explanation, he just told me "It's business, it's my business." During that whole week, he never called to tell me he couldn't make it. He never called the cabin to see if I was all right. He never took a minute to call me on my cell. God, I thought he was such an asshole.

A few years later Cynthia told me that he never cancelled the flight ticket, and that he really thought he could make it.

I came home, after the week to see him fucking a trick in our bed, sorry, his bed. Great. What was I supposed to do?

I knew that Ethan was more than a little interested in me, and I really needed someone who could pay attention to me when even when he wasn't fucking me. I was flattered by Ethan's attention. I knew that he was in PIFA like me, so I tried to see if we could be friends. Didn't the gang always tell me to make some friends my own age?

Well I took the chance. I never thought that I was so helpless emotionally, and that I would fall for the first guy who showed me a little interest. The first guy to be romantic with me. That's what I thought was missing between Brian and me.

Well Ethan told me pretty words, but he was a liar. At least, Brian never made promises he didn't keep.

That's why I tried so hard to get back to him. From the moment I left the "Rage" party, I knew I had made the biggest mistake of my life.

Sometimes I'm glad I made that one, because since then, Brian had shown me how much he cared about me and that I could hurt him, even if he sometimes overreacted.

I tried to figure out by myself if he really loved me but I knew I'd never hear those words from him. Wrong, Taylor, since the bombing, he told me those words every day. He was so sweet when he said them. "I love you." I could never hear those words enough.

## Chapter 6     It's business

Even if this time it was deliberate, my leaving didn't hurt less. No, it hurt even more. Our last night was so full of emotions, so full of promises.

The honking in the street told me that my cab had arrived. I grabbed my wallet, cell, coat, and my asthma medicine; my panic attacks had increased in the last two weeks.

I got in the cab and told the driver the address of the gallery. I knew exactly why Conrad, the gallery owner, asked me to come. The first show went well since most of the paintings were done before I left Pittsburgh. I only had a few more to do in New York. I did some painting for the second show during the preparation for the first one, but most of the paintings should be done by now. For the moment, I'm not even close. There are 3 paintings that are really dark. I knew, from the beginning, they wouldn't be part of the agreement, that's why he told me to pass on entering those.

Well, I thought, one thing at a time. Right then I had a thirty-minute ride, if the traffic was good.

As I sat in the cab, our last night in Pittsburgh hit me, again.

The last night - it was then I knew Brian had changed for good. Because, rule number, I don't remember, "never fuck someone without a condom" was broken that night. I never thought he would make that step with me, or with anyone.

He broke another one of his rules too "never keep a reminder" of someone. I realized that when I saw the box on the coffee table holding our rings. I thought he would return them, I never imagined he would keep them.

\* Sighs \*

I thought he was afraid he would lose me if he returned them, so I tried to show him that we didn't need them to prove that we loved each other. He tried to convince me I had become the best homosexual I could be and I knew at that moment that he was proud of me, that my leaving would cost him a lot. But I never thought he could tell me that with his actions.

He kissed me in despair and led me onto the sofa. Once there I noticed there wasn't any lube, or any condoms. I was a little anxious, but looking in his eyes, I knew the answer to my unspoken question. *'I will make love to you'*. And we made love. Slowly and carefully, he slid into me. God, it was unimaginable, the feeling, the sensation, everything was different. He claimed me as his own. To make him understand that I was ok with this decision, I tightened my arm on his lower back to push him into me even more.

We never got to the bathroom but ended in bed, where we made love again. It was long, passionate, and heated. My hands were wandering on his body as if to print every curve, every parcel of his flesh in my mind. God at that moment I wondered why I was leaving. It would be so simple to stay there. But I knew he wouldn't let me do that. No, he would push me, because he always wants the best for me.

I knew he wanted to ask me to stay there with him. But he wouldn't. Everything was written on his face, the love, the passion, and the pain.

\*Sighs\*

Looking out the window of the cab, I knew it would be at least 20 minutes before I got to the gallery.

So my mind went back to that night, he broke down every wall he had built around his heart. Exhausted and sated with love and passion, he grabbed my hair and pulled me in a tight embrace. Still inside me, he cradled his head against my shoulder and I tightened my arms around him, pulling him even closer if that was possible. We finally fell asleep. Or should I say he fell asleep.

Once he was asleep, I got out of bed, making sure I didn't wake him. I went to the bathroom and took a quick shower.

One last look at what had been my home for so many years. I spent a minute wondering if I should wake him up, but I decided not to. I knelt beside the bed, ran my hands one last time through his beautiful hair, and whispered in his ear, "I love you, always have, always will. Don't give up on us, I won't. I love you." Then I stood, grabbed my bags, wallet, coat, and my cell and headed as quietly as possible out of the loft.

Once in the cab, I started crying. I knew, perfectly well that I would come back no matter what.

I brought myself back to the present - in a cab again, another city, another time, but again in a cab.

Finally, I reached the gallery. Taking a deep breath I got out of the cab with a resigned sigh, dreading the meeting I was about to have.

\* \* \* \*

I entered the gallery and spotted Conrad, the owner, in the background with Ophelia his assistant. As soon as he saw me, he smiled.

"Justin!"

"Conrad!"

Conrad turned to the young woman near him, "Ok, that's it. Let's go to my office, Justin."

"Lead the way." The gallery is really nice, open space with a huge first floor where the offices are. Reaching Conrad's office, we stepped in and he closed the door.

"Sit down; I have a few things to tell you."

"Okay." And then I felt the beginning of a headache and possibly a panic attack. "Why did you want to meet with me?"

"Well, first, it seems that your work is far from finished. You've only delivered 25 paintings out of the 40 I asked for and the show is in 4..."

"I know," I interrupted, "Work didn't go like I planned."

"That's not the point, I made a deal with you and you signed it.

"I told you I need a little more time."

"I can't give you more time, because I have the Auerbach show in 10 weeks; you know that. I only gave you a chance because you're a close friend of Lindsay Peterson and were highly recommended by Simon Caswell, the art critic."

"And that I sold lots of my paintings at the last show, and made lots of money for the gallery."

"Yeah, well, beginner's luck."

"Sure, beginner's luck." I stated, really disappointed with this meeting. I began to get angry, because Conrad I was wasting lots of time that I could have spent painting.

He continued in his no-nonsense way. "Yes, and you made copies from your own art, 5 paintings are the same as in the last show."

"Yes I know. You sold every piece and some clients asked for some of the same paintings in this show. If you look, the name of the buyer is on them."

"25 paintings, minus 5 gives me 20 paintings, and you promised me 40, how do you plan to do that in less than 4 weeks?"

"By working day and night." That's what I had done the last 3 weeks. At that point, he didn't know

that. But I'm not only working on my paintings, but also on some other projects.

"Yes, or maybe you could sell some of your older paintings," he said. How did he know about them? Obviously he had been snooping.

It was not an option to sell the paintings I had given to my relatives and friends. My decision was made quickly, "No."

"Why not? I know you have 5 paintings at Lindsey's gallery, and 5 at Kinnetik."

"Yes, and 2 at the loft, 3 at Britin, and 5 at my mother's home and..." I waited until he said the fatal words.

"Sell them."

"Those are not for sell. You know that." I yell at him. "It was part of the deal when I signed with you." I reminded him, my headache becoming stronger.

"I know. What do you propose then?" I could tell he never thought I would take the lead and say no to him. But I didn't spend 5 years with Brian learning nothing.

"Let me do my job, and we'll see in 3 weeks if I can make the show without touching the old paintings."

"I'm not sure ..."

"You know I didn't disappoint you for the last show, Conrad."

He took a few moments to think. "Okay, deal."

"OK."

With that, he stood up, passed by me, and opened the door to show me that the meeting was over. Thank god, because at that moment I knew just one thing - my headache was getting worse.

I stepped out of the office, and then headed out of the gallery. On my way, I grabbed the bottle of painkillers from my jacket pocket and took one of them.

On the street, I called a cab and gave the driver the studio address. During the ride, I tried to work on the details of the Brown Athletic account for Cynthia. Yep, surprise, for a couple of weeks I've been working on the side for Kinnetik because they needed an extra hand on some projects. I drew under the name Julian T. Story, an anagram of my real name. I passed every phone meeting and the interview with the art department head with flying colors. They were so overwhelmed that Brian didn't bother to see me before signing off on my hiring approval. So, no one at Kinnetik, besides Cynthia, knew that I was working for them. I knew that I was making my own money and wasn't dependant on Brian's generosity.

Kinnetik was close to losing the Brown Athletic account because no one in the art department could take Brian's description and put it into art. I had ten days to finish it.

During the ride to the gallery, I finished the rough sketch and planned to finish it using the computer that night. In addition, I also had to finish my paintings. I had lied to Conrad. I had most of the paintings finished. I had just one problem: giving them to the gallery - they're too personal and it was too difficult for me to give them away. It didn't matter that I had every one of them on the computer. Maybe tonight I would be able to sleep, or maybe not, because my headache kept me awake.

It was 1:45 pm. I had spent my morning in a stupid meeting, having done nothing for the gallery, and practically finished the boards for the BA account. I had reached my studio, and had decided to send a message to Brian, telling him everything was fine and see if I could finish the boards and send them to Cynthia.



## Chapter 7      A phone call from home.

Brian was ready to leave the office, when the phone rang one more time.

"What!"

"Leo Brown on the phone."

"Cynthia I told you ..."

"I know, but he insisted!"

"Cyn..."

"Brian, it's the fifth time he's called today, and he's threatened that he'll leave us to go to another agency."

"Do I have a choice?"

"No, not really. Should I cancel the flight to New York?"

"No! Just make sure it's an open ticket so I can leave when everything is done."

"Ok, then, I'm putting Leo through."

Brian was fuming; everything and everyone this morning was against him! The art department fucked up the Remsen Pharmaceutical account, the last three big accounts asked for short delays, and he didn't know how to answer them - not enough people, and not enough creativity!

First, they were more than demanding and then his best worker when he was in a hurry was in New York and Brian didn't have time to help him. He thought he must be damned!

Once Cynthia put the call through, she answered the second line.

"Justin, hey, how are you?"

"Fine, thanks, could I speak with Brian, please?"

"Not at the moment, you know some days everything is ..."

"All stress," finished Justin with a smile."

"Yeah, should he call you back?" Cynthia asked hopefully.

A little saddened Justin smiled and answered, "No thanks, I'll send him an email. Bye Cynthia."

"Bye Justin."

And the conversation was finished.

Justin opened his computer, to write an email before beginning to work on the final version of the boards.

*"Hi Brian,*

*The meeting was fine. Just called; Cynthia told me you are really stressed out. Please don't push too hard (on work \*\* grins \*\*) I want to see you in one piece when I get back! And hope to enjoy every piece of you.*

*Seriously, the meeting was fine; Conrad told me he wants the 40 painting in ten days. He said if I can't finish them, I should sell the paintings I have in the Pitts. But I told him it wasn't part of the deal. BTW, I have finished 35 paintings, but I'm finding it difficult to part with them because they are a part of us. Never mind.*

*Maybe you could come this time?*

*Forget it. It was a bad idea.*

*Can I help you?*

*Tell Daph and Mom, I'm ok.*

*Love,*

*Sunshine*

Justin hit "Send" and the email was gone before he could change his mind.

He passed his hand over his face and made a mental list of things to do:

First: finish the boards for tonight.

Second: Order some take out.

Third: Call Daphne and give her an answer to the question she asked him the other day.

\* \* \* \*

Brian was frustrated as shit. Leo Brown had changed his mind again. The other boards weren't even finished and they had changed their minds.

He sat on his desk, thinking, when everything went clear; fuck Brown, fuck the account, and fuck everything. He stood up, closed the computer, took his briefcase, and headed to the door.

"Cynthia, I'm gone." his voice startled Cynthia, who immediately stood up and tried to stop him.

"Brian, you can't!" she said, concern filling her voice.

"Yeah, I can." Brian tried to get passed her to head to the door. "See, I'm leaving. Justin's not doing well, he misses me, he has too much work to do and --I miss him, I have to go." Brian didn't even notice that he had said that in front of everyone. For once, he had expressed out loud what he really meant.

"What did you just say?" asked Theodore, who had just stepped in behind him and caught the last part of Brian's answer.

"You heard me already, should I repeat it?"

"No ... and I suppose if I say anything I'll be fired?"

"Right!" He tried to pass Cynthia, but she stood in his way. "No, no, Mister, you have worked too hard to throw everything away!"

But Brian was on a roll and he didn't want to listen to Cynthia; he was on a mission, and the mission was Justin. The most important thing for him, at that moment, was to get out of Kinnetik and to catch the plane, which left in an hour and a half. He looked at her, his eyes dark and dangerous, "Cynthia get out of my way."

"No," she had worked with him for almost 6 years; she knew he wasn't himself.

"Cyn ..." he was interrupted by his cell phone. He picked it up without checking the caller ID and barked into the phone "Kinney."

"Oh, huh, did I disturb you?"

"Justin?"

"Yeah." Justin wanted to hear his lover's voice, but he immediately thought he had made a mistake to call Brian's cell. Obviously, the man was in a bad mood.

Brian was so upset at Leo Brown, at Remsen, and at Cynthia and Theodore that he didn't even realize that he was ready to start a fight. And worst of all that the victim would be Justin.

So, in his most annoyed voice and with all the anger he was holding in, he barked, "What do you want?"

But deep down, he knew he had made a mistake and he tried to regain a little control, and whispered, "I'm sorry, I've had a bad day."

On the other end of the line, Justin was out of words; Brian Kinney apologizing was something out of character.

Brian knew he had overreacted and turned back to his office, he stopped at the door and spoke into the phone, "Wait just a minute."

He turned toward Ted and Cynthia. "Cynthia, I'm going into my office. I don't want any interruptions, even if it's the President of the United States, and Ted you say anything about this to anyone and you're fired on the spot. No wait, you're murdered, got it?"

Both replied in one voice, "Got it, boss."

Brian closed the door, walked toward the sofa, put his briefcase and his coat on one end, and sat on the other, putting his feet on the coffee table before him. He inhaled deeply and asked, "Justin? Are you still here?"

"Yeah," he replied softly.

"Sorry."

"Sorry's bullshit!" Justin threw Brian's own words back at him.

"Not for you. I meant it, I'm really sorry, I've had a shitty day."

Since the bombing at Babylon, they had made a promise to learn to talk to each other, and to be honest with each other. Talking, about nothing, or everything, from the weather, or about how their day was.

But, even though they had agreed to talk, everything was new for them, and Justin wondered if Brian was ready to do that. He asked him very carefully, "Do you want to talk about it?"

But even if Brian was ready to make some effort, for the moment, he was far too angry to put all his thoughts together. Instead, he turned the conversation to Justin.

"Not right now, but maybe later, first I want to hear about what's going on with you."

Justin was a little amazed at his confession, and before Brian could change his mind, he began to relate the events of his day.

"Well, I sent you an email, explaining, that the meeting went okay and that Conrad wants the paintings in 3 weeks tops. I lied to him. I told him I hadn't finished them. He suggested that I take all the paintings I still have in the Pitts, but I told him that was not a part of the deal. Then I got out and headed to the studio, but before I did I took a painkiller for that fucking headache, and ..."

"Fuck!"

"What?" Justin asked with a smile, a result of Brian's dramatic outburst.

"Did you breathe during all this? Wait, what did you say? You took a painkiller?" Brian asked as the

last part of what Justin said hit him, and he stiffened on the couch.

"Yeah, I have a bitch of a headache," whispered Justin.

"And, now, how's your head?"

Justin could hear the concern in Brian's voice. He winced because the last thing he wanted, was to make Brian worry about him. "Not good, but I manage. You should know that."

"Yeah, I know how you try to take care of yourself," his voice was more concerned. "Please don't push too hard, Sunshine; I don't want to have to come to New York for an emergency."

"Hey, you read my mail, I used the same words," Justin said and Brian could practically see the sunshine smile on his lips.

"No, not yet, I was going out for a break. You know, I was so upset that I almost took the first flight out."

Justin knew it was an opportunity to ask, "Do you want to talk about your day?" His voice was low and concerned, filled with love and hope.

"Yeah," was the only answer Brian gave him.

### **Brian's POV**

I was never was the type of guy to speak about my feelings. But I almost lost the love of my life, twice, because I was too stubborn and too proud to say that I cared for him, that he meant something to me. Finally, I said those three little words. I always thought, it couldn't be love, or I can't do love. But when Babylon exploded, and I heard the news, I knew, that Justin was... is my life. After I took him to the mansion, I had to find the courage to tell him everything. When he asked me, *"What changed your mind?"* I had no other answer then to tell him the truth. And the truth was that, *"I finally thought of one good reason to do it."* He challenged me like always, asking me, *"And what is that one good reason?"* I realized I had never been so scared. *"To prove to the person that I love how much I love him. That I would give him anything... I would do anything... I'd be anything... to make him happy. I'm selling the loft and the club."* I was scared he would run away.

But instead, he challenged me again, asking me, *"Without even knowing what my answer would be?"* And for the first time, I told him the **real** truth, the real feelings I had, *"I am taking my chance on love."* I thought he must have seen something in my eyes because he asked me, *"And you mean it?"* God, I was so scared to give him my answer. To regain a little control, I inhaled deeply and said, *"I never meant anything more."* And then he challenged me again, *"OK, Let's do it."* But even if I wanted to marry him, to be committed to him, to whatever, I wanted to hear his words. *"Say it."* He gave me his Sunshine smile. *"Yes."* But it wasn't enough for me. *"Yes what?"* And then he told me, *"Yes. Yes. I will marry you."* I never felt so happy or so scared. It must have shown on my face because he said, *"What, don't tell me you're having second thoughts?"* And I could only answer, *"No, no second thoughts"*, because I didn't have any. I was just so fucking scared. Scared I would fuck everything up. Scared to really lose him, that's why after we made love in front of the fireplace, we promised to tell the truth to each other, and most of all to try to explain the feelings we were dealing with.

We found, together in front of that fire, that I could talk more easily wrapped in his arms, and in the dark. It was confirmed some days later, that it worked better after we made love.

Justin was proud of all the efforts I was making, but he also knew it cost me a lot, because for me this sort of things was proof of weakness.

We kept the little ritual between us, even through webcam, or on the phone. At those times, we lowered the lights, and made ourselves comfortable; I would usually be on the futon, he would usually be on his sofa.

\* \* \* \*

Brian sighed deeply to regain control, and said, "I wanted to come to see you, but, Remsen called and they want a new ad." Justin said nothing, just listened to Brian. "Then Leo Brown called, he wants to change the boards, AGAIN, the others are not even done, fucking prick! And then, I have three new big accounts and they want their ads ASAP. My team works 24/7 and I even hired someone from the outside, who does a kickass job, but nothing get done! Christ. I have the feeling that I'm standing on the edge of a cliff and that the wind will push me over." Brian sighed heavily and passed his hand over his face. "I'm tired, it's been almost 6 months, and we haven't seen each other. I miss your ass, I miss fucking you, and I don't sleep well without you. And through all this shit, in the last few weeks, I've been home and alone, not even the web or phone sex because you're working on your fucking show 24/7. I'm worried about you." After a short silence he said, "I really miss you." Brian sighed again thinking to himself, 'very good Kinney, you just acted like a fucking Dyke!' But it doesn't matter, Justin has to know that I care about him. The silence on the other end of the line became uncomfortable for Brian. "Justin?" he said.

His voice thick with emotions, Justin managed to answer, "Yeah, I'm still here, I'm just ..."

"Astonished, overwhelmed?" tried Brian.

"Yes, those are the words I was searching for. Since when do you finish my sentences?"

"Since I asked you to marry me."

"Well Mister Kinney, it seems like you're sooo in love with me that you can finish my sentences."

Brian could almost see Justin's smile, his sunshine smile, and he smiled in return. "Yeah, what do you want, you changed me."

"Yes, maybe but you never do something you don't want, so I think I helped you make the first step and you did the rest. So, you didn't answer my other question."

"And that question was?"

"Can I help you with the boards?" Justin was hopeful, he knew that if he could help Brian, he could release some of the tensions his lover had, and maybe if all those accounts were closed before the show, he could come to New York.

"How do you imagine doing that, Sunshine? Working on your show and for me?"

"You know, it's not a big deal I can..." Suddenly Justin was interrupted by a coughing fit.

"Justin, are you all right?"

Once he caught his breath again, he said, "Yeah, I'm all right, just a little side effect from that cold I caught a little while ago. You know I need more time to heal than others because of my allergies."

Much more concerned than he wanted Justin to know, Brian tried to give him a supportive answer, "Yeah I know, but I hope you're taking care of yourself. And no, right now I don't need your help." He didn't think that Justin would take that answer that poorly but the outburst on the other end didn't last long.

"Bullshit! And you know it. Tell me, or I'll call Cynthia, or Ted. Or I'll take the first plane and come to give you a hand. And you know I'll do it, not because you want me to, but because I want to do it. I'm more than a little persistent, remember?"

Taken aback, Brian could only nod even if Justin couldn't see him. Justin spoke again, "I think you just nodded, you must be really tired, if you're not even able to gave me a correct verbal answer."

Brian inhaled deeply, "I told you before. And yes, I'm tired, not only because I haven't slept, or because of the job. It's because I can't see you, I can't touch you, I can't feel you. Yes, you heard me. Every time we try to meet each other something happens! I hate the fact that you're in New York and that I couldn't come to your first show. I hate the fact that you can't come and see me because you have too much work to do. I hate the fact that I sound so lesbianic, and finally, I hate the fact that the plan I had to come see you this week has once more been cancelled because of all

the shit at the office." Brian sighed heavily, he was more than exhausted, and this speech had drained the little composure he had left.

On the other end of the line, Justin was amazed. He knew since the proposal at the West Virginia Manor that Brian could be more open. He already knew that they had agreed to tell each other how they felt if one of them asked. But here, he couldn't speak, god, he could barely breathe.

"Well... I ... you..." Great he thought to himself, you've never, ever run out of words before - this is the first time that's happened.

"What is it Sunshine? You are running out of words?" Brian had finally cut the silence by teasing Justin with his lack of words. "You got me to express my feelings, and you know I hate to do that. But we agreed before you left to tell each other the truth. So, I've told you the truth. Do you think you can fix that?"

"No," came the answer, "but I can help you with the boards." Finally, knowing from experience how persistent Justin was and since he didn't want to get into to a fight, he accepted Justin's help reluctantly.

"Ok, but only the boards you've already worked on, like Brown and Remsen. I'll take care of the new accounts like I always have. I just remembered something Gardner told me when I was a partner at Vanguard, *"You're a miracle worker."* Miracle of shit, with the job I'm doing this time. Well, never mind. Try to deal with those boards and if you have any problems, call. Okay?"

"Miracle worker? You never told me that." Justin said, smiling on the other end of the phone.

"Yeah, well we were dealing with some other shit at that time. Did you hear me?"

"Yes, I heard you. If I have any problems I'll call."

"Good, Oh before I forget..." Brian inhaled deeply to find the courage to tell him the three little words Justin loved to hear.

Justin interrupted, "I know, you told me twice in the last 10 minutes. I love you, too."

"Me too, Justin, me too. Ok, you'll send me the boards?" It was much simpler for Brian when Justin led the way in expressing his feelings first.

"Yes, I'll do that."

Brian suddenly remembered Daphne, "Shit!"

"What?"

"I have to call Daphne; she thinks I'm on a plane to NY."

"Oh, could you tell her that I miss her and I don't have an answer for her yet."

"Sure, no problem, what was the question?" Brian asked, intrigued.

"She made me promise to talk to you, so unless you bring up the subject, I won't say a word," Justin answered with a smile.

"Think I'll talk to her this evening then."

"Yes, do that, she won't tell you." Justin told him, knowing expertly that Daphne would never say a word.

"I can be really persuasive, you know." Brian replied with his famous tongue in cheek smirk "Okay; I have to go; I'll try to fix some of the new ads before I go home. Later."

"Later."

And they hung up.

## **Chapter 8      My so called best friend.**

Finally, the day ended. Brian called the loft to tell Daphne that he would be coming home, probably late, because he wanted to go to Woody's, and that she could stay there and make herself comfortable. He finished most of the background work for the various new accounts, and if everything worked like planned, they should be finished by the end of next week.

So, at almost 10pm, he stopped at Woody's. The last time he was there was two months earlier, maybe longer, he didn't remember. He stepped up to the bar and asked for a beer. He didn't want to get wasted, he had a meeting the next day and he didn't plan to fuck it up. And even if he was angry and frustrated at the situation, he had more or less accepted the fact that the reunion with his blond lover was once more delayed.

He was sure, after today's conversation, that Justin was fine and that despite his own work, he could help Kinnetik with some boards. A little smile came to his lips; that little persistent kid was always on his mind. He turned around. He saw the whole gang at a table and decided to join them.

"Hello boys."

"Hey sweetie, long times no see," said Emmett giving him a kiss on the cheek.

"Busy, busy," Brian answered, not bothering to acknowledge that Emmett had just kissed him hello.

Michael huffed, looking at a handsome tall brunette who was more than interested in hitting on Brian. Brian followed his gaze; the guy was really hot.

"I'm not interested!"

Michael looked at Brian like he was seeing him for the first time and Ted choked on his glass of juice.

"No, not again. Are you too at war again?" The situation reminded him of Michael's 30th birthday, where Brian and Michael had fought.

"Huh?" they both replied.

"Yes, you two," he said, pointing his finger from one to the other. "Are you two fighting?"

"No, I don't think so, are we fighting Michael?" Brian asked casually.

"No, last time was before the ... well you know." Michael answered with a shrug.

"Yeah," turning to Ted. "No we're fine. Why?"

"You just told that guy you weren't interested." Ted pointed out.

"Yeah and ..." Brian smiled lightly at Ted's stunned face.

"Well, you're always interested in tall brunettes," replied Michael, with a knowing look.

Nursing his beer, Brian answered just low enough to be heard by everybody, "Yeah, well maybe the only dick I'm interested in is in New York. Is that a problem for anyone?"

"Yeah, like I believe that." Rolling his eyes Michael turned his head toward Ben who was looking at Brian and tried to warn his husband

"Michael, I don't think ..."

Brian looked past Michael, into Ben eyes "You should listen to the professor, Mikey."

But as usual, Michael never listened to anyone when it came to Brian. "And why should I listen to Ben, when I have a perfect stranger before my eyes?" he gestured toward Brian.

"A perfect stranger?" repeated Brian, to make sure he had heard right.

"Yeah, that's not you. Turning down a trick, that's really not you." Michael paused and suddenly his face lit up because he had just had an idea. "Maybe you should go with us to Babylon and take a tour in the backroom? To get laid, to enjoy your liberty. When was the last time you got laid?"

"Why should I go to the backroom? Why should I enjoy my liberty?" Brian asked back.

"To be yourself, again."

"Michael!" Another warning from Ben

"Please come with us to Babylon, enjoy the music, the backroom, the men ..." whined Michael, ignoring all the looks and Ben's hand on his back.

"Yeah, the men... I'm not in the mood," Brian answered.

Michael slammed his beer against the table yelling, "Not in the mood, that's a first! Why don't you come partying with us? Take a break from your job, find a trick, and fuck him in the backroom? Or get laid at the baths?"

Brian looked at him, trying to ignore Michael's obvious stubbornness. "The baths are closed, remember, it's now an advertising agency called Kinnetik, does that ring a bell?"

Everyone smiled at that.

"Yeah well, you know what I mean, the new bathhouse on the end of Milgate Street," insisted Michael.

"Why should I go there?" Brian pinched his nose; a headache was coming.

"To be yourself again, what else?" huffed his "Best Friend."

"You told me that twice, why should I be myself again?" Brian was getting angrier from question to question.

"You know, your old self, before Justin came into the picture." Michael tried to be convincing, "He's not here anymore, you can do what you want, and you don't have to be home before three, you don't have to hide who you are anymore."

At that moment, Brian's head snapped up, and he looked in Michael's eyes, trying to find what Michael could have taken before coming to Woody's. But Brian only saw clear eyes. "Hide who I am anymore? What does that mean Mikey, could you explain that to me?"

"Michael, I don't think it's a good idea to continue," Ted tried hopefully.

"Why not?"

"You're on a slippery slope," added Ted.

But before Michael could answer Ted, Brian asked him, "I'm going to ask you a question and I want an answer."

"Brian, I don't think ...," tried Ben, but looking in Brian's eyes, he saw it was useless. Brian wanted this discussion, and he wanted it **NOW**.

"Michael, I'm waiting... what did you say?" Brian scratched his forehead trying to remember, "Ah yes, I don't need to hide who I am anymore? What does that mean Michael, could you explain that to me?" he added in a falsetto voice, like he was a five-year-old kid who needed an explanation.



"Well, getting drunk, fucking around, getting high, the things you haven't done lately. It's like you lost your true self."

"I lost my true self?" stated Brian, furrowing his brow. He looked around him, and saw that Ted and Blake were uncomfortable, Emmett was shaking his head in defeat, and Ben had silently moved in case he needed to interfere in their fight.

"Yes, like you would please Justin," continued Michael without seeing all the warnings in Brian's demeanor, the dark eyes, the red face, the gritting teeth and the thin line that Brian's lips were forming. He didn't notice any of those signs, but everyone else was aware of them.

"Please Justin?" Brian repeated, in a sarcastic voice.

"The truth is we all knew he wanted commitment, and you, you wanted freedom, power, to be the stud of Liberty Avenue. You two ... well it never would have worked." Michael finished making a point.

"How come?"

"Michael," putting a hand on his husband's arm, Ben tried again to interfere. But Michael shook his arm away and answered Brian's last question with all the venom he had in him.

"Because he was a trick, a trick you fucked more than once, ok, but he was still a trick, a one night stand. I never saw you enjoying a comfortable evening, together, like every couple does. I never saw you two going shopping, or being in the same room just enjoying each other's presence. Hell, it was always about fucking. You could barely keep your hands off of each other at the family dinners."

"Uh-huh," stated Brian, stiffening in his seat.

"You solved all your problems with fucking. Something happened, no problem, you took him in the backroom and fucked him, problem solved. It wasn't like Ben and me."

"Not like you?" asked Brian, tilting his head to the right.

"Yes, or Ted and Blake."

"Could you please leave us out the conversation? That would be nice," Blake asked.

Taking a long gulp from his beer Brian tried to compose himself. "Ok, Justin and I aren't like you... explain."

"Weren't... you're speaking as if he's here with us, but he's not anymore. Yes, Ben and I are married. We're living together, sharing things together. We fight sometimes, but we talk our problems out; we don't just fuck, and then everything is fine. Right, Ben?" A light nod from the professor made the point.

Coming from nowhere Brian suddenly asked, "Michael, are you happy?"

"Huh?"

"Happy?"

"Yes why?"

Turning toward Blake and Ted, Brian continued, "Do you think Blake and Ted are happy?"

"Yes, why would you ask me that?" a slightly pissed off Michael asked.

"Do you think I'm happy?"

Without thinking, Michael answered, "Yes."

"Why?" Brian asked in a whisper.

Ted put a hand on Brian's shoulder, "Brian, maybe we should go, we have an important meeting tomorrow."

"Fuck off." Inhaling deeply, "I'm waiting Michael."

"Because he's gone, he can't bother you anymore. You can be yourself again, the person who loves partying, who loves to trick. And by the way, you and Justin were never really together, not in a real relationship, because you don't do relationships, you don't do boyfriends either. You and Justin never had the same relationship as Ben and I, you never went to see a movie, or went shopping together. It's better this way. You finally came to your senses and called off the wedding. That was really a farce."

"Michael," again, Ben tried to warn him that he was going too far. But Michael continued, "To be you again. Just like you were before Justin"

Brian hung his head and looked at his hands, "Yeah, and you think I would be happy?"

"Yes ..."

And before Michael could say anything else, Brian stated firmly, "But I'm not, Michael. I'm not happy."

Looking up, like a ton of bricks was falling on his head, Michael laughed nervously, "You're kidding, right?"

"No! I'm not kidding!". Brian shouted, and suddenly Woody's was calm. Everyone tried to listen to the conversation that was taking place at the gang's table.

"No, I'm not kidding," repeated Brian. "Listen Michael, I miss him, ok, and I'm not happy."

"I can't believe this, he's gone. He moved on, you must be happy!" Michael tried to convince him.

"Would you please shut the fuck up, and butt out of my life for once?" Brian barked, and he turned away walking to the bathroom, trying to regain control of his emotions.

Michael grew angrier as he saw that Brian wasn't going to listen to him. For him, Justin had once more ruined his friend's life.

Knowing Michael was disappointed, Ben tried to soothe him. "Look, he must be right. Since he walked in here, he's turned down every man who hit on him. Don't you think he misses Justin?"

"Yeah, maybe, but then he should be going in the backroom with a trick, like he always does. It's his method of pain management."

Ted tried tentatively to interfere, "He's probably over that kind of pain management."

"Yeah, but it's not the Brian I know," Michael stated firmly.

He was so self absorbed, that he didn't even notice that Brian was back at the table. He had heard that last statement and it was more than he could take.

"Yeah, and you're not the same Michael I knew 20 years ago, so what's the problem now?" Brian asked with an angry voice. Before Michael could say anything, Brian continued, "Do you remember your 30th birthday?"

Michael nodded.

"Yeah, well, do you remember how when you met the Doc, that I tried to keep you in a 14-year-old mindset? It's not that I didn't want you to find love, it's just that I didn't want to grow up. So I pushed you into David's arms and we were angry at each other until Justin put two and two together and tried to make everything all right between us. Do you remember?"

Michael, surprised at Brian's outburst, could only nod.

"I never found out what he told you, because he never said anything, but I'm guessing that he tried to defend me and bring you back to your 'best friend.'"

Brian sighed heavily, and continued talking, not noticing that everyone else at the table was extremely quiet.

"And then instead of going to him to speak with him about Ethan, you came to me directly and told me that he was cheating on me. And the only thing I could think to do was to push him away into Ethan's arms, instead of trying to understand him."

It was not just the gang's table, but everyone at Woody's was captivated. Brian 'fucking' Kinney was expressing his feelings, and was speaking about a part of his life. That was a first. And most of all, he was speaking about his blond twink.

"And I remember your little speech about *"because you are so good at dumping things."* Did you think that I could just stand behind the door and listen?"

Michael tensed and blanched. He was in shock, shaking his head in denial.

"I was there, not because I wanted to listen but because I wanted to talk to him. But you," he pointed his finger with anger and pain against Michael, "you told him that because he wasn't with me any longer and that he should just disappear! Disappear! And then I learned from Debbie that he just left like that," he snapped his fingers. "Thank God he didn't disappear entirely! I was angry with me, with you, with Ethan. But I had just lost a big part of my life, and I was alone, and I pushed my anger at you away and tried to forget that I was hurting."

Everyone at Woody's was silent now. Everyone was listening to the "stud of Liberty Avenue's" story. No one had tried to hit on Brian in the last 15 minutes, not because they didn't want but because most of them just then understood that he was off the market.

"And then I showed up at the munchers anniversary party, do you remember that day?"

Michael nodded, how could he forget the munchers party. Brian had hit him that day.

"Do you remember what you said? You said you couldn't believe that the little twat had the nerve to show up with his new boyfriend after what he did. I tried to warn you, telling you that he didn't do anything, that we weren't happily married, and that he was always free to go and so was I. I tried to warn you to stop, but as usual, you never listen. You know Michael, he never used me and never took anything without giving back something, and he tried to pay me back everything. I never knew you could be so small, but today I understand what I always suspected. You were jealous of him. You were jealous because he had me in a way you never could!"

"That's not true," Michael whined.

"What was your exact phrase? He's a selfish little shit, he used you and he took from you and he never gave back a thing. And this is the thanks you get for saving his life. If you ask me, it wasn't worth it. You should have left him on the ground." Does that ring a bell?"

"Oh my God." Emmett was breathless, he never thought Michael would have said that to Brian. But most of all, he just understood why Brian had hit him that day.

"Did you really say that?" Ben asked Michael.

"I... I...," stammered Michael, incapable of putting his thoughts together.

"You what?" Ted asked, "You're sorry? You never thought about it? Now I know why Brian hit you."

"I think you deserved it," added Emmett.

"I never ..." Michael tried to explain, only to be abruptly interrupted by Brian.

"You never what? Wanted to say that, think that or you want to take it back? Too late, Michael, I

was there, he was there, we were all there. You thought I forgave you. Wrong Captain Astro, I **never** forgave you that comment. You were with me, at the hospital, you were there, you saw me, and you knew deep down that I had feelings for him. I was amazed that you could even say that," Brian finally said.

He sighed loudly. Ben moved from behind Michael and put his warm hand on Brian's shoulder as silent support, and Brian continued.

"Since the moment we were back together after the fiddler, I knew I wanted to change. I didn't know how but he led me all the way. And I did change. The last straw was when he went to stay with you and Ben. I thought we were happy until you threw all that shit in my face. You used the crude version; Justin always tried to be a little softer. I went back to Babylon that night, made a stupid bet, that I won, and then everything was clear in my mind."

At that moment, he raised his beer to Brandon on the other side of Woody's.

"I don't need to fuck every hot guy in town, because, first, I've had them almost all of them. And second, I had the hottest guy with me at home and I was too stupid and too blind to see it. Even more, after what happened at Babylon, I know that I had loved him since the first night, because he was there to name Gus, he was there the next morning, and I took him home with me more than once. And most of all, I know that I will marry him and that I **never** will have anyone else in my life. Despite all this, **you** still think I'm the 30 something I was, thinking only with my dick! No, I'm not that man anymore!"

He looked around him and scoffed.

"Ask them, how many times I have been here in the last few months. Ask Todd if he has seen me at Babylon, or better yet, ask Emmett as he is sort of the new owner."

Emmett leaned against him, and put his arms around his shoulder, joining his hands over Brian's chest. Instead of taking offense at the embrace, he covered Emmett's hands with his own, leaning against the taller man for support. That was extremely rare because he normally only did that with Justin, but with the day and the evening he had had he needed some comfort.

Regaining a little control, he continued.

"Michael you must have seen that I have changed - I asked someone to marry me. Not because he wanted it but because I wanted it. And you know me well enough to know that I never do something I don't want or do, something I don't believe in."

Michael was astonished and was out of words; the only thing he could do was nod.

Ted looked in his glass knowing that the best thing to do was to stay quiet. Emmett tightened his embrace, and Ben squeezed Brian's forearm to tell him, without words, that he understood and that he was on his side.

Suddenly Brian felt really tired and, without thinking, Ted asked him, "Do you want a ride home?"

Brian only nodded, telling the others, "I think I've told you enough for a whole lifetime. I'm going home." He thanked Emmett with a smile, put his beer on the table, and headed to the exit following Ted.

## Chapter 9 Ted & Emmett Silent introspection

### Emmett POV

Why could Michael not see that Brian had changed? God, he's always said the same thing, "He's my best friend and Justin is the trick who never wants to leave."

I saw Brian change these past few months. I think I saw the change the first time I came to him, to beg him to save Ted's ass during the Stockwell campaign. He stood there in front of me, showing no emotion, but deep down, I knew he would do something.

Then Ted fell into the crystal spiral, becoming more and more addicted. I stood there, watching him destroying his life and mine, but I couldn't do anything about it. Then one night, at Babylon, Brian asked me to dance with him.

I've known him for how long? At least 10 years, and we **never** danced together before. Of course, we had all danced together, but he had never invited me personally. I was there leaning on the bar and he was standing in front of me when he suddenly pulled me onto the dance floor with him. For a second I thought, 'What the fuck is going on?' but then I realized I really was with Brian Kinney on the dance floor. That's the moment I told him, "You know we've never done this before." He answered with his confident voice, "It's a shame; we make such a lovely couple. We're both - tall!"

But I couldn't live with that answer; I wanted to know what was going on. He told me that he thought I might enjoy being the center of attention because I was with him. I remember glancing toward Ted thinking that maybe I could save him from his own hell, but my thoughts were interrupted by Brian telling me that I should move on; that I should forget about him, because he was dead. I told Brian that he wasn't dead, that he was standing there in Babylon with us, that we could save him, but I knew he was right. Ted was on a really bad slope, and if he continued that way, he would die soon enough.

Brian taught me the 'Kinney survival skills 101'. And that was, put one foot in front of the other. I thought he was a heartless shit, but in fact, he was more concerned about us and our well being than he would admit!

Right then, though, I couldn't admit he was right, and started to go back to Ted. Brian called after me, "Go back to him! Show him how much you care. Let him kill you too!" I needed a few seconds to really register what he said, but he was exactly right. Ted would have dragged me down with him.

I wanted to be angry with Brian, but it didn't work, at least not for very long, because deep down, I knew he was right. I slowly realized that maybe he wasn't such an asshole. I understood why he and Justin were together. This must be the façade the rest of us never saw. And if he showed it to us, it was only because he knew that we needed help.

God I never understood why Michael couldn't see or understand that.

Mister "I'm his best friend" should have been happy for him, or suffer with him... but no. It was always about what Mister Michael Novotny Bruckner wanted, never about what his best friend wanted or needed.

I knew through Daphne that since Justin had been in New York, she had tried to spend some of her free time at Brian's. First because Justin asked her to make sure that Brian ate, and then, because he appreciated her company more than he really wanted to admit. But she made me promise to keep my mouth shut and never say anything to anyone because it was Brian's private life, so I simply agreed.

The most difficult moment for me, was when I heard his so called best friend tell everyone that he was better off without Justin, that he was still the stud of Liberty Avenue, that he was happy to be a predator, and tricking. I knew from the moment Justin moved to New York that Brian would be sad, that he would suffer. But he never showed it. He worked twice as hard, he immersed himself in work, at Kinnetik, at Babylon, anything he could find. Ted had told me that he often came early to Babylon during the first two weeks in order to leave early. I didn't know why until Daphne told me that he had a direct web link with Justin. I smiled at that. She also told me that they were spending a lot of time together this way. I was happy for him; he wasn't alone.

I remember the first time I saw the real Brian Kinney emerge, the one Justin always saw and we never did.

It was the night Teddy OD'd. We were at Babylon, like every night, and Justin was there, shirtless, trying to steal Brian's trick from him. I remember the look on Brian's face - the 'WTF' look. And then I saw the other look, not the predatory look, but the one that said, 'Woah, this guy has balls'. The look told me that Mister Kinney would probably break his first rule: 'I don't do repeats'. I didn't receive confirmation until much later, but deep down, I knew it.

I remember that day where we were all at the loft, because the night before Brian had had an

accident.

Brian was lying on the couch and someone knocked on the door. Brian told me to open it. I was surprised to see Justin on the other side, but said nothing.

I only smiled.

Justin walked in, said hello to everyone, and took the empty place on the couch at Brian's feet. Brian reached out calling, "Come here." Justin moved near him and Brian kissed him, and then asked what happened to his lip. Justin answered casually that he had a fight with that asshole of Hobbs, and that he was suspended from school for 3 days. All the time they were speaking Brian had a hold on Justin's hand and at the end he was running his thumb along Justin's cheek.

The Lion was becoming slowly domesticated, but everyone else still saw him as a selfish asshole, and the biggest stud on Liberty Avenue.

Michael never admitted that Brian had broken every rule he had for Justin. The only thing he saw was that this 'kid' didn't want to go, that he was a stalker, and that he took everything.

What did he take? Money? The credit card balance was long paid back. Justin worked at the diner to pay back every cent with interest. He took his first check from Rage to cover the rest. One day he told me that he had paid back everything, including the interest. He was so proud of himself.

As for the college tuition, he told me that he had signed a loan agreement - Brian paid for the tuition and Justin would pay him back when he got a job and earned his own money. In fact, I later learned that he tried to pay Brian back with the money from LA, from Rage, the tips from the Diner; every cent Justin could spare was to pay Brian back.

Either Michael never knew about that, or he ignored it. He never saw the love between them. He only saw that Justin was stealing Brian away from him. He never understood that Brian loved Justin like a lover and that he loved Michael like a friend.

I don't know what I would have done if I had been in Brian's place the day Michael told him that he should have let Justin die. I think I would have killed him. Fortunately for Michael, Brian forgave him. No one even thought to ask what made Brian hit him. Once again, everyone assumed it was Brian being Brian.

Brian was always sacrificing his own happiness to help a friend. I don't know if I could do that.

\* \* \* \*

## **Ted POV**

I dropped Brian off at the loft and headed home, not sure if I understood everything that had happened that night.

Did Brian really say that he was interested in only one man? I couldn't believe he had said that in front of everyone at Woody's. But maybe it was better that way because we were all there. And still I was amazed that the world hadn't stopped spinning? Everything was the same as before the announcement.

The ride to Brian's loft was quiet. I figured if he wanted to speak, he would. In fact, I watched closer and saw that he was really exhausted, drained, and knowing him, he probably wouldn't be able to get any sleep. But he would be at the office the next day, and probably drive everyone nuts. So the next day, everyone would be in hell, but they would be very productive.

I had known him for at least 10 years, or more, I don't remember; he let me hang around him because I was friends with Emmett and Michael. Brian just tolerated me. He never paid attention to me until the day I told him that my fantasy was to be him. That day, he let me borrow his loft, and his bracelet. God I was such a dork.

In my Living Will, I had made him responsible for my life and I never changed that - he is still responsible if something happens to me. At that time, I did it because I thought he was heartless, and selfish, and I knew he would do the right thing. Even though at that time he was cruising and

running after every dick he saw.

He never deceived me and he had confidence in me. I remember after he had just launched Kinnetik and I had been clean for 6 weeks. I was in a meeting, sharing my story when he barged in, interrupting me, and dragged me to his new office. I was angry and asked him how he just could do that, because in AA, the first rule is to never interrupt someone when they're sharing! He replied coldly, "It's not my club, not my rules."

He dragged me over to his computer and told me that his stupid accountant, my old boss, had fucked up a transfer for 20 grand from his account into the Heat Magazine's account. I wasn't really surprised. He asked me to fix it. I wasn't sure of my ability to do that, but **he** never doubted me, telling me that I may have been a pathetic drug addict who lost everything, my dignity, my livelihood, everything, but that I was still a talented accountant! That not even the lowest form of degradation could take that away from me. Most of all, he told me that I should live in the solution and not in the problem. I didn't really believe him. But I was thankful to him because he was the only one who didn't treat me differently than before my addiction.

I finally fixed his transfer problem and he offered me a job. Typical Brian Kinney: I fixed something, he said thank you in his way, not with words. I accepted his offer only after I had had an epiphany during the service dinner at Rigoletto's.

I think since then I can say we have become friends.

I saw him in agony during his cancer treatment. And I saw that he trusted me enough to deal with some big accounts; he even gave me a compliment. Mister Brian Kinney giving a compliment, can you imagine that? I couldn't, until I heard him say it.

Then I saw him sink into depression during his breakup with Justin. I tried to get him to go out for lunch, or to have a drink after work, to make him speak about the breakup, but he turned me down. I told him that it was all right to be depressed and in pain, when he had just lost the two most important people in his life. I never thought he would tell the truth like he did, but he told me everything in one sentence -- *"My mother was a frigid bitch. My father was an abusive drunk. They had a hateful marriage. Which is probably why I am unwilling or unable to form a long-term, committed relationship of my own. The fact that I drink like a fish, abuse drugs, and have more or less redefined promiscuity doesn't help... much. As a result I have lost the two people in my life who mean the most to me."*

I was taken aback by this outburst. And I knew that Brian was a decent person. That he suffered like all of us, but that he had learned to hide his emotions better than us, that's all.

I will never understand why Michael couldn't accept Justin. Justin is funny, young, beautiful, and smart. What did Brian say? 1500 on his SATs? Whoa!

I'm in a strange position now, friend and employee.

Brian is a good boss, very tough with everyone but also very knowledgeable. He only hired the best, that's why Kinnetik is one of the best ad agencies in Pennsylvania, and in only one year

When I saw Justin for the first time, I thought, damn, he's hot! No wonder Kinney is taking him home. Perfect hair, perfect body, and perfect ass, and well, in one word, he was perfect. And then, he was there every day, challenging Brian. Even on a bad day, he smiled. He was kind to everyone, and most of all, he never acted like a teenage boy. He was always the smartest of us all. He never worshiped Brian like Michael does. He always saw both the good and the bad. He took him whole.

I caught them one evening at Kinnetik. Justin came often after his classes at PIFA. It was about 5:45 pm and he headed directly to Brian's office. I was in the conference room, working on some papers for the meeting the next morning.

Brian was on the sofa, taking some notes for the same meeting, and Justin just stepped in.

"Hey."

"Hey." I heard a soft kiss, and Brian's voice a little lower and softer than usual asking Justin, "How was your day?"

"Bad and depressing. I have a headache and no pills."

I heard paper rustling and Brian walking toward his desk, a drawer opened and closed, and then he returned to Justin. "Here."

"Thanks."

I heard rustling again, but didn't see anything. I wanted to leave them alone, but I couldn't. I had to have the file ready for the meeting tomorrow. It was quiet for a few minutes, until Brian asked,

"Better now?"

"Not really," then I heard another kiss.

"And now?" Then I heard a sigh. It must have been Justin. I tried to concentrate on my paperwork but it was difficult, because this was a side of Brian no one knew, except Justin of course.

I finished 2 hours later, and stepped in Brian's office. They were on the sofa. Brian was working on his notes and Justin was sleeping, his head in Brian's lap. Brian was caressing his hair every now and then. I didn't want to disturb them but Brian needed to sign some papers.

As I stepped in, Brian looked up and smiled. I never saw Brian smile like that. Without a word, I handed him the papers, he signed them and handed them back. I looked at them, and smiled too. As I looked into Brian's eyes, I saw a trace of fear, sadness, I don't know, something ... I mimicked a key closing my mouth to tell him I wouldn't ever tell anyone what I had seen. And I never have.

If only Michael could see that Brian had changed. He would probably understand that Brian is not God, he's not Rage, but he's someone who loved another human being sadly for Michael, it's not him.

Michael forgot all the shit Justin went through to put Rage together, reliving everything from the bashing, just that, not the good things that had happened before. He forgot every harsh word he had spit in Justin's face to make him leave, or every harsh word he had told him to make them break up, playing on the fact that Justin was too young to be in a relationship, but he failed.

I never knew he said that shit to Brian at the muncher's anniversary party. I wonder if Brian has really forgiven him, or if is just pretending because he doesn't want to lose the only friend who knew his past. I don't know. The only thing I know is that Brian really loves Justin.

God, I remembered the bombing at Babylon. First he looked for Justin and then for Michael. Michael had become second since the bashing.

Michael never understood. I thought he understood when they got back together after the fiddler, but not even then. He claims to be Brian's best friend, but ever since the first time Justin stepped into our little extended family he tried to pull them apart - like Brian was his, only his, that he can't live or love without Michael's agreement. I don't know. I think he always considered Justin a threat, but it's not as if Brian would forget him or leave him on the roadside. Michael never thanked Justin for putting all the pieces together after his 30th birthday. Ok, Brian really fucked up, but he wanted to free Michael from his dependence on him. It worked, not for long enough though. Michael came back to interfere with them. If only once in his life he could first think before speaking, and butt out sometimes. Everything would be fine. But with Michael, it's always complicated.

## **Chapter 10 Ben & Michael silent introspection**

### **Ben POV**

Until today, I never knew why Brian had hit Michael at the party, but now I know, and I'm shocked.

I looked at Michael, my husband, sitting in the passenger seat, and I have to say that I don't know him. I know he's had a crush on Brian since, I think, forever, but I never thought he could be so heartless.



Justin never did anything to him so I never knew why he had made such an odd request while I was in the hospital for my problems with my pancreas. He came to see me and brought me a gift. He told me not to say anything to anyone, because they would probably laugh at him. I never told anyone, and I didn't know why at that moment, but now I understand why Justin asked me to keep it to myself. He didn't bring flowers or chocolate; he brought me a little Buddha that he had painted on a canvas. Actually, I put it on the wall near the entry of the house, and I always thought it would bring peace and happiness in our home.

I never understood the Brian and Justin relationship since it was so off and on. I can say that Brian is an amazing sex partner. That doesn't begin to describe Brian in bed, but I don't think that his relationship with Justin is based entirely on sex.

I remember the White Party. If I wasn't celebrating life, I think that maybe I could have spent some more time with him. I don't know why I just thought that, maybe, because he's really great in bed ... really great, that's the word.

I had already told Michael. God, it wasn't very helpful the day Justin slipped up and inferred that Brian had fucked someone else from the gang. To his credit, he was tired, really tired. Michael and I needed almost three days to work things out, and finally he told me the feelings he had for Brian. I had suspected them.

I never heard him speak about Justin positively; only to bitch about him. He's a good friend when Michael is talking about RAGE, but when it comes to Brian, Justin is the worst thing on earth.

The day Justin stood at our front door with his bags, I knew something was wrong and I told him he could crash in Hunter's room. The next night, Brian showed up, high, drunk, and very upset. I saw anger in his eyes, and pain, so much pain, distress, solitude and love. Deep down I knew that he loved Justin, but he needed a scapegoat to blame and that time it was Michael.

So often, problems between Brian and Michael have been Brian's fault but for once it could have been Michael's. Brian had difficulties talking about his feelings in front of others. Tonight he did it. He put his pride aside with his 'fuck them all' attitude, and spoke with his heart, for a change, and it's a good change.

\* \* \* \*

## **Michael POV**

I'm here in the car but I feel like I'm in the middle of a nightmare. Brian in love, that's not possible! I always thought it was a joke, a farce. I want to scream ... This twink has everything I have always wanted but will never have. He has Brian. How did he do that? He stalked him, stole his credit card, got bashed, moved in, moved out, cheated on him, and Brian doesn't seem to care.

That's not entirely true. I remember the night of the prom. I was there and I saw Brian. He was destroyed and I could tell how much he had been affected, how much he cared for the little twink.

I was there before everyone came running into the hospital when he told the nurse, "I'm his partner, I have a right to know." I was there the moment Jennifer arrived and told him, "It's all your fault." I was there the moment the doctor told us, "He's ok, but not safe. We have to wait until he's passed the next 60 hours to know for sure." Brian never left Justin's side, or I should say he never left the hospital until the doctor told us Justin was safe. I should have known. I should have understood. This boy would come before me and everyone, and everything, else. He would protect him, no matter what happened.

Yes, I should have known, but I never understood until this evening. I just thought he wanted to please Justin, to give him what he wanted. But in fact, he wanted the same thing, and I was too fucking busy trying to convince him to stay true to his old self to see it. Shit. I found someone incredible, and I never thought once that the incredible one for Brian was Justin.

How could I be so stupid? How could I be so heartless to tell him that he was better without him?

What would I do if Ben moved somewhere? I think I would follow him. Yes, I would follow him.

Why? Because he's my partner, my lover, and my husband. No, not just that, it's because I'm in

love with him.

Ok, Novotny, think about two years ago. What did I say to my mother? "I can date who I want." I should have learned that lesson and I should apply it to Brian's rel ... god, I can't say that. Yes, I should apply that to Brian's relationship! That's it. I said it.

What does he see in Justin?

I never asked him, but while we were working on Rage, I saw some things. He's smart, sensitive, funny, and don't forget cute and loving. Yeah, loving.

He helped me more than once to put the pieces back together between me and Ma or me and Brian. He even helped me with Mel. I never thanked him for what he did. I threw everything in his face, and he helped me out every time he could. Could he be a friend? Oh god, I should have told him that Brian was in New York for his first opening, I should have told him he was lonely and that he wouldn't come out of his loft. Instead, I was thinking about "Rage" and "Rage" and "Rage". Maybe I can make it up to him.

Maybe... \*Sigh\*

First, I need to work things out with Ben, and tell him how I feel. We need to talk about what happened at Woody's. Yes, I think I'll do that. We'll work things out and I'll try to tell him how I fell about Brian and Justin.

I won't bother Brian tomorrow, or the next day. I need to figure out my feelings, good and bad. I have to do that because I'm filled with so many emotions right now. And even if I wanted to talk to Brian, I don't think Ben would let me.

I've caused enough damage tonight.

Maybe if I talk with Ben, he would help me to find a way to apologize to Brian and Justin.

It would be a good beginning to tell them "I'm sorry" and to mean it for once, but not until they're both in front of me. Yes both of them.

That's it. I'll apologize to both of them.

## **Chapter 11    Apologies.**

Almost an hour later Brian stepped into the loft. He stopped in front of the computer and saw that the webcam on the other side was oriented to the bedroom and he could see a form in the bed. He smiled to himself; Justin was home and was sleeping. He immediately thought that tomorrow morning would be better than the last couple of days. He looked through the emails and saw one from Justin.

*"Hi Brian,*

*Came home at 10:00 pm and spoke with Daph for a bit. I finished all the boards; I'll send them via FedEx to the office tomorrow morning.*

*Daph told me you were with the guys at Woody's - hope you had a great time.*

*It's 11:48 pm , I'm tired and I'm going to bed.*

*Goodnight.*

*Love*

*Sunshine.*

Brian smiled and wrote a note back:

*Sunshine,*

*Ted brought me home, too exhausted, and I had a discussion with Michael.*

*Didn't enjoy Woody's, I miss you - how lesbianic is that?*

*Later.*

He went into the bathroom, took a shower, and put on some boxers. He walked into the living room, and looked over at the futon – Daphne was there. He smiled and shook his head. She's really a stalker. He moved toward her, and put the blanket on her. He smiled as Daphne moved a bit and opened her eyes looking at him.

"Hey, your home," whispered Daphne.

"And you're still here," answered Brian.

"Thought you might want some company... how was your day?" asked a sleepy Daphne.

"Peachy."

"That rough?"

"Yeah."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

"No. Go back to sleep, Daph, it's a school day tomorrow, and if I recall you have a big exam."

"Okay, night Brian."

"Night."

Brian walked toward the steps when he remembered what Justin told him during their conversation. He turned around and knelt down near Daphne again. "Daph, one more thing before you totally go into Morph's arms."

"Hmm?"

"What did you ask Justin?"

"To father my child," was the reply. Brian was out of breath for only a few seconds, but then smiled to himself. Somewhere deep down he knew that would happen one day.

Daphne drifted back to sleep a few minutes later. Brian was awake for a long time, thinking about what Daphne had just told him. She asked Justin to father her child; that was a big step for anyone. It might not be the best time, with Justin in New York and the shows coming up, but maybe she planned to do it in a few months. Maybe it was just an idea.

I always thought that Justin would be a great father – I'd seen him with Gus and JR. He was always available, always the calm one, trying to never raise his voice at my son. No, our son. Yes "our son" because he spent at least the same amount of time with him as me.

Except maybe in the last 6 months.

I remember the evening last year just before the bet with Brandon, that stupid bet. I can't even recall why I did that. I remember standing in front of the mirror in the bedroom, trying on shirt after shirt trying to find the perfect one to make me look hot. Justin was sitting on the dinner table, working on some art, and he told me, "When I was in LA fucking around, it was fun and all, but

when I came back and you said to me 'the offer still stands' to move in, I thought that things would be different. I thought that we'd be 'a real couple, like Michael and Ben,' maybe even have the things that they have some day, a house, maybe even a family."

His face looked so sad, so full of pain, like I'd just kicked him out. I wanted to go to him and tell him that I loved him. But I was too afraid. Afraid to lose him for good, afraid to lose my reputation, afraid to lose everything we had tried to put together, because even though I had known since the night I first picked him up that he would be more than just a trick, I was never able to give him what he wanted.

Until Babylon.

I really thought I had lost him that night. And in a fraction of a second my life became clear, I wanted the same things as him. I wanted him, I wanted a house, a family, everything.

Yes, I think Justin will be a good father. He's a loving and caring person; he anticipates children's needs. And most of all he's patient, stubborn, and persistent. Yes, he will be a good father.

\* \* \* \*

When Brian finally fell asleep, it was nearly 4 in the morning.

\* \* \* \*

The next few days were quiet, no calls, no harassment from either Michael or Debbie. For Brian and Daphne it was clear that the little discussion at Woody's was a bombshell, but Daphne was more optimistic, "Maybe Michael finally understood that Justin and you belong together, even when it's difficult between you two." Brian laughed at that.

They dropped the subject about the baby, after spending two evenings talking about it.

\* \* \* \*

In the morning, Daphne woke up in Brian's bed. She had been sleeping on the futon but she moved into Brian's bed when she heard the storm outside. Brian woke up when he heard a noise from someone rustling in the kitchen and quite talking. He looked at the alarm clock; it was 7:00 a.m. He smiled when he looked toward the clock and saw Daphne's form sleeping over the covers. Sensing the bed moving, she looked up at him, and smiled sheepishly.

"Hey sleeping beauty."

"Hey yourself," she replied with a shy smile. "I didn't want to ... but ... I hate the thunder and all, and I always ended with Justin, so ..." she didn't finish her sentence and jumped to another subject "Did you hear someone in the kitchen?"

"Yeah, I heard. Wait, I'm going to ..."

But before he could finish, Michael and Ben were standing at the end of the bed with a breakfast tray, which crashed on the floor, once Michael saw Daphne in Brian's bed.

Ben had spent most of the week trying to convince Michael that Brian had changed, and that he should finally apologize to him. At six this morning, Michael woke up and told Ben to get ready in 30 minutes because they were going to make breakfast at Brian's. It was the best thing to do to make amends. Ben told him he thought it wasn't a good idea to sneak in the loft like that, but Michael insisted Brian wouldn't mind. So, they finally sneaked into the loft, fixed breakfast and stepped into the bedroom.

The sound of the tray crashing on the floor brought up another sound.

"Brian, are you ok?" a concerned voice asked.

Michael was uncomfortable.

Brian slightly pissed.

Daphne and Ben were laughing.

"Brian?" came the voice again

"I'm all right; just give me a sec." He turned toward Daphne. "Daphne, dear, I told you it wasn't a good idea to sneak in my bed like you did. And dear, would you just tell Justin I will speak with him in a minute?" He kissed her forehead, and looking up at Michael said, "You, with me in the bathroom, now!"

Once in the bathroom, Brian grabbed his sweatpants and a wifebeater and put them on. "What are you doing here?"

"Huh?"

"I asked, what are you doing here?"

"Huh?"

"Ok, that's an answer Mr. Novotny Bruckner. Ben!"

"Yep?" came the answer from the bedroom

"What are you doing here?"

"I think," gesturing toward Michael, "he's trying to make amends for the other night. But for the moment, he," pointing again toward Michael, "is in shock from seeing you with a woman in your and Justin's bed."

"Yeah well, it's not the first time he would be shocked," Brian replied coldly.

Finally wearing some clothes, Brian stepped out from the bathroom and went to the kitchen, stopping at the table with the computer.

"Morning Sunshine!"

"Morning." Spotting the guys behind Brian, "Hello guys. Daph just told me what happened."

"What do you want? It seems like Michael's run out of words." Brian answered with his tongue in cheek smile.

Once Michael recovered his voice, he ran to the computer. "Justin, Justin, he slept with Daphne, did you know that?"

Ben looked in disbelief at Michael, his eyes shooting daggers, realizing that Michael didn't learn anything from the other night. "Michael, when will you learn it's not your problem?"

"But ... " came the usual reply.

At that moment, Daphne had had more than enough of the same routine between those three and finally let out all her anger and barged into the conversation

"Stop it, all of you!" Her intervention grabbed everyone's attention.

"Michael, if you could only learn to butt out sometimes! Things would be much easier." Turning an accusative finger toward Brian, "And you Brian, don't laugh - if you would have told Justin that you loved him from the beginning, or since I don't know when, during the first, the second or before Ethan, you would have fewer problems." Turning to the computer, "And you, Justin, if you would have learned to read through all the Kinney bullshit, you would have known that he's loved you since, well I think always."

She walked to the counter in the kitchen and looked at Ben. "And you Ben, you're too nice and too much of a pacifist for Michael. I don't know how you're doing this!" Satisfied by the shocked looks on everyone's face, she concluded, "Well I've finished, I'm going to clean up the mess Mister 'I'm

his best friend' made in the bedroom. Bye Justin."

Before anyone could say anything, she had gone into the bedroom to clean up the mess on the floor.

\* \* \* \*

After an hour at Brian's, Michael understood why Brian wasn't really devastated this time. It was because he was in communication every day with Justin, and he had Daphne as a support team. And he had another support team at his office with Cynthia and Ted, so he was in good hands.

\* \* \* \*

The next two weeks were relatively calm, even if everyone was under a lot of stress.

Daphne spent all her spare time at Brian's loft. The first two days Brian told her to head back to her dorm, but she ended up at the loft every evening.

He thought, 'great another stalker'. She slept on the couch or the futon and tried not to interfere in Brian's life too much. She told Brian that the real reason she was there was that she could see Justin every day and it didn't cost her a cent. Brian laughed at that.

Surprisingly, she got better grades. The silence in the loft and being around Justin and Brian helped her more than studying in the school library while other students talked about their last party.

She was also surprised to see that Brian spent most of his evenings at home, and not at Woody's or Babylon, with everybody else. Sometimes she'd get a call just before seven saying, "Put your jacket on, I'm taking you out for dinner and a drink." They usually finished at the diner, and stopped for ONE drink at Woody's. She knew Brian didn't do those things to please her or Justin; he just didn't want to go back to where he was.

Usually, an evening at the Kinney residence was planned like that: Brian was on his computer, working on some new ad for a client and Daphne was sitting at the dinner table working on her homework. And Justin, on the other end of the webcam, was painting.

One evening, they were all working on their computers, Brian on a new campaign, Daphne on her studies, and Justin trying to explain through Brian's computer something about the boards. Finally, Justin and Brian agreed and Justin knew what he had to modify on the boards to fit the client's demands.

\* \* \* \*

Kinnetik finally closed most of the biggest accounts. The only one that really caused problems was Brown Athletics. Justin was working twice as hard on that one. He also managed to finish all the paintings he had put on hold and had made five extra canvases.

The show could take place on time.

## **Chapter 12    Like driving home**

Beginning October 2005

It was late, almost 10 pm; the show had begun around 7. Brian had missed the first plane. He sighed. He was finally in New York, a few minutes and he would see Justin. God, is it possible to miss a person that much, and to take almost 6 months to see him?

He checked his voice mail - two messages, Cynthia who told him that everything was ok with the rental car and the hotel and Daphne who told him that Justin was still at the Gallery.

He smiled thinking how much he loved those two women, especially Daphne.

They found a living arrangement last month that fit them both. One day, he bought some expensive and stylish Japanese walls to make a private place for her behind the dinner area. He pushed the table nearer the kitchen, and placed the lounge chair along the Japanese walls. He bought a very expensive futon and some drawers to put her things and clothes in she had them thrown everywhere. Brian thought it was better this way.

She discovered the surprise one night as they stopped at the loft. She was happy, but even with her own area, she still ended up sleeping near Brian often, just because she didn't want to sleep alone. Often she was already asleep on his bed when he came out of the shower.

\* \* \* \*

He reached the baggage area, grabbed his luggage and headed to the rental car desk.

Thank god, as Cynthia told him in her message, the rental car with chauffeur was correctly reserved. He rented the car for his arrival and his departure. His arrival included the drop off at the hotel. He sat in the car and let the chauffeur guide him through New York.

The car stopped in front of the gallery. He stepped out, and before walking in the gallery, he gave some more instructions to the chauffeur, with a \$200 tip, to make sure that everything would be settled when they arrived later at the hotel. He sent the car away, telling him to come back in two hours, and confidently walked towards the gallery.

From the outside, he immediately saw the subject of his affection.

Justin stood in the middle of the gallery, talking with some people, his back towards the window, his right hand in his pocket. He was wearing Hugo Boss black pants, with a grey shirt hanging over them. He was to die for. In this position, Brian couldn't see his expression, but he could easily picture his big smile.

He stepped in and took a flyer He also picked up some stickers to be used to mark any paintings he bought. Then he began looking at the paintings.

He always thought Justin was talented, but he was more than that; he really had his place in the area of real artists. Brian looked at every painting, seeing that most of them were sold. He also looked at the prices and saw that none of the paintings had sold for under \$12,000.

He stopped in front of a couple of paintings, in dark shades. They were different from the rest of the paintings, and he immediately knew why. They were more personal. One especially caught his eye, it represented a street with a lot of smoke, people, some red and blue light in the background, and in the middle, a couple. He knew exactly what this painting represented.

He assumed that no one would understand the subject of those paintings and maybe that's why no one had bought them. He also looked at the price and was surprised. The paintings were sold at 1/3 their initial price.

His first thought was to rip the price away and take the painting without paying. His second thought was 'what the fuck.' He was about to ask when he decided to put a sticker on the paintings, with the right price and the name of the new owner: Kinnetik.

"You don't need to do that," came a voice from behind him.

He smiled and whispered, "Justin." He turned around and his arms were suddenly full of a young blond man hugging him tightly. He nuzzled his nose in his hair to inhale his scent. He was never so aware of how much he had missed Justin's scent.

They stood there, in a tight embrace, getting looks from the few people who were still in the gallery. Finally, Brian pulled away and began to place light kisses on Justin's forehead, making his way down to his mouth. Surprised, Justin tried to stop him before the situation became too heated or too sexual.

"Stop," his voice was low like a whisper, full of lust and desire.

"No," said Brian quietly, "I don't want to." Justin became increasingly uncomfortable; the heat in

his body didn't help. He tried again, and shyly said, "Everybody is watching"

"Fuck them," Brian finally reached his destination, his lips covering and pressing gently against Justin's as he kissed him. Brian pushed his tongue against Justin lips, which allowed him entrance and the kiss became deeper, more demanding, and more needy. A little moan from Justin sent a chill through Brian's body. Every second, the kiss became more and more heated. Finally, Brian lifted Justin up, so that he didn't have to lower his head and Justin tightened his grip around Brian's shoulders. Brian moaned against Justin's lips.

Brian finally put Justin down. Leaning his forehead against his, Brian said, "I missed you." Justin smiled at him, "I didn't notice." They were both hard.

Taking Justin's hands in his own, Brian immediately spotted the splint on Justin's right hand. "Christ, what happened to your hand?"

Trying to hide the evidence, Justin looked up and explained, "Overexertion from painting."

"You shouldn't push yourself so hard; it should be a passion, not a painful job. Come here," Brian said as he pulled Justin towards him.

Justin struggled to get free from Brian's arms.

"I can't, I have some people to meet and some contacts to make."

"It's almost 11:00, don't you think you've already made enough contacts?"

"Yeah, you're right, but I need to speak with Conrad for a few minutes. Do you mind waiting for me?"

Rolling his eyes, but smiling, Brian said, "No, I'm going to go back to the airport and take the first flight back to Pittsburgh." Looking at Justin's face, he immediately saw a flash of pain. "Of course I'll wait for you, I'm here for a whole week, and you're mine during that whole time. I called Conrad this afternoon and he agreed to reschedule your meetings later in the week."

"You did?"

"Yep."

"Are you coming to the apartment?" Justin asked hopefully.

"No."

"No?" Brian could hear the defeat in Justin's voice.

"No, I was thinking about you spending the next week with me in a little something I rented.

"But ..."

"With all the comforts of home, room service, massages, spa - wait here's the description from the brochure: The apartment has three large windows, features a king-size bed, and a spa-like bath. The apartment is air-conditioned, and has a flat-screen HD tv and original oils. The apartment has wireless Internet access and it's two flights up. Are you interested in following me there?"

"Oh my god, where is that little palace?"

"I reserved [The Marcucci apartment at the West-Eleven apartment in Greenwich Village](#). I hope everything will please you."

"You reserved what?"

"Should I repeat?"

"No, I understand but I wasn't sure, you really said 'in Greenwich Village!'"



"Uh-huh"

"Oh my god."

Before Brian could say anything more, Justin kissed him. He was on his tiptoes, his right hand behind Brian's head, pushing the older man against him. The kiss was breathtaking, and everyone in the gallery could sense the sexual tension between the two men. Out of breath, Justin broke the kiss. Both were panting heavily. It was more than a little evident that they were fully aroused and for once Brian was a little uncomfortable. He leaned his forehead against Justin's, smiling and taking breathing deeply to regain control.

### **Chapter 13 It's all a question of Money**

That was the moment Conrad chose to break the magic between them.

"You must be Mr. Kinney, Mr. Brian Kinney?"

Brian raised an eyebrow to Justin asking him silently, 'Did you say something?' Justin just lightly shook his head.

"You must be his inspiration ... the man in all the sketches, the man whose name covers a whole wall in his studio." Conrad was as excited as a child. He always suspected that the man on his artist's sketchbooks must be Justin's major inspiration.

Justin looked at him in disbelief and anger. His suspicions were confirmed, Conrad had been snooping in his stuff in his apartment and his studio.

"You've been going through my sketch books?" Justin asked angrily.

Conrad didn't even look at him, he was concentrating on Brian, but answered casually, "Yes."

Brian could sense something was wrong, and saw that his young lover was far from all right. He put his arms around Justin's shoulder offering his support and shooting daggers with his eyes towards Conrad. Justin was trembling in anger, and as he spoke, his voice was icy.

"How could you go through my things, how did you get in my apartment, my studio? How could you do that? This is un-fucking-believable. How could you go through my things? Those are personal!"

Conrad looked at him with a cold glare and said, "I've made an investment in you. I own the place you are living, so I can step in when I want, and I have the right to go through your sketches, to look in your studio, and you knew it."

Fury, Justin was furious, Brian felt the tension in the young man's body, he tried to sooth him, but Justin got out of his embrace and moved toward Conrad

"Yes, and I have a right to be angry, to say fuck off, and to find another gallery and manager." His voice was icy and didn't invite discussion.

Taken aback by the outburst, Conrad looked at the young blond before him like he had just seen him for the first time. He never thought Justin would get so angry, and that he would be able to take his career in his own hands. Conrad thought he was irreplaceable.

Suddenly Justin moved towards Brian, standing in front of him, straightening his shoulders. He looked at him, and spoke to Conrad without even looking at him.

"That's it, I've made my decision, I quit."

"What?" Conrad asked.

"I told you I quit, I've had other offers, and I think I can find another manager," Justin said, his eyes never leaving Brian's.

"But you can't," Conrad was rubbing his hands together in an extremely nervous gesture.

Justin stood facing Brian and continued, "I can and I will." Inhaling deeply he continued. "Listen, tonight I made at least enough money to cover the gallery loan and your commission. And you know that very well, because one painting was sold for over \$100,000."

Brian watched Justin with renewed pride. When he heard the amount of money, he probably made this evening, he asked, "You made how much?"

Justin didn't bother to answer, concentrating hard to make sure Conrad understood that the deal between them was over. He turned around moving closer and defiantly told him, "With the money I earned from the last show and from this one, I can pay back everything you lent me, Conrad!" Then turning towards Brian he said, "The same for you - most of the money you invested in my tuition is in an account under Ted's management earning a lot of interest. He invested it in mutual funds which have grown quickly so I could pay you back."

He was pretty proud of himself, as he looked back into Brian's eyes, a little afraid to see what he would find there. He was a little embarrassed because of the outburst and his cheeks were flushed. He was finding it difficult to breathe, but he managed to smile his sunshine smile at Brian.

Brian was in a daze. He remembered when he had paid Justin's tuition. It was \$100,000, more or less. Brian wasn't surprised though, he knew that Justin had done well with his first show because Brian had helped make it all happen, sending invitations to all his clients, and making sure to promote the New York show in Pittsburgh, too.

Brian's mind was racing a mile a minute, trying to figure out how much Justin must have earned.

If the owner received 30% - 35% of the sales and if Justin said he could pay him back, it must be the rent from the studio and the apartment. Okay, Justin borrowed some money, why in hell didn't he ask me? Brian could have helped him. No of course, Justin would want to be self-sufficient. He wouldn't take hand outs.'

Brian smiled. This reminded him of the day Justin came home telling him his parents were getting a divorce, and that his father wouldn't pay for his tuition. Brian told him, "I'll give you the money." Justin had replied, "I don't want your money." Justin wanted to prove to everyone, that he could handle his life as well as Brian.

He finally sold himself to Sap. He told Brian the truth, the same day he told him about getting the weekend off - all he had to do was go to Sap's personal party. Brian knew exactly what kind of party Sap would organize, he tried to keep him safe, but as usual, Justin was too stubborn to listen or to understand. The next morning, Justin told him he wouldn't go back to Sap and he accepted Brian's offer. Brian never knew what happened at that party.

Brian finally understood what Justin had said: he could pay him back with the money he earned all by himself. This meant that he could live on his own. He just proved to Brian, to Conrad, to Sap, to his father, and to himself that he had become the best homosexual he could be.

## **Chapter 14    Panic Attack**

Brian was brought back to reality by Justin's hand clinging to his forearm. He looked down and saw total fear in Justin's eyes. His breathing was erratic.

"Fuck!" Brian immediately took Justin in his arms and led him to the bench, in front of the biggest painting. Conrad, full of concern, tried to help.

"Give him some room," Brian's voice was angry and thick with concern. "You want to make yourself useful, look for a bottle of water, bring me a washcloth, and then you can leave."

He sat on the bench pulling Justin against his chest, his legs on either side of him, wrapping his arms around him.

"Shh, calm down, take a deep breath."

Justin struggled to get his hands free to search for a bottle of pills in his pants pocket. Brian caught his hands, before he could reach it.

"Justin, Justin, listen, listen to me, are you listening?" Justin nodded weakly trying to free himself. "Stop this, please stop," Brian's voice was low and pleading.

Justin struggled against Brian, "I can't ... I can't... hel..."

"I know, just listen; listen to me"

Conrad came back with a wet cloth and a bottle of water. Brian took the cloth and put it on Justin's neck. He pulled the younger man closer, his left hand pulling Justin's head against his shoulder. He entwined his free hand with Justin's and began to talk to him. "Take a deep breath... Hold on... Ok?" Justin nodded slightly. "Exhale... one, two, three, four, five. Good. One more? Take a deep breath... hold on... Exhale." Brian felt Justin's body become calmer. Soothingly stroking Justin's hair, he said, "One more?" Justin nodded. "Ok then, take a deep breath... hold on... Exhale." They sat there in perfect silence; after a few moments, Brian asked him, "Better now?"

"Yeah, thanks." Justin tried to get up, but Brian tightened his hold. Justin was far too weak to stand up.

Seeing the movement, Conrad asked, "What happened to him?"

Looking up Brian gave him a dirty look. "You've worked with him for 6 months, you pretend to be his friend and you never noticed that from time to time he has panic attacks?"

"No, I never ... "

"What kind of friend are you?"

"Brian... please?" Justin begging made Brian angrier than he already was. "We're outta here." He told Justin.

Conrad looked at them. He always liked the kid, and he didn't want to lose such a good money maker. The truth was he not only liked the kid; he had fallen for him. He remembered the day he went through Justin's things and the pang of jealousy he felt the moment he saw all the sketches and drawings of Brian. And right then, he could only look at Brian with hate and disgust. Hate, because the young artist was in love with him and disgust, because he felt that Brian possibly had more money than he would ever have. He tried again to catch Justin's attention, "Justin I think you need to ..."

But Justin caught the look. "I need nothing from you. I just need to leave the gallery, go to bed and get some rest, because I'm fucking exhausted."

"Wait a minute, you just can't..."

"Yes he can. And we are leaving." Standing up, Brian pulled Justin with him. Knowing he had lost the battle, Conrad turned around and saw that the gallery was now empty.

Conrad was gone, and for the first time, Brian looked at the painting in front of him. It was huge and had sold for over \$100,000. It was a little abstract, but he recognized Central Park, kids, families and dogs, police officers on their horses, a normal day in Central Park.

"Pretty amazing, no..."

"What, the painting?" Justin asked genuinely.

"No, the price you twat."

"Oh, yeah the price. It was one of the last paintings I made. It was a beautiful day. I didn't know that I had drawn the two most famous families from New York. They were here tonight and they made a bid for this painting. And other clients made bids on other paintings. That's why some of them sold for so much."

"Yeah and you sold practically everything." Brian noticed.

"Uh huh, and you helped a little. Tonight I got an offer to have a 6-month engagement in Manhattan. I need to discuss the details with the woman who made the offer, but it would probably take place next year."

"What?"

"Yep. My own show, with all the paintings I've made and new ones I'll create. It should run for six months."

Justin was bouncing, he was so happy. "Aren't you happy for me?"

Brian looked at him, full of joy, "No, I'm proud of you, now come on."

\* \* \* \*

He extended his hand, took Justin's, and escorted him out of the gallery to the car.

"This is your car?"

"Yeah, now come on, I have plans for tonight."

Justin gave him his Sunshine smile, "Yes."

Brian pulled him closer and kissed him. "So let's go to our home – at least for the next week."

The chauffeur opened the door, and both men slid in the car. Justin first, than Brian. The chauffeur took his place behind the wheel and checked the information on his GPS. Turning against the back of the car, he said, "We will be at the hotel in approximately 30 minutes."

"Ok thanks."

"Should I pull up the glass Mr. Kinney?"

"Yes, please."

The chauffeur started the car, put up the parting glass, and put the car in gear, joining the late traffic jam.

Justin looked at the parting glass. "Do you think he can see or hear us?"

Brian pushed a button. "Now, we're on our own, he can't see or hear us, or ..."

Brian never finished his sentence. Justin threw himself against him. Kissing him hungrily and leaning heavily against his right shoulder. Brian's left hand went behind Justin's head and deepened the kiss. A moan escaped Justin's lips. He lifted his hands, and discarded his splint.

Never breaking the kiss, he could sense the heat from Brian's body. Justin moved from the right side over Brian's lap. When he finally broke the kiss, he looked in Brian's eyes. They were dark, full of lust.

Brian raised an eyebrow and asked, "What are you doing?"

Justin smiled at him. "It must have been a long time if you don't recognize my actions. And actually, I'm taking the lead and taking advantage of you."

He leaned down and continued to kiss Brian, who wrapped his arms around him, running them up and down Justin's back eliciting another moan from his young lover. Justin began to move his hips back and forth while trying to undo Brian's tie and kissing his jaw. Once the knot on the tie was open, he threw it over Brian's head, and began to unbutton his shirt. Continuing to kiss Brian with light and deep kisses, he began to open the shirt, one button after the other. Once it was open, he slid his hand under the thin cotton fabric, and began running his hands over Brian's bare chest. A

long moan came from Brian, telling him he appreciated every attention.

Both of them were hard, and Justin had slowed his movement to rub their erections together. His right hand traveled down Brian's chest, reaching his belt. Suddenly with a gasp, Brian held Justin's hand and whispered, "No, stop."

Justin stopped and looked at him, like he had just been slapped in the face. "What?"

"I said stop."

They were both panting, trying to recover their breath, Justin sitting on Brian's lap, not knowing what to do. Brian looking up into Justin's blue eyes, trying to read his mind -- Brian never turned him down. He never did, except during his bout with cancer. Justin went pale and clung to Brian's shoulders.

"Oh my god, have you had a relapse? Are you sick again? Is that why you couldn't, wouldn't come all those times? Is that it?"

He pulled Brian closer to him, clenching his coat, trying not to shake, but that was nearly impossible. He pulled Brian into a tight hug, trying to keep the fear away, but he knew deep down that something was wrong. If everything was OK, Brian would never turn him down.

Brian tried to push Justin away from him to see his face, but that was impossible, Justin was shaking and clutching on to him as if his life depended on it.

Brian smiled and cursed himself. He thought, 'Good job Kinney, he didn't need all this shit right now.' Tracing soothing circles on Justin's lower back, he leaned in to his ear and whispered, "Calm down." Justin's body tensed. Brian reached out to dim the light, and continued to speak. He tried to calm Justin with his soothing caress and whispered in his ear, "I'm not sick, I promise, do you understand?" Justin nodded slowly. "Good, because I brought you the papers from the last check up, to prove that I'm alright."

Justin finally pulled back, "You're not sick?"

Brian shook his head no.

"Then why are you stopping me? It's me? Tell me," Justin continued. Brian tried to suppress his smile, listening to Justin.

"Remember, we made a promise to tell each other everything, even the bad things, and I plan to stick to this one." Justin said affirmatively.

Brian looked into those blue eyes he had fallen in love with, filled with unshed tears, knowing he would have to give him an answer. He wiped the tears away before they could fall, whispering to Justin, "I'm not sick, I promise."

Justin looked at him questioningly, "Then, why? Why did you stop? It's me? Did I do something? Are you breaking up with me?"

Brian inhaled deeply. God Justin could sometimes be a real twat. He regained control and answered "I don't want to fuck you here in this car, because I have other plans for us."

Justin's face lit up at hearing those words.

"And, by the way, we have arrived."

"Huh"

"We're at the hotel."

"Oh," he reached out to straighten Brian's clothes. "Let me help you."

Justin straightened Brian's shirt and buttoned it up again. And Brian did the same with Justin's, his

fingers lingering over Justin's rib cage. Justin lifted his eyes, looking into Brian's, "What?"

"How much weight have you lost?"

Justin shrugged, "I don't know, does it matter?"

"No, but you look far too skinny to be healthy." Brian's worried looks followed Justin as he stepped out of the car, waiting for him.

"You are too skinny," Brian stated.

## **Chapter 15    Like Lovers Do**

The driver opened the car door, and Brian and Justin stepped out. The driver had caught the last part of the conversation, and stopped Brian.

"Sir, There is a good doctor not far away. If you want, I can leave the address and the number at the front desk."

"Thanks, please do that," answered Brian

They went to the front desk to check in. They told the clerk to get the information about the doctor and make an appointment for them for tomorrow around 11am if possible. Then they headed to the apartment they were going to share for the next week.

As they opened the door, Justin saw that in the apartment vases with black butterfly and china lilies and a pot of Golden Gardenias, were on the coffee table in front of the fireplace.

"Oh my god," Justin said, turning toward Brian. "You remembered."

"Yes, I remembered." Brian smiled back.

And it hit Justin, "You were really serious, when you proposed to me, and when we were planning the wedding."

"I told you, I never meant anything more, and you should know I never do something I don't want to do."

Justin looked around and realized that all he had were the clothes he was wearing. He looked up and said dramatically, "You know I must go to my apartment to get some clothes."

But Brian was smiling, "No you don't, I used my spare key to bring some of your clothes here."

"You did?"

"Yes, I did, and stop speaking."

Justin wanted to say something more, but Brian attacked his mouth in a searing kiss, eliciting a moan from him. He pushed his tongue against Justin's lips, demanding entrance and the kiss became deeper, more demanding, more needy, and more overwhelming. A moan from Justin sent a chill through Brian's body. Every second, the kiss became more and more heated and breathtaking. Finally, like in the gallery, Brian lifted Justin up, and began moving towards the stairs leading to the master bedroom. Justin tightened his grip around Brian's shoulders, without breaking the kiss.

They reached the first step, and instead of climbing directly to the bedroom, Brian put Justin down and removed his jacket as well as his own, letting them fall to the floor.

Then he placed his hands on Justin's shirt, beginning to open it. Justin matched Brian's actions. Once both shirts were open, Brian stepped on the first step as well, lifting Justin up, and pushing him slowly backward, to climb the rest of the stairs.

"Too long, far too long," Justin tried to say.

"Shut up." Brian covered Justin's mouth with his own to keep him from speaking and continued to kiss him, while carrying him up the stairs.

They finally reached the bedroom. It was beautiful.

Breaking the kiss, Brian opened his eyes, to see Justin's reaction. Because the fireplaces weren't working, Brian had asked the apartment manager to light two dozen candles.

As Justin opened his eyes, he shivered in Brian's embrace. "Oh. My. God."

"What?"

Justin was speechless and Brian tightened his embrace, whispering in his ear, "Like you said before - it's been too long, far too long." Nibbling against his neck, his hands were wandering along Justin's chest, until he reached the waistband of his slacks.

"Wait," Justin was suddenly very uncomfortable. "I hmm ... thought ... I ..."

"Hmmm"

"I was thinking. . ."

"Dangerous," Brian answered, kissing his neck.

"No, not this way" – silence, "I ... --don't know how to ask."

"How to ask what?" whispered Brian, continuing to kiss his neck.

Justin turned against Brian's chest to face him, and was trailing his hands up and down his back. He inhaled deeply trying to find the courage he needed.

"Will it be like the last night we spent together?"

Brian looked in Justin's eyes. They never agreed to be monogamous with each other, but deep down, he knew that this question implied that Justin had been. He looked deep into Justin's eyes, and leaning toward his ear, whispered, "Tell me what you want."

Trailing his hand along Brian's back, and resting it on his lower back, Justin whispered, "I want you inside me. Like the last time we ..." a little silence, a sigh, he tilted his head to the right, "made love together."

Brian released his embrace and answered while extending his arms to offer his body. "Then go for it."

Justin walked toward him, discarding his shirt in one movement. Brian leaned toward him and they meet in a scorching kiss. They pressed their bodies together, hands traveling along the other one's body, claiming and caressing. Brian took off his shirt as he put one knee on the bed.

Holding Justin, he sat on the bed, and then laid down on it. Justin straddled Brian's groin, and begin to open his pants, and Brian did the same with Justin's. The offensive material was thrown away in a hurry, like the socks and the underwear. During the process, Brian managed to switch positions and lie on top of Justin. His hands slowly moving down Justin's neck to the hollow of his throat, then the brush of his hand moved across his collarbone. His hand continued running lightly over Justin's chest, causing his body to arch under Brian's hand. A light moan escaped both mouths.

Too long, far too long.

Brian continued to make his way down Justin's body, tracing an imaginary line full of kisses. They were both rock hard, but as Brian had told him before in the car, he didn't want to fuck him in a hurry.

"God, you're beautiful." Brian sighed, "I almost forgot how beautiful you are "

"You're not bad your ... self," Justin looked up at Brian, who just kissed the head of his cock.

Brian smiled at him and stated, "But you're too skinny." He kissed him again. "Tomorrow," kiss, "appointment," kiss, "at the doctor," kiss, "for a total check-up," kiss "deal?" kiss.

The sensations overwhelmed Justin as he tried to give the appropriate answer. "No ... I don't ..." but on the last kiss, "Yes..."

Leaving Justin's cock, Brian returned to kiss his lips, pressing his body against him. Both gasped as their erections met. Justin reached between their bodies, but Brian grabbed his hand before he could touch himself.

"No."

"I... I ... won't last long if I don't do something."

"Ok," Brian reached between their bodies and applied a little pressure on Justin's cock, "Better?" The sigh of relief told him that Justin was OK. God he missed him so badly, if he didn't have such self-control he could come just looking at him. Resting his forehead against Justin's, he inhaled deeply.

"Are you Ok?" asked Justin with concern.

"Yeah ... just aware that I really missed you," Brian's voice was just above a whisper.

Justin lifted his hand to caress his cheek. "Yeah, but I never doubted that"

"Would you just be quiet?"

"No ..." but once again he was silenced with Brian's kisses.

Hands were traveling against each other, trying to pull the other body as close as possible. Never pulling back from the kiss, Brian reached for the lube on the nightstand, opened it, and squirted some on his fingers.

He shifted a little, and Justin spread his legs a little more, the look in his eyes, love and lust. He reached between their bodies, and gently pushed one finger into his lover, moving carefully and slowly. A little whimper, told him it had been a long time since Justin had had sex with anyone.

"Slowly, like the first time?" A little nod from Justin confirmed his agreement.

God, the boy hadn't had sex with anyone **HE** hadn't had sex with anyone since Justin either. He had certainly had opportunities, but he really hadn't wanted to have sex with anyone else. He had realized that at Babylon's reopening. He had gone to the backroom, and someone had tried to blow him, but he had soon dismissed the trick. He wasn't in the mood. It was the same scene the two other nights he had gone there, so he never went back. He stayed at home or at the office, 'til Justin sent the mail or Daphne showed up, and then he had a good reason to go home.

As Justin began to push against his fingers, he knew they are moving to another level. He removed his fingers, and placed the tip of his cock at Justin's entrance. Pausing for a brief second, looking at Justin moving his hand to the nightstand only to be stopped by Brian.

"I know I haven't been with anyone, but ..." Brian looked in the deep blue eyes, seeing so much love, he could barely breathe. "Me either," came the strangled answer.

Justin's eyes widened, the answer just sinking into him, his heart began to race. Finding his voice again, he whispered, "Oh god, I never asked you."

"I know, it just happened," whispered Brian back to him.

"You know, I don't think I'm sick with anything bad, but I think, that maybe, safe sex tonight



would be smart," continued Justin, "I don't want to put you in danger."

"I know, and you won't put me in danger. And if that makes you comfortable, I understand," said Brian, placing kisses along Justin's jaw.

Justin nodded his head and opened the little package, and put it on Brian's dick and whispered, "I want you safe, I want you around for a long time... Brian remembered saying those exact words at another time.

Brian gasped from the sensation of Justin's hand on his shaft. It was becoming more and more difficult to control himself.

Looking deep into each other's eyes, Brian placed himself at Justin's entrance, and, never breaking their gaze, he entered him slowly giving him time to adjust.

Justin gasped, tilting his head, "Fuck."

Brian waited until Justin's breathing became calmer. And once he was nearly all the way in, he started to slowly pull out, to finally thrust one more time deeper, and he was completely in.

"God you're tight."

"Uh-huh".

"You ok?" he asked stroking Justin's face.

"Yeah and you?"

"Couldn't be better"

Once Brian was sure Justin was OK, he began moving, slowly, almost tenderly, pulling all the way out, and driving all the way in. Alternating every now and then with a short thrust. They were making love, they weren't fucking, and it was slow and sensual. They were facing each other. Never breaking the gaze they shared. The only sound in the room was the long low moans escaping from time to time, from both of them.

Brian moved slightly, still inside Justin, bringing his knees under him. Using them as leverage, Justin loosened his grip with his feet behind Brian's back, and let Brian bring his legs onto his chest. Brian held him tightly, to keep the contact, and drive deeper into him.

To keep his balance, Justin laid his hands along his body on the mattress. He let Brian lead the love making session. Brian reached out with his left hand to grab a pillow and tuck it behind Justin's lower back, to ease the tension created there from their new position. Then he caught Justin's hand and intertwined their fingers.

They moved together, slowly, like a tango, getting closer to the edge every time, and every time Brian pulled back to make the session last as long as possible.

They were in no rush. They used the time to rediscover each other's bodies and to tell each other how much they were in love.

Justin tightened his grip around Brian's cock, telling him without words, that he was close. Brian slowed his movement and began kissing Justin's jaw. He slowly, pulled out, despite Justin's whimpers and began moving down Justin's body, trailing sweet kisses all along.

"I ..."

"Shh," soothed Brian, "this is important too, just enjoy ... we aren't over yet."

The light sigh of contentment made Brian smile. No, they weren't finished yet... so much more to share.

He discarded the pillow from under Justin's lower back and resumed his place over Justin's body,

continuing to place open mouth kisses down Justin's body.

He reached Justin's cock, and began to lick the leaking member, he heard Justin groan and knew he was on the edge. He left his cock and moved up again to kiss Justin deeply on the mouth, to calm them a little, Justin was not the only one who was near the edge.

Instinctively, Justin wrapped his legs around Brian's waist, and pulled him forward. He needed the contact, he needed the heat from Brian's body, he needed the love, the passion, and he needed Brian buried deep in him.

Brian smiled. Looking down into the deep blue eyes beneath him, he followed Justin's demands. He buried himself deeper into his lover, thrusting slowly in and out, trying to get deeper with each thrust, until he couldn't hold the slow pace any longer.

Justin's breathing became heavier, he was close, and so was Brian. Justin tried to stay still for a second to keep control of his emotions, but it was impossible, with Brian still moving. He followed the lead, and they both came in unison, Justin between them and Brian filling the condom. Brian felt his limbs giving way beneath him, no longer having the strength to even hold himself upright, and fell onto Justin's body, their limbs entwined.

After a few minutes, he looked into Justin's eyes, and kissed him deeply. "Missed you," he whispered again into Justin's ear. And Justin tightened his hold on Brian, and suddenly began to chuckle. Looking up Brian raised his eyebrow in silent question. Justin looked over at the clock it was almost 2:30 in the morning... when they had reached the room it was barely midnight. They had made love for more than two hours. Two hours of non-stop love making.

"I think we beat our own record," chuckled Justin.

"Yeah," Brian replied.

"I think we need a shower," continued Justin.

"I think we need to sleep," added Brian, yawning. He moved from Justin's body, taking his hand and pulling him up with him. "Come on, we're gonna take a bath."

He moved toward the bathroom and opened the door, the bath was lighted with candles, like the rest of the apartment, and a heated bathtub was waiting.

\* \* \* \*

Brian had chosen to make this little visit, a vacation. They had never had a vacation, they never spent time alone, just the two of them. He had planned the trip for days and with Cynthia's help, he had planned everything. He made sure that Justin's favorite flowers were delivered during the afternoon. And he asked the hotel to run a bath and to keep it warm. They always showered together, but he wanted to spend some special time with Justin.

And here, they were alone, no extended family, no remarks, no best friend, only them. He didn't have to play the stud card with Justin; he had done that a long time ago. They didn't have to play any games with each other. The only thing he never did was to surprise him.

And this was his chance, to prove to Justin that he wasn't the only one who could express his feelings. Okay, he wasn't great at that, but he tried. He tried because he made a promise to a person he really loved. Often over their last months in Pittsburgh, he had tried to explain his feelings, and yet the only thing he could say was that he was in love. He was in love with a man who loved him back.

\* \* \* \*

He stepped aside and let Justin walk into the bathroom. He was rewarded with a huge Sunshine smile.

"You are unfuckingbelievable," was all Justin said.

"I know, now come on, we don't have all night. We have a doctor's appointment in the morning.

"I don't want to go," Justin said.

Brian inhaled deeply and moved them toward the bath. "Listen, I'm not sure how you will take what I'm going to say; I'm not even sure how I will say it." He squeezed Justin's hand. "I hate to see you sick, or in pain, because it hurts me, somehow I feel responsible." He inhaled again, and again squeezed Justin's hand. "I never felt that for anyone, except Gus." He tightened his hold on Justin. "I don't want to lose you. I don't want to live without you, and I've done it more than I wanted to during the last six years. Every time I thought I would die. And every time you came back."

Justin eyes where filled with tears. "I know. I'm ... "

"We have an appointment tomorrow, and we're going. The doctor will run all the tests and we will ask for the results to be sent as soon as possible. Ok?"

Justin nodded his head. That was all he could do. He was too overwhelmed by Brian's revelation and by the fact that during this little speech, Brian hadn't moved his gaze from his in the mirror. He was trembling all over, and not from the cold; it was from the mixed emotions running through Brian's body.

"Now come on, a bath is still waiting for us." The moment was like a magical spell - the openness, the feelings of belonging, of being loved. It was all there in Brian's hand leading them to the warm bath waiting for them.

The tub was a balneal one making bubbles and keeping the water warm. Like planned, the bathroom supplies were Brian's and Justin's favorite ones.

Brian stepped in first and helped Justin in; they slid slowly into a sitting position, Justin resting against Brian's chest.

The water was warm, perfect, Brian took Justin's right hand and began to massage it.

"That feels good," whispered Justin.

"How long have you been wearing the splint?"

"Don't know, a couple of days, a week tops." Brian was running his hands against Justin's chest.

"Uh-huh"

"Okay, ten days."

Brian intensified his massage, "Why didn't you call me?"

"For what, to tell you my hand was bothering me again?"

"Yeah, remember the rules 'talking about everything'? Or did you forget that part again?" asked Brian with a chuckle in his voice.

"No, I was just too busy"

"Too busy?"

"Yeah, finishing the painting and some other stuff," answered Justin. He had started wearing the splint to ease some pain and cramps.

And right then, the hot water, the bubbles, Brian's massage, felt like heaven. He made himself more comfortable against Brian's chest, snuggling closer.

"God I've missed that."

"What, me rubbing your chest, back, and hand?" whispered Brian in Justin ear.

"No, you behind me, holding me. That's what I missed the most"

"Wouldn't you say, me behind you, fucking your brains out?"

"No, just you there, holding me like the few weeks after the bom... you know what I'm talking about."

"Yeah."

Justin leaned his head back to kiss Brian's jaw. Brian moved his hand toward Justin's neck to hold him against him. He moved his lips to cover Justin's and deepened the kiss. Justin parted his lips to allow Brian entry.

Never breaking the kiss, Justin moved to straddle Brian trying not to splash all the water from the tub.

"What are you doing?"

"What do you think I'm doing?"

Justin assumed his position. He linked his legs around Brian's waist and grabbed the tub behind him to prevent them from slipping under the water. Brian tightened his hold on Justin's back, one hand traveling up and down, lingering along his thighs and along his lower back, one hand on Justin's neck. And round two began. Slowly Justin began to move against Brian, grinding his erection against Brian's. Passing his hand between them to stroke them both, eliciting a moan from Brian, he smiled, sex was always perfect, and love was always breathtaking between them.

They moved together, grinding against each other, hands roaming over each other's bodies. Brian stopped the bubbling from the spa system, and looked into Justin's eyes.

"I think we should...." began Brian, but Justin pulled him down into the tub.

"I think we're just great right here." Justin extended his hand and grabbed a condom from the box he brought in with him earlier.

"I came prepared." Justin said, showing Brian the condom.

"Mmmh, had some evil thoughts?" grinned Brian.

"No, just some sexy thoughts."

Justin opened the condom wrapper, Brian sat on the edge of the tub, and Justin expertly put it on Brian's full erect cock. Brian pulled Justin against him. Justin lowered himself and slid onto Brian's shaft. Brian lifted Justin's legs so they were wrapped around his waist, and they slid back down back in the warm water.

They rocked together, Justin setting the pace. Brian tightened his hold, they where both near climax. Justin sped up the pace and they both came together.

Justin raised himself up and Brian discarded the condom.

"Well, it seems we are up for another shower or another bath," grinned Justin.

"I think a shower would be good."

They pulled out of the tub, emptied the water, and headed to the shower stall. They both showered, and then headed back to the bedroom, to get in bed again. But this time they just laid together, it was after 3:00 am.

Brian was on his back, Justin wrapped around him.

"Did you really think what you told me before?" whispered Justin

"What?"

"That you don't want to lose me and that you barely survived without me?"

"Oh that," Brian answered casually.

"Yes that."

Brian flipped them over so that Justin was on his back and he was over him. He looked into Justin eyes and began to stroke his hair.

"Your hair is longer."

"Brian."

Brian laid his head down on the hollow of Justin's collarbone. "Yes I thought it, now get some rest, we have an appointment tomorrow."

Justin put his arms around Brian, and drifted quickly to sleep. Brian tightened his hold, and shortly followed him.

## **Chapter 16 Medical Appointment**

The next morning, about 9:30, Brian began to stir. During the night, Justin had shifted to his chest and Brian had wrapped himself around his lover, covering him with his body, their legs were entwined, and the sheets were rumped around them.

Brian moved his hand up and down Justin's back, eliciting a little sigh from the young man who moved a little. Brian smiled to himself; Justin must be hard, just like he'd been every morning since he'd known him. He moved a little to cover practically all of Justin's body, and wrapped his hand around Justin's waist to reach his hard-on. He began to stroke him, slowly, kissing his neck, his shoulder, and his cheek.

The slow pace of his hand made Justin whimper, and he turned to his back to give Brian better access, Brian began trailing kisses down Justin's chest working toward his crotch. Once there, like the night before, he planted soft kisses on the head of his cock.

Justin moved his hands into Brian's hair, as his body arched Brian knew he was ready. He began to lick the vein pulsating there, he moved higher and licked Justin's pre-cum. Brian tightened his hold on Justin's waist, and continued to lick along his shaft. Justin began to thrust into Brian's welcoming warm mouth. Brian continued his ministrations until he felt Justin's body stiffened. Brian deep throat him and swallowed every drop of his cum.

He moved higher and kissed Justin deeply. "You're awake," whispered Brian.

"You too," Justin moved his hand toward Brian's full erect cock, but Brian stopped him. "We have an appointment, and we need to shower, now come on."

\* \* \* \*

Thirty minutes, a good shower, a protein breakfast, and a real breakfast later they were heading to the doctor.

Brian and Justin had called their doctors back in Pittsburgh and asked them to fax their medical records to Dr. Hutton. The medical office was a ten-minute ride from the hotel. The doctor was a black, middle-aged man, who appeared to be non-judgmental towards gay people. His name was Samuel Hutton. He sat in his office looking at Justin's file.

The latest data in the file was from the check up they had for their commitment ceremony. Weight, allergies, pills, everything - now they were sitting and waiting to take some other tests.

"Well Justin, it seems you have lost a lot of weight would you please come here ..." asked Dr.

Hutton.

Justin moved to the examination room. He removed his clothes and waited on the table. The doctor checked his vitals, his blood pressure and his weight, and then asked the nurse to take a blood sample asking for the results that afternoon. The nurse told them there would be an extra charge for that, and Brian told her that everything would be covered by his insurance.

Once the nurse left, Dr. Hutton asked Justin some more questions. "Have you been getting enough sleep lately?"

"Not really. I've been under a lot of stress, trying to put my own show together," answered Justin sheepishly.

"In looking at your file, I see that you've lost 16 pounds in the last 6 months. That is entirely too much."

Justin saw Brian stiffen in his chair.

"And your blood pressure is low. I suggest you get some rest, perhaps take a vacation," continued the doctor.

"I can't take a vacation," answered Justin.

"I'm afraid you are going to have to take some time off or you may have to be hospitalized," replied Dr. Hutton.

"No, I really can't, I have some files to finish, the deadline is in ten days, and I haven't finished the artwork yet."

"Call the client and told them you can't finish the project," said Brian calmly.

'Sure' thought Justin, 'I will call you and tell you that Julian T. Story, that would be me, can't finish the model artwork for the Newman Pharmaceutical file, because I'm too tired to finish it. Yeah you're right, I will do that, and you will lose a ticket for the big apple'.

\* sighs \*

Justin sighed heavily ... no he couldn't take a vacation. He needed to work on this account. It was a top priority, right after spending time with Brian.

He tried to think of a solution during Brian's meeting with the doctor. The doctor knew that Brian had had cancer, that he had received radiation treatments, and that the last test results were 'cancer free'. Like Justin, he took a blood sample and once again asked the nurse for the results that afternoon.

"So when will we be able to have the results," asked Brian.

"Around four this afternoon," answered Dr Hutton looking at the clock.

They said their goodbyes, and shook hands. Brian wrapped his arm around Justin's shoulders, and they headed out of the medical office.

It was near noon, and Brian suspected Justin was hungry. "Would you like to eat somewhere special?"

"Huh," asked Justin.

"That's great, not even 24 hours here, and you are already ignoring me. Should I head back to the Pitts?" asked Brian in a false outraged voice.

Justin smiled, but his smile never reached his eyes. Concern passed over Brian's face, "What is it?"

"What if I'm really sick, Brian? What if it's more than I thought? What ..."

Brian stopped walking and pulled Justin into his arms and whispered in his ear, "No presumption, without results, and you were also safe, right? That's what you said last night." Justin tightened his embrace around Brian's waist and nodded his head unable to speak, not trusting his own voice.

He finally managed to tell Brian, "Like I said last night, you were the last one to fuck me."

"Then everything should be ok... we were both clean before we cancelled the ceremony. And last night you were the smarter one, remembering, that we have to play safe if we have any doubts," Brian told him, running his hands up and down his back.

Justin smiled remembering his fear from last night, but he also remembered in spite of that fear, they had made love for more than 2 hours... 2 hours! They often fucked all night, but then there were different rounds in one night, not one round that seemed to last an eternity. They were so enthralled that they forgot dinner, and then they were too exhausted to do anything else but sleep.

Brian's words brought him back to reality, "Are you hungry?"

He wasn't really hungry, not even a little. He was far too nervous to eat, but he also knew that 'no' wasn't an option, "Yeah a little."

They stepped into a restaurant, which was close to the medical office and to the hotel. Brian chose a light meal with a huge mixed salad, and Justin chose the same thing with a large order of French fries. Brian laughed at that, because somehow he knew that Justin would be tempted by some greasy food. They chose a good glass of Vermouth as an aperitif and Brian ordered a little bottle of red wine with the lunch.

They were talking about the last ad campaign and about the show, when Justin felt a cold chill going through his body, "Excuse me a minute," he said.

"Sure," answered Brian.

Justin headed for the bathroom, and took a bottle of pills from his pocket. The label said 'Klonopine.' He took two pills with some water and headed back to the table.

As usual when he took those pills, he was much calmer. They kicked in quickly, and when he returned to the table, Brian knew instantly that he had taken something. He was slower to answer direct questions, and his eyes were a little blurry, but Brian didn't say anything, he just waited for Justin to talk. Maybe after the doctor's appointment he would have some answers.

They had dessert and Brian saw the slight sweat on Justin's forehead. Like before, Justin excused himself, and headed to the bathroom, but he didn't notice Brian following him. He barely made it there, and threw up everything he had just eaten.

Brian grabbed a towel, got it wet, and waited at the sink. As Justin stepped out of the stall, he put the wet towel around his neck.

"What did you take?" he asked Justin.

"Huh?"

"I said, what did you take?"

"Nothing and thanks," croaked Justin, gesturing toward the towel.

"Don't bullshit me, please," said Brian, as he grabbed the towel and got it wet again.

"I already told you, I didn't take anything," Justin managed to say, just before he whirled around and grabbed the toilet bowl again.

After he emptied the rest of his stomach, Justin sat on the floor leaning against the wall.

"What. Did. You. Take?" Brian's voice was cold and he wanted an answer.

Justin knew he had lost the battle, and handed him the bottle he had in his pocket.

"Klonopine! Since when are you taking this shit? No, don't answer me." Brian kneeled near him, and pushed Justin's hair back to put the towel on his forehead.

"Thanks," managed Justin.

Brian knew that if Justin took those pills something was wrong, putting two and two together he asked softly, "So, tell me, when did the panic attacks start getting worse?"

"A little while ago, about 3 months, I think, I'm not sure," answered Justin with an exhausted voice and a shrug.

They were surprised when the restaurant manager stepped into the bathroom and asked, "Are you ok, Sir? Was it the food? Do you need me to call the paramedics?"

Brian looked up and smiled at him, "No, I don't think it was the food, and thanks, but I think we can manage the situation."

"Sir, will you be going back to your table?"

"Yes, in a little while, oh hmm...", replied Brian.

"Barney."

"Yeah, Barney, could you bring a fresh carafe of water and some crackers to our table?" asked Brian.

"Yes sir."

The manager headed back to the main dining area, and Brian helped Justin to his feet.

"Better?" he asked.

Justin nodded his head weakly, and they went back to their table. They were glad to see some fresh water and crackers, and a bowl with some veggie cream soup at Justin's place.

"Well seems they didn't want to lose you as a customer," stated Brian.

Justin gave him a small smile.

"So, why didn't you tell me that the panic attacks had increased?" asked Brian again.

"So you could come and fix wittle Justin's problems?" stated Justin, with an angry and hurt look. "Like you always try to do."

If Brian was hurt, he didn't show it in his words, "Yeah well, maybe, I would have, but you should have called me and told me something was wrong, I would have tried harder to get here to see you. Maybe fly in on the weekends, when I'm not visiting Gus, so that we could have worked out your issues together, isn't that what you wanted, what we agreed? You also could have told me that through the web cam."

Brian sighed deeply and looked at Justin who was eating his veggie cream soup.

Justin put down his spoon. "I didn't want ..." he began, but couldn't continue. His eyes filled with tears, he sighed trying to control his emotions, and continued, "Listen, you're right, we agreed to all that, and we also agreed that I should try to make it in New York alone, that you wouldn't interfere, that I could prove to you that I was able to take care of myself."

"Yeah, and you did, you're still in one piece, and still alive," smiled Brian.

"Yeah barely," added Justin.



"Not, barely, if I recall last night, you were pretty alive for me," grinned Brian with his tongue in cheek smile, "And you're still here, not in the best shape, but still alive and here. So, enjoy the next few days. You won't do anything other than sleep, eat and have great sex with me!" he added. "And if this week isn't enough, I will check with Cynthia and Ted to see if I can stay longer, until we get tired of each other, alright?"

"Alright," agreed Justin.

Brian signaled to the manager that he wanted the bill. It was nearly 2:30 pm and they had over an hour to kill before going back to the doctor. Brian paid the bill and added a large tip because he noticed they hadn't charged them for the veggie cream soup or the extra crackers.

They left and walked back to the doctor's office to wait for the results. The waiting room was full and there were only old magazines to read.

Brian and Justin sat together on a couch and looked around the waiting room. There was information about pregnancy, HIV, and other STDs as well as general health information.

"Are you tired?" Brian asked.

"No, I'm exhausted," answered Justin looking up. "Do you think Chris Hobbs was right?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Brian.

Justin felt Brian's body stiffened, "I've been thinking lately about the last time I saw him." Brian nodded. "I was with Emmett at the GLC, Godiva had died the day before, and we were packing her things. I left him alone in her room, and walked down the stairs, and I saw him, there, mopping the floor. You remember?"

Brian nodded again. Yes, he remembered that evening, Justin had been back at the loft for maybe a few weeks, and Brian was working on the Poolside Coolers account. He came home that evening, late and drunk. Justin was sitting in the dark, and he told him that he had seen Chris Hobbs, he didn't remember what Justin told him, but he remembered that he wanted to make sure that he was all right and that Hobbs hadn't done anything to hurt him. Once he had Justin in his arms that night, he was reassured and calmer.

"I never really believed him, but maybe I will end like he said," continued Justin.

Brian put his arm around Justin's shoulder, "Listen, are you listening?" Justin nodded. "You don't have HIV, last time we were checked, we were both clean, and unless your body or you lied to me last night, you haven't have sex with anyone since you left Pittsburgh. So stop worrying - leave Hobbs out of the conversation and out of our lives for good. Okay?"

Just then, the nurse came out and called Brian and Justin into the doctor's office.

Brian could tell that Justin was beginning to have a panic attack. He pulled him against him, and tried to soothe him, as the door opened and Dr. Hutton stepped in, "Okay, Justin, Brian."

"Stop fighting, Justin, just try to breath," Brian told Justin.

Stepping into the office, the doctor understood immediately what was happening and called for the nurse. He gave her some instructions and she came back with a small syringe and a little bottle of medicine.

"What's that?" asked Brian.

"It's simple magnesium and some vitamin B to help him relax a bit and get over his panic attack. Justin, are you allergic to Magnesium?" asked the doctor, while the nurse prepared the treatment.

Justin shook his head no, and the nurse rolled up Justin's sleeve. She gave him the shot in his left arm.

"You'll be better in a few minutes, but your arm will be sore for a few days," acknowledged the doctor.

Justin nodded, and followed Brian's low voice, doing his breathing exercises. Dr. Hutton didn't leave them. He checked Justin's vitals during the calming process. After a few minutes, he was much calmer, and could breathe easier.

"How long have you been having those panics attacks?" asked the doctor, sitting behind his desk to put some notes on the medical chart.

"Three months," answered Justin in a weak voice.

"Impossible, they are too strong. You've been having them longer than that," stated the doctor.

"Four years, and almost five months," said Brian flatly.

"What happened?" asked the doctor softly.

"He was at his prom with a friend, a girl. I was there too; we danced. He walked me back to my car, and he went back to get his friend. Another student who didn't approve of us bashed him in the head, right here," Brian slowly moved the hair just above Justin's scar. "If I hadn't called his name to warn him, he would probably have died. He was in a coma for two weeks and rehab for six months."

Justin looked up at Brian, he had never heard him talk about that moment, and he never knew or suspected all the hidden feelings he had just heard. During the whole speech, Brian held tightly onto Justin's hand.

"Well it seems that Justin is not the only one who is suffering residual trauma," confirmed Dr. Hutton, looking directly at Brian.

"We're not here to talk about me, but about my pa... well Justin, he had a panic attack earlier today at lunch, and he took these pills," he handed the bottle of pills to the doctor. "The effect was immediate, and a little while later he threw up everything he had eaten. The waiter brought us some veggie cream soup and crackers and so far, he has kept that down. I suspect he has taken a lot of those lately and that's why he has lost so much weight," Brian finished.

Dr. Hutton was scribbling furiously in the medical records, and finally looked up and watched the interaction between the two men in front of him.

"Well you aren't here for another check up, so right now, we're going to go through the results of the first tests. First, the tests for STDs – neither of you have HIV, hepatitis, or any other STD." He heard a sigh of relief and looked up to see a small smile on Justin's lips, and continued, "Brian, your results are perfect. Justin, I also asked to have your cholesterol and sugar level checked. Your cholesterol is fine and you do not have diabetes, however, you are anemic. That, along with your low blood pressure, is why you are so tired. Also, I checked for minor infections, and I see that the flu virus is still in your system, that we are going to treat with some medicine."

"You know I'm allergic to most drugs," Justin told him.

"Who told you that you are going to take drugs? As for those pills," holding up the bottle of Klonopine, "you won't need them any longer."

Brian and Justin nodded. The doctor continued, "I will prescribe you a simple Magnesium basic treatment, and for the little virus that is still there, you need also a basic treatment and a lot of rest, even though I suspect that won't be the case in the next few days. I strongly suggest that you eat, rest, have fun and enjoy yourself, take your regular meds and in ten days or so, you should have gained three to six pounds."

He looked up and saw, for the first time, some relief on their faces.

"See I told you that you're OK, I was sure of it," whispered Brian in Justin's ear.

"No, you weren't," stated Justin firmly.

"No, you're right, I wasn't, but I am now," and Brian sealed that with a kiss.

"Ok gentlemen I will fax these results to your current doctors and to your respective e-mails, so you will have the latest results if you need them. Justin, if you stay in New York a little longer, I'd like to see you in two weeks, to see how you're doing."

"Okay, I'll schedule that," answered Justin.

They all stood up to leave, when Dr. Hutton said, "It would be good for both of you to talk about what happened the night of the prom. I think it would release a lot of emotions. And before you say anything, I don't think you need to see a shrink, but I think a heart to heart talk would help. It won't solve all your issues, but it would help. I suggest a time when both of you are well and feeling good," he gestured between both men, to make it clear that the discussion should take place only between the two of them. "If you need help or other advice, I'm available."

Brian huffed at that, but tightened his hold on Justin's hand, somewhere deep down he knew that the doctor was right, and that the discussion would release some unspoken pain between them. He wasn't sure that this trip was the best time to talk about it. He decided to wait to see what Justin said and follow his lead.

The clear bill of health was great, the fact that Justin should get some rest, was something different, because the only thing he wanted was to kiss him, touch him, love him, and fuck him in every possible position and on every available surface in their hotel room.

When they left the office, it was dark outside.

"Shit how long have we been in there?" asked Justin.

Looking at his watch, Brian told him, "Nearly 3 hours, why?"

"Shit I forgot I have to send something to a client."

"Couldn't it wait until tomorrow? First, we have to find a pharmacy and fill the prescription, and then, we have to eat," Brian said as he lifted his arm and hailed a cab. Once in the cab, he pulled out his cell and called the hotel to order dinner, without wine, only water. He asked if the list of items he had ordered this morning had been delivered and if everything was there.

He closed his phone and smiled at Justin. Tonight they would have a real dinner.

## **Chapter 17    Feeling betrayed**

For once, Brian and Justin listened to the doctor; the only stop they made was at the drug store to drop off the prescription and asked them to deliver it to their hotel.

Dinner had been delivered a while ago, and the fridge was stuffed with veggies, yogurt, milk, water bottles, and beer bottles, along with some pre-made meals.

They ate in comfortable silence when the bellboy knocked on their door with Justin's prescriptions. They cleaned the dishes in the little kitchen in the suite. That's why Brian chose this hotel. It had a great reputation, but the residents could also cook their own meals. And that was just fine because Justin really needed to center himself on something and he always loved cooking. Brian couldn't deny that he always loved to look at him while he was cooking. He loved to look over him when he tasted the sauce, his little tongue licking the spoon, or his fingers, so hot and so sexy.

After dinner, they decided to check their respective emails and calls on their notebooks and phones. For Brian, there was nothing new, some background information from Cynthia on the latest campaign and major accounts, like Remson and Brown Athletics. He frowned at the last email though, it was from the Art Department, and they hadn't gotten the last master of the boards for the Newman Pharmaceutical file. The outsourced contractor hadn't mailed them.

"Shit," he cursed.

"Something wrong at the office?" asked Justin.

"No, just a little problem, one of our external contractors forgot to send us something important, and the first meeting is in two days, hope he won't let us down," Brian looked up and saw Justin opening his notebook, "What are you doing?"

"Checking the mail, and sending what we talked about earlier," answered Justin.

"No you don't, you should rest," Brian told him as he walked over to him and tried to close the notebook. But Justin moved the notebook out of Brian's reach.

"No, I should finish this, because I have a commitment with a client, who will pay me. Then I can rest," insisted Justin.

"I don't see how this could be so important," stated Brian, trying again to reach toward Justin's notebook.

"If I told you, it was worth \$10,000 would you think it's nothing. Let me send the email, and I promise I will close the computer," pleaded Justin.

"Go on, you have one hour, deal?" Brian said, extending his hand toward him.

"Deal," Justin smiled back.

They were both in the living room, each on a couch, feet propped up on the coffee table. Justin was working on the artwork for Brian's account and he didn't notice Brian moving from his couch to sit near Justin. He only reacted when he felt Brian's foot on his. He looked up and saw Brian looking at him.

"What?" asked Justin nervously.

"Nothing," replied Brian.

"Don't bullshit me. I know you," replied Justin.

"Just looking at you, is that something I can do, or should I fill out an authorization form?" asked Brian in a false hurt voice.

Justin laughed at the comment, and continued to work on his project. One hour later, Justin closed the notebook, "Finished or at least I sent the necessary files."

He grinned knowing that tomorrow, the art director from Kinnetik would go through his file and email the result to Brian. Then like they always did when they were together, they would discuss the file, and tomorrow night Brian would put everything together. But right now, he just wanted to relax. He shook his right hand, and frowned, but the gesture didn't escape Brian's view.

"Cramps?" asked Brian with concern.

"Yeah, I tried to finish these files in high speed. Normally, when I use the computer it's to release the tension, to make it easier for my hand, but here, I tried to hurry and now, my hand is cramped. I had to send the file because the client has a dead line for the final master in 10 days or something like that," explained Justin.

"Mmmh. Feeling better since this afternoon?" asked Brian.

"Yeah, but I think a shower would be great," replied Justin as he stood up and extended his hand. "Are you coming?"

"Or going," added Brian with a wicked smile, standing up, too.

"Or coming and staying?" continued Justin, pulling Brian against him.

"I think I'm staying, and you Sunshine, what are you doing," whispered Brian.

"Staying too. Now what about taking that shower?"

"That's not a bad idea," stated Brian.

Justin led Brian through the bedroom into the bathroom. They discarded their clothes, and Brian started the shower. They stepped together under the hot spray of water, and Brian began massaging Justin's hand again. A sigh of relief escaped Justin's lips and he smiled up toward the man he had missed so much for the last six months. He leaned against his chest and wrapped his arms around his long form.

Brian sighed too, god he had missed this, taking a shower with the blond, It was always so ... 'electrical', so wild, so refreshing, and also so hot, everything at once, he couldn't sort the sensations.

Justin ran his hands up and down Brian's back, and began to massage his back. Sensing the tension knots there, he turned Brian against the tile and began to massage his back with both hands. He could feel under his fingers the tension leaving Brian's back. Brian was leaning with his head against the tile savoring the massage Justin was dispensing. He suddenly reached backward to grab Justin's hand, and moved it to his lower back. Justin smiled.

Despite the cramps earlier, his hand was fine and he continued his ministrations on Brian's back. One of his hands slid lower just above his crack, and began to massage the spot there while the other continued to ease the tension in his lower back.

Brian reached out again, caught Justin's hip, and pulled him against him. Justin knew instinctively what Brian wanted.

"You're sure?" he whispered in Brian's ear; Brian only nodded.

Justin continued to massage and caress Brian's lower back, crack, and balls, until he slid a finger over Brian's opening, eliciting a slight moan from him. He continued his ministrations, passing over and over again, circling around it. He heard the second moan and took it as an invitation. He slid his first finger in, pushing slowly in and out, Brian spread his legs a little wider, giving Justin better access. Justin trailed open-mouthed kisses on Brian shoulders.

Justin added a second finger to stretch him and prepare him correctly. The last time Brian had allowed Justin to fuck him was at Britin in front of the fireplace. But then it was different, they were still using condoms.

Justin was still running his other hand up and down Brian's body, caressing some specific spot driving Brian crazy.

Justin pulled his fingers out, and Brian groaned from the loss. Trailing kisses along Brian's shoulder Justin moved his left hand to cover Brian's left one on the shower tile linking their fingers and the right one moved around his dick, to guide him into Brian's hot channel.

Feeling the head of Justin's cock at his entrance, Brian lowered himself a little, pushing himself onto Justin's cock. Justin resumed his position and pushed slowly forward, pausing for Brian to adjust to the intrusion, and for him to savor the feeling, until he began to move slowly. The feeling was amazing. Flesh against flesh, and he was the first to do it after the green light from the doctor.

They quickly found their rhythm, and Brian reached for Justin's right hand on his waist and linked it with his own over his cock. He began to match Justin's thrust. It didn't take long for both of them to reach their orgasm.

Once they came down, Brian turned around and pulled Justin against his chest. He wouldn't tell anyone, but he loved it when Justin took the lead, and when he bottomed for him. He loved it, because Justin was always gentle and careful, even the first time. He was certainly more gentle and careful than he had been with Justin the first time.

They finally stepped out the shower and ended up in bed.

\* \* \* \*

Brian woke when he felt Justin tossing and turning near him. Justin was on his back. Brian moved closer and wrapped his arms around him. He heard Justin say, "The layout's too dark." Brian

smiled and kissed him on the forehead. "Shhh," he whispered. But Justin kept going on with his dream "... keep Brian away from Newman's pharma ... layout? Can't" – silence – "Shouldn't lie to him, shouldn't". Brian looked down in shock at Justin in his arms, who finally calmed himself and went back to sleep. Once he was sure Justin was asleep, he snuck out of the bed and went to the living room where the computers were on the coffee table.

He opened Justin's. He wasn't surprised to see that he didn't have a password; he should probably remind Justin that wasn't safe. But for the moment, he was glad that he hadn't put any in, because now, he could snoop.

He looked in the main root, and saw a folder called '*Kinnetik*'. He smiled and clicked on it. The sub-folders had some different account names on which Justin helped out (GLC / GLC Carnival / Brown Athletic / Remson) nothing new. He returned to the main root and looked over the folders again. He saw the folder called Julian T Story. He frowned and clicked on it. There he saw another list of folders with some other account name on it, Remson, Newman Pharmaceutical, Brace Inc, Brown Athletic, Liberty Air Inc. He clicked on the Remson folder and looked at the different layout and emails saved there. He did the same with the Newman folder and stood up, running his hand through his hair. He pinched his nose – a headache was forming. Why are the last accounts on Justin's computer in a folder called Julian T Story? Isn't that the name of the New York contractor?

He thought to himself, someone will pay for this – even if it's Justin. He closed Justin's notebook, grabbed his cell, walked back into the bedroom, to make sure that Justin was still asleep and headed back down. The phone on the other end rang twice before someone picked up.

"Give me Ted!" Brian yelled.

"Hello to you too, he's sleeping," replied the voice on the other end.

"I don't care, wake him up, I need to speak with him, now!" growled Brian.

"Okay, wait a minute."

Brian heard rustling and a sleepy Ted came on the phone. "Brian it's 3:00 o'clock, what do you want?"

"I need some information," came Brian's simple answer.

"Now?" asked Ted.

"Yes now, can you connect to the Kinnetik database?" asked Brian a little softer.

"Huh?"

"Yes or no?"

"Yes. Yes, I can – just give me 5 minutes," answered Ted.

"You have 2 minutes."

"I'll do it as fast as I can." There was silence as Ted attempted to connect. – "Would you tell me what's so important that you would call me from New York in the middle of the night?" continued Ted.

"No," replied Brian.

"Oh that's very helpful."

"I didn't call to be helpful. I called to get my questions answered," stated Brian.

"Ok I'm connected, what's your question?"

"Tell me when Julian T Story started working for us."

"Wait, Julian T Story? That's a weird name."

"Why's that?"

"It just is," stated Ted. "OK, here he is. He was hired in mid June."

"Who hired him?" continued Brian.

"The Art Director," answered Ted flatly.

"Directly? Without passing through me?" asked a stunned Brian.

"Yes, without passing through your approval. Wait, there's a note, on the file, candidacy approved on work sample sent to BK and Cynthia."

"Do you have an address to send the checks or the mail?" .

"Nope only a mailbox in New York."

"Only a mailbox, are you sure?" asked Brian.

"Yes, only a mail box and an email," confirmed Ted.

Brian wasn't satisfied with all the answers and asked, "Do you have his account references? Or some phone numbers?"

"Wait a minute," Ted began to click furiously. "Yes I have them."

"Wait I need some paper. . . Ok, give me the numbers."

"Brian private," replied Ted.

"Give me the goddamn numbers Ted!" said Brian.

Ted gave Brian the numbers and Brian wrote them down. Then Brian heard Blake in the background say, "That's funny, you can write Justin's name with the name you have on your screen."

"What did he just say?" asked Brian.

"He just said that you could write Justin's name with this one, he's pretty good ..."

"I have to go, thanks," and Brian hung up.

Okay, Brian thought, this is un-fucking-believable. Justin has been working for Kinnetik since June and Brian never knew it. He hadn't even hired him; he just signed the hiring papers because they were in a hurry on some contracts. They needed someone capable but they didn't need someone fulltime. Cynthia suggested an external person, and that's when it happened. He had hired Justin.

He always thought the artwork was excellent, he never needed to make major modifications. He thought he had found someone who was almost as talented as Justin. Now he knew why.

That little shit. That's why he didn't ask me for money. God, Justin legitimately asked for a job and was hired not because he was my par..., my bo..., my unconventional partner, but because he was talented. What can I say except that I'm proud of him. Yes proud, because he didn't ask me, I didn't suggest him and he didn't tell the art director that he was in a rel... well with me.

I told him he had become the best homosexual he could possibly be. But now he really is. God so much time had passed. I really think of him as my equal now. No, he's better than me, he always was better than me, he always was the stronger one. I don't think I'll tell him tomorrow, I think I'll keep that to myself, and see what happens. But before anything, I need some information and that could only come from Cynthia.

\* \* \* \*

He went back to bed, without waking Justin who was sleeping on his stomach. Brian slid in under the covers, and rolled toward Justin, wrapping his long form around the smaller one, Justin turned his head "Everything all right?" he asked sleepily.

"Yeah, go back to sleep," answered Brian kissing his neck. Justin turned his head back, said "I love you," and drifted back to sleep. Brian smiled and kissed him one more time, before allowing himself to fall asleep too.

\* \* \* \*

He didn't tell Justin the next morning or the next one, what he had discovered. He wasn't sad or angry, he was proud, because Justin had done it all by himself.

He tried to keep track of work. Every afternoon, they both spent 3 or 4 hours working. They made a deal - the mornings were for quality time in bed and showers. The afternoons were for work, the evenings and the nights were theirs. No phone calls, no interruptions.

Brian filtered every call and so did Justin. No Debbie, no Michael, even if both voice mails were full of their messages, they ignored them. Cynthia wrote that Michael had barged in to Kinnetik threatening her that unless she let him talk to Brian that he would make sure Brian fired her when he got back. Cynthia asked him if someone had died. The answer was no, so she explained that it wasn't an emergency.

Brian and Justin laughed at the emails. Like they had planned, they worked on the Newman's Pharmaceutical account together and they used the opportunity to see the client in person in New York.

Brian nailed the account before the dead line. The client was impressed with Justin's artwork and Brian got a ticket for the 'Big Apple'.

Justin cleared everything with Conrad, picked up his check, and paid him back the loan for the rent of the apartment. With Brian's help, he looked for a new place to live. Brian told him he would like to pay half of the rent, because he planned to be there every other weekend.

They agreed that Brian would pay a quarter of the rent, and Brian's name would be on the lease. They just needed to find something that would fit Brian's standards and Justin's income.

After visiting a few places, they found something not too bad in Chelsea. It was a loft, not as big as Brian's, but it had an open attic. In fact, it was half as big, as Brian's loft. It had a living area, a kitchen, a bedroom, and a bathroom. But it had great light, and it was not far away from a hospital (this was a priority in Brian's choice).

The bedroom and bathroom were in the attic. The bathroom wasn't as big as the one in Brian's loft, but the shower was huge and that sealed the deal.

The main living area was split in two with a wall; behind the wall was the kitchen. They decided to put the eating and the living area there too. They kept the other part as Justin's studio.

They picked up Justin's car and Brian was astonished to see that Justin had bought a Nissan X-Trail Columbia – Limited version – in a Red Rubis Metallic color with Gray Nappa leather seats. Justin told Brian that he put a down payment on the car with the money he had saved. Brian knew the car cost a small fortune, almost \$52,000. Justin said he was financing it over 5 years.

The car had everything he needed - Bluetooth installation for the phone, Navigation system, alarm, a special box in the trunk for the dirty accessories, and all the indispensable security accessories

Justin laughed while he explained why he chose this one instead of another one. The car had enough room for Brian to sit in the passenger seat without complaining. Brian looked at him with an offended look, and they both laughed.

They needed two days to move all of Justin's possessions into the new apartment, and needed an afternoon to christen every area.



After a week, Brian called the office and asked if he was needed, the negative answer let him stay with Justin a little bit longer. They checked out of the hotel and moved into the new apartment.

\* \* \* \*

Two days before Brian had to leave Justin stepped out the bathroom, and saw that Brian was on the phone. He immediately felt the tension in the room and saw it in Brian's body, He wondered why until he heard Brian's voice.

"Lindsay do you remember what you promised me?" Brian asked.

"Yeah I remember," answered Lindsay.

"I had hoped that for the next school break he could come visit me at home."

"Home meaning ..."

"At the loft, or the house, depending on where I stay," answered Brian, knowing that if Gus was visiting they would probably stay at the loft. Because the house didn't have furniture yet.

"The house? I thought you sold that. Never mind, will Justin be there?" Turning his head toward Justin, Brian asked him "Will you be at home for the next school break, so we could spend some time with Gus?"

"You know I'll try to make it, so we could spend time all together, but I'm not sure if I can reschedule all the meetings I have," answered Justin.

"Lindsay, did you hear that? He'll try to be home, so we can all spend time with Gus," replied Brian with a smile.

"So it's not for sure that he'll be there," continued Lindsay.

"No it's a strong maybe," confirmed Brian with his tongue in cheek smile.

"That's not good enough," whispered Lindsay. "It's not enough."

"What do you mean that answer isn't good enough? Good enough for what? Are you telling me I can't see my son alone? To spend time with him? To show him a good time? Lindsay, you fucking promised me before you left that if I asked to see him during school breaks that I could!" said Brian.

"Yes but it that was when you and Justin were still together. You're not together anymore."

"We are still together, maybe not in the same city but still together. Look, we're spending as much time together as possible," pleaded Brian.

Justin trailed his hand down Brian's back. He wanted to do more, but he couldn't. It wasn't his son, and he didn't know what they had agreed before the girls left.

"Yes you are, I know that, but don't forget he's in New York and you are in Pittsburgh," Lindsay said.

"Listen Lindsay, you promised me my son, you promised me he would never forget me. How will you explain to him that he can't see his father during holidays? Explain that to me, please!" Brian was agitated, and was pacing back and forth.

"He hasn't forgotten you, you see him at least one day every week," stated Lindsay. "You know that you can come to Toronto every week so you can see him, you can even spend the holidays here," she added.

"Yeah, but you're always there, and you promised me some time alone with him. The school break is a good time for me to spend some quality time with my son."

"Brian, listen, you're not living in the mansion or the house or wherever you had planned to live, and you're probably not going to be with Justin during the school break, so the answer is no," said Lindsay.

"Linds, please..." pleaded Brian.

Justin never heard Brian beg Lindsay before, and it made him mad that Brian had to do it.

"Listen, there's no problem for you to come and see him here. That way, if something were to happen, I wouldn't be too far away. We really don't have enough confidence in you to leave him alone with you. And I don't want Debbie calling me one night, telling me she had Gus for the night, while you were in the backroom of Babylon getting your dick sucked. I won't send you Gus, I won't leave my son alone with you. I'm sorry Brian I can't continue to argue. I have to go. Bye."

And the line was dead. Brian looked at his phone, like it was a UFO, but he couldn't quite process what Lindsay had said. It was a fucking farce. It must be a fucking farce. But deep down in his gut he knew it was real, Lindsay would never give him his son during a school break.

Brian shut the phone. Justin immediately knew something was wrong.

"That's bullshit and she knows it, you've had Gus more than once, and you can take care of him," Justin said, sitting down next to Brian, running his hand absentmindedly over Brian's back, offering silent support. His mind was reeling a mile a minute. "Listen, I can try to cancel my meetings and spend a week with you in the Pitts."

"No, your meetings are important too, I don't want you to sacrifice your job for me, or for my kid," added Brian. "We've done that, and it didn't work, remember."

"None of my meetings are as important as you and Gus. You're my partner, Gus is your son, it's important," insisted Justin.

"No I won't have you put your career in danger for me. Leave it, I will find a solution."

"Brian..." tried Justin again, but he was cut off by Brian's answer. "I said leave it!" He moved toward the steps and a few moments later Justin heard the loft door close. He was gone.

Justin didn't follow him, it was clear that the topic was closed for the moment. But it was not forgotten. He also knew that right now Brian needed some time alone and some peace.

\* \* \* \*

Brian's POV

I needed some distance, that's why I headed out. I didn't go far, just on the main steps in front of his door. I sat down, my mind reeling.

I started thinking the time Ted was at the hospital after his OD. I was the one he had chosen to pull the plug. And I remembered the moment Linds came to me to apologize about what Mel had said to me.

She had stepped into the loft, closing the door. "I just want you to know Melanie feels terrible about what she said."

"Do you think I care?"

"Look, it's upsetting for all of us but at a time like this, we could try showing a little compassion, especially for Ted. Is there any word?"

"The machines say he's still alive."

"Poor guy."

I wondered who would care about me if something would happen to me. I asked her, "What about

us? We don't have any beeps or wires or little white dots telling us we're alive, so how do we know? I guess we just take each other's word."

She never answered my question, she only spoke about her feelings, and she never told me anything to soothe me. "Maybe we know from what people expect from us. I mean, take Gus. He needs me to feed him, to change him. Knowing that tells me I'm alive, so for me right now, it's him."

I asked my question again, "What about me?"

She never told me that Gus might need me, or Justin, or her, but instead she said, "Ted needs you now. So that's what tells you you're alive. You'll do the right thing. Whatever it is."

I was so afraid, so alone, so lost that I could barely reply, "You don't know that."

I was glad when he woke up so I never had to make that decision. That same day I went dancing with Michael, telling him that I chose him if something happened to me, and I did, until Justin's bashing. Then I changed my will and chose Justin, because I knew he would make the right decision if something happened to me. I didn't have to be afraid of his choice. He would put my wishes before his.

Lindsay asked me to father Gus, and I said yes. Then she asked if I wanted to father their second child and I said yes again, until Mel told me she had chosen someone else.

I gave up my parental rights to keep them together. I signed their fucking insurance papers to protect my son from his circumcision. I let them go to Toronto after the bombing, because they needed that to feel safe. Today I'm not sure it was a wise decision, seems like there is trouble in paradise.

In fact, I scarified almost everything I had to make them happy. I never thought I could love my son so much, but I really do love him. And only one other person knows and sees it, Justin.

She played with my feelings and my love for my son, to keep me where I was before I met Justin, alone.

In fact, she's not the only one to do that, Michael does the same thing, with his words, Lindsay does it with her actions. Could it be possible she's jealous? Maybe, that's it. I remember the conversation we had as we were waiting for the principal at Gus's potential school. I always suspected she loved me as more than just a friend. It was never important for me, but it seems it was for her.

How could people play with other people emotions? How could people think they can chose your destiny, make all the decisions because they want to be able to control you?

Did I do that with Justin? Did I do that with the other people around me? I don't think so. Did Justin do that to me? I don't think so. I think he was always clear about what he wanted. He always expressed his desire for me, and he was always honest with me. I don't think he played with my feelings or with me.

I don't think so. But that didn't erase my feelings of betrayal towards the other people in my life.

## **Chapter 18    A commitment thing**

The next two days Brian and Justin tried to have some 'quality time' together, despite the subject of Gus. Justin tried to speak about it but Brian tried to avoid the conversation. Justin thought it was better not to push him, so he just made sure that Brian knew he was here. He would start talking some day ... he just needed time.

In fact, Brian never did talk about Gus, and he was leaving in the morning. They spent the last night making love. Justin thought it was like the last time when he had left Pittsburgh, intimate, sensual, loving. So much loving, that it hurt. And Brian felt the same way.

\* \* \* \*

Brian couldn't believe that he had just spent 14 days with Justin, without playing the asshole card, without going out, getting drunk, and fucking tricks.

No, they spent the last 14 days together, fucking, moving Justin's things into his new loft, making love, working on some accounts, fucking, spending time together, being fucked by Justin, going to the theater, Justin making love to him, Justin gaining weight. They went to the doctor's appointment; the doctor was satisfied with everything, saying that Justin had gained four and half pounds. It wasn't the six Brian had expected, but at least he had gained some weight. The resistant flu symptoms were still here, and Justin still had some pills to take, a light background treatment.

\* \* \* \*

During the time they spent together, Justin finally told Brian about his panic attacks one night after they made love. Brian made him promise to call the next time one occurred. If Justin was struggling with one, he should send a message on Brian's cell saying "911 breathe" and Brian would call him back, even if it was in the middle of the night. "No more chemicals which make you sicker than you already are," said Brian and Justin told him, "I promise."

Brian even took Justin to the next three appointments, and asked for a copy of the test results. Justin laughed and played the outraged twink card, and at the end, they were fucking on the rug in the living room.

\* \* \* \*

It was nearly two in the morning, and Brian had to leave in two hours, his flight was in four hours. He was lying in the bed, not sleeping, but thinking, and looking down at the blond head resting on his chest.

They had had some hot, passionate sex and Justin was sleeping deeply. Brian ran his hand one more time over Justin's back, and slowly got out of the bed, trying not to wake him. He got dressed, went downstairs, pulled out a pad of paper and some envelopes from his briefcase, and sat on the dining room table. .

He began to write. Nearly thirty minutes later, he put the letter in an envelope, sealed it, and put it in his briefcase.

He took another piece of paper, and began to write again.

To Justin Taylor from Brian Kinney.

Before you left in April, I asked you to marry me, first you said no, telling me it was out of character for me. A few days later, I took you to a mansion I bought, to prove to you that I was serious - you said yes.

We had planned a wedding and we canceled it, because you said I was changing too fast, and you wanted to move to New York... I say bullshit, I still want to marry you... I still want to take the chance on love, and like I said, I never meant anything more, but it won't be in the conventional way.

If you agree that we will never be married, or committed in front of everybody, with a dinner, a celebration and a priest or a minister, you will find everything you need in this envelope. Read every page take your time, this time, it's your call.

You will find the phone number of my lawyer on all the papers. Call him if you want something done or changed.

The papers in order to be signed are:

My life insurance - I have made you the primary beneficiary with Gus as the secondary. If something happens to you, the money goes into a trust for Gus with Ted having control over the money. And if something happens to Ted, the lawyer will step in.

The mortgage to the loft and the house.

Full partnership in Kinnetik, a little bird told me I had some special help these last few months... (You talked in your sleep, I snooped – end of story)

Half of Babylon.

Your name on my accounts, (another bird told me that you have already done that on your own accounts, with my name. Am I right?)

All the papers we need to be committed, same rights on everything, money, houses, kids, and parental rights.

Like I said before, I chose, now, it's your call.

For once, I'm onto you.

Forever

Brian

Like the first letter, he put it in an envelope, and sealed it, leaving it on the table.

He grabbed another piece of paper and wrote a little note:

*Have an early meeting in Pittsburgh, couldn't move it. I will be back tonight.*

He put it an obvious place on the counter in the kitchen, and then moved to the windows.

After a few minutes, he turned around and put the pad of paper and pencil back in his briefcase, and grabbed the little wooden box hidden there.

He looked up at the bedroom, he still couldn't decide if it was the right time for 'all' of that.

He hesitated and thought that the best moment might be Christmas, or Justin's birthday. He knew for sure that Justin was still in recovery from his depression and some of his insecurities, and that this could do more damage than help, but he also was sure that the gesture would bring some peace to Justin's mind. So he decided it couldn't wait, they had waited long enough, it was time for them. He walked to the desk, took the envelope and wrote on the front:

We swear by peace and love to stand,

Heart to heart and hand to hand.

Hark, O Spirit, and hear us now,

Confirming this our Sacred Vow.

He laughed to himself - it was an old Irish wedding vow he had learned long ago, from his time in the church, and that he had planned to say at their initial wedding day. It was probably the only thing he remembered from church, but for once he was glad to remember it.

He walked upstairs, looked at the bed. Justin was lying on his stomach, Brian walked toward him. Once there he opened the little box, and took the rings out. He hesitated just one second, to be sure this was right, and be sure it was really what he wanted. He put the smaller ring on Justin's left hand and the other on his own left hand. 'A promise for tomorrow' he thought to himself.

He remembered with a pang in his heart the first time he saw a ring on Justin's finger, it was a gift from that fucking fiddler. He also remembered that the ring had been on his right hand, not his left. He smiled, Ian gave him pretty words and a ring; Brian gave him no pretty words, just a promise. And like Justin always said, he never broke a promise.

He looked at the clock, thirty minutes and the car would be there. He stood up again. He hadn't told Justin that he was leaving in the middle of the night, but he had a meeting at Kinnetik at 9 am, and he couldn't move it. He leaned over Justin, and kissed him one more time whispering, "I love you" and rubbing his nose in Justin's hair.

Everything he needed for today was packed in his suit carrier, he didn't need anything else. He just took the suit carrier, his laptop, his wallet, and his cell. He left the envelope on the dining room table, not really evident but just there. Justin would find it tomorrow.

He added some words on the note on the counter:

*"Sunshine – Won't be available, will call you as soon as possible. Brian."*

Brian looked one more time at Justin's new apartment and headed downstairs, to the car where the chauffeur was patiently waiting to take his luggage.

"Did you have a nice vacation, Sir?"

"Yes. Thanks. Is my flight on time?"

"Yes"

"Ok, let's go then," said Brian, turning his head one last time towards the building, and with a heavy sight, got in the car and headed to the airport.

\* \* \* \*

It was 8:00 am, Justin awoke with the strange feeling that he was alone. "Brian?" he called with no answer. He stepped out the bed, wrapping the sheets around him, and padded to the bathroom. Their things were still there, he looked in the closet, and the clothes were there too. He headed downstairs, "Fuck", and he headed back to the bedroom, "Double-fuck". He noticed that just the suit carrier and the laptop were missing. He sat on the bed and passed his left hand over his face. That's when he noticed the ring.

"Holy shit."

He looked at his hand twice before having any rational thought.

\* \* \* \*

## **Justin's POV**

Okay, the last time he had checked this ring was in a wooden box in Pittsburgh, probably in a drawer. What the fuck!

He took the ring from his finger and looked at it closely. He remembered the day Brian had brought them home. Simple platinum rings. "So I'm sure you won't be allergic," Brian had told me. "I didn't engrave them, thought the day of the wedding would be fine, what do you think?" He told him that he was right - the day of the wedding would be great. But now that he was looking closely at the ring he noticed that Brian didn't engrave the date of their non-wedding, the ring bore the

inscription, 'Forever – BK'.

He took his cell and dialed Brian's number. Fuck - straight to voice mail. "Yeah, it's me, call me back please," he managed to say.

He had to process everything.

He couldn't believe it.

Last night, they had made passionate love and this morning he had a ring on his left hand - the one where a wedding ring usually goes.

Fuck!

Was he so wasted last night? No, he remembered that until the wine with dinner they didn't take anything. In fact during all those days Brian was there, they hadn't taken anything at all. No pills, no poppers, nothing, it was like they didn't need them.

When did he get this ring? Obviously it was between last evening and this morning. Fuck, when did it happen?

Justin managed to put on some clothes and headed downstairs to see the awaiting coffee and breakfast. As he moved toward the dining room table, he saw the note and the big envelope.

He thought his heart had stopped beating. He sensed a cold shiver running along his spin, and his breath began to hitch, He instantly recognized the signs: a panic attack.

He tried to calm down and read the note.

Have an early meeting in Pittsburgh, couldn't move it will be back tonight.

Sunshine – Won't be available, will call you as soon as possible. Brian."

Perfect! He checked the clock, it was 8:45, maybe he wasn't in the meeting yet. Justin tried to self controlled his breathing but nothing happened, after five minutes of struggling, he reached for his cell and sent the message they agreed on.

\* \* \* \*

The phone rang and less than 10 seconds later, Brian was on the phone.

"Justin? It's me, ok, take a deep breath, hold on, let's go - five, four, three, two, one... still there?" asked Brian.

"Yeah," managed Justin weakly.

After two more rounds, Justin was able to breathe alone.

"Better now?" asked Brian.

"Yeah."

"Want to tell me what happened?" asked Brian casually. In fact, he already knew what had triggered this panic attack, but he wasn't sure Justin could speak about it.

"Why now?" was Justin's only question.

"Why not?" answered Brian casually.

"I thought this wasn't for us, that we were waiting for a better time or until we could do it together?" Justin told him.

"Did you look in the envelope?" asked Brian.

"No."

"Then do that and we'll talk tonight about everything," said Brian softly.

"Yeah, okay," silence. "Brian?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

Smiling, Brian answered, "Later"

"Later."

And both hang up.

\* \* \* \*

Justin ate his breakfast and finished putting away the contents of the few boxes left. Then he arranged his paint corner, and went out running. By the time he got back and settled it was mid afternoon. He opened the envelope and read the letter, twice, before beginning to cry. Once he regained control of his emotions, it was almost 3:00 p.m.

He decided to sign every paper, life insurance, mortgage on the loft and the house, the partnership at Kinnetik, when he saw that one he cursed himself, 'why do I talk in my sleep?'

He also signed the paper to own half of Babylon. On those papers was a note, *because you helped me rebuild it, when you came back from LA*

He reluctantly signed the paper to have access to Brian's accounts. Then he called his own bank and asked if it was too late for them to write up the same papers and send them to Brian by fax today at Kinnetik, with a note telling Brian *won't return your papers until you have signed mine..* Half an hour later, the bank called back, the fax was on its way.

He also made his own living will. That he would bring to a lawyer later.

Then he looked at the last group of papers - the commitment papers.

Right then his cell phone rang, he checked the called ID, Mom, and he let the call go to voice mail.

He began to read the papers, and signed each page near Brian's initials. The phone rang again, Brian. He picked it up.

"Hey."

"Hey"

"Signing the papers, or finished already?" asked Brian.

"Signing the papers and you?"

"I just filled out your papers," said Brian.

"You signed my papers?" asked Justin.

"Yep, and you signed mine," stated Brian.

"Yep."

"What it is Justin? You're not happy?" asked Brian in a lower tone.

"I thought that we were doing this together, but you signed them first, and then me ... it's ... it's just a little, it's not really what I, well, I thought that maybe ..."



And just then the door opened and Brian stood in the doorway, an envelope in his hand. "We could do that together just the two of us, without anyone else?"

Justin looked from his phone to Brian puzzled, before launching himself toward him, "You came!"

"Not at the moment," smirked Brian with his tongue in cheek smile. And then seriously, "You really thought I would leave you alone? Today? I had this stupid meeting, that I couldn't cancel, knowing how your little mind works, I played the card - 'I'm going somewhere safe where I can breakdown, without explanations and where I feel safe.' Did I make a mistake?" he lowered Justin to the floor and closed the door.

"You really know me," answered Justin.

"No, Justin, I love you," said Brian looking at the floor, not really comfortable with the words.

Justin lifted his hand until he could caress Brian's cheek, "Help me finish the paperwork?" he asked.

"Yeah, I put my initials on every page, but they aren't signed. Not for the moment," Brian stopped and walked to the couch. Justin had spread all the papers on the coffee table and continued without looking up, "I thought, I thought that maybe, that we, that ..."

"That we could do that together?" finished Justin for him.

"Yeah, see I brought my pen and food, what do you think?"

"It's a great idea, dinner first, then paper?" asked Justin.

"Ok. I'll give you a hand with the table," proposed Brian.

Until Brian stood in front of him, Justin hadn't been aware that it was dinnertime, and that he had been dealing with the papers for most of the afternoon.

Justin stood up and helped Brian in the kitchen, setting the corner of the counter where they could eat. A comfortable silence settled between them. Once they had finished eating, Brian walked upstairs into the bedroom, changed into something more comfortable, came back to the living room, and sat on the couch. Justin resumed his previous place, sitting in front of the coffee table. Once he was settled, Brian moved from the couch behind Justin, and wrapped his legs over Justin's. They looked at the papers they were ready to sign together.

Justin was prepared to sign the commitment paper, when Brian stopped him.

"Don't you have anything to say, before signing this one?" asked Brian "because I do."

Justin looked at Brian puzzled, "You won't use the word 'cuddle' again, will you?"

"That word must have really traumatized you," chuckled Brian, Justin only nodded, "No, I just thought that I could be honest with you, and explain, why I did this today." He inhaled deeply, "I want to say that I'm not doing this because I feel obligated, but because I want to do it... I don't and I won't ask you to sign this to make me happy, I hope you are doing this because you want it too, deep down here," he placed his hand on Justin's heart, "and here" and then moved it to his head. "I don't want you to feel obligated to do this, because I choose to do it now. I want to be sure that you are doing this because you want to, and not to please me or anyone else. Like I said, there will be no dinner, no announcement, no party, and no congratulations. It's between us, just us, you, and me. Even if I don't give a fuck about the others about what they think, what they want, the less they know, the better. Don't you agree?"

Justin nodded.

"I don't want them to blame you or me if something happened that is not planned in a perfect 'marriage.' That's why I don't want them to know."

"That's why, I bought this," added Justin handing him a long wrapped gift. "Open it, it won't bite."

Brian unwrapped a long green jewelry box, and furrowed his brow. He opened it and looked inside,

there were two necklaces.

"I couldn't afford the platinum ones, so I choose the pure white gold, one for you and one for me," said Justin rapidly.

Brian looked a little uneasy, "You don't want to ... the ring ... I mean, you don't want it?" a flicker of pain appeared in Brian's eyes.

"Of course I want it, but I don't want to ruin the ring while I'm painting, and so I'll always have it with me, no matter what. No need to take it off when I'm meeting my Mom, or the gang, no need to lie, if someone sees them on our fingers. So we don't need to make false excuses. And like you said before, it will be on the right place," placing Brian's hand on his heart. "In our hearts, and just between us, that is what you wanted, right?"

Brian sighed in relief. For a minute, he thought he had made a mistake with this partner-commitment thing. He tightened his embrace from behind Justin, and Justin realized Brian had been scared! He turned a little so that he could see Brian, and looked into Brian's eyes.

"Brian? You didn't really think I would say no, did you?"

"I..." Brian sighed deeply, "I thought that maybe, you know, it wasn't the right time. That because we cancelled it once, you thought it was not real," he said in one rapid breath.

"With you it's always the right time," Justin smiled back. "Does the necklace fit your standards, Mr. Kinney?"

Brian smiled and watched Justin signing the last piece of paper, and said, "Yes, it fits my standards."

"Well seems it's official now, we belong to each other." Justin teased back.

"No, not quite yet, give me your ring," said Brian. Justin took his ring off and gave it to Brian, and Brian did the same and gave it to Justin.

Justin moved from his position and sat so he could face Brian. Brian reached toward him and pulled him onto his lap.

He took Justin's left hand and slid the ring on the third finger. "Forever," he whispered.

Justin waited a few seconds and did the same with Brian's ring whispering, "Forever," also.

They looked at each other and Brian said with a strangled voice, "I love you." Justin smiled back, "I love you Mr. Kinney." He leaned towards Brian and brushed his lips against his, and gave him a slight kiss, entwining their hands. Brian moved one hand behind Justin's neck, pulled him even closer, and deepened the kiss.

They moved together, and they undressed each other slowly. Once naked, Brian reached for the little green box, and grabbed both necklaces.

"No difference?" he asked.

"No difference."

"Come here," but Justin stopped him, took the second necklace, and matched Brian's movement. They knotted both necklaces together, and sealed their union with a deep kiss.

They moved from the rug to the couch and they made love.

The next morning, Justin woke up first and needed a few minutes to recall what had happened the night before. He tried to move, but Brian tightened his grip around his waist, "Where are you going?"

"To make some coffee."

"Later."

Justin smiled and returned to his place in Brian's arms. The night before, Brian had told him that he had to be back in the Pitts the following morning, and that he would take the last flight tonight, they would spend the whole day together. They had something to celebrate, an achievement.

Brian moved, wrapping himself around Justin who was on his stomach. He reached towards Justin's left hand and entwined them together. He smiled to himself. The bands were beautiful. He also loved Justin's choice for the necklaces, simple and beautiful, matching the rings.

"Shhh, Brian, I hear your mind," whispered Justin.

"You know, I really think, you're really the best homosexual you could possibly be ..." he whispered to Justin.

"I know, and you too, Brian," Justin whispered back, "So if Mr. Kinney would like to shut up and go back to sleep it would be great ... because, we haven't much time tonight."

"Yeah, but you won't have that now either," replied Brian, trailing sweet kisses along Justin's back.

Brian moved back to Justin's lips, he looked into Justin's eyes, and leaning into his ear whispered, "You know, even if no papers stated that, I love you Justin Taylor-Kinney," the whisper was so low that Justin had to concentrate to hear it.

Taken aback from this admission, Justin smiled, and replied above a whisper "I love you too,"

Brian leaned toward him to kiss him...today, was a good day, for once they were both sure of a few things.

They knew what love was.

They knew what it felt like to be in love.

They knew what it felt like to be loved in return.

They both smiled, they knew that love would always win, even if it is in a twisted way.

Justin resumed his place in Brian's arms, and Brian closed his eyes again.

## **Chapter 19 Hell's name : Pittsburgh**

Brian smiled as he heard Justin laughing at something Daphne said. It had been almost three weeks since Justin and Brian had committed themselves to each other, he still couldn't believe it. He stepped into the kitchen and heard Justin say, "You're a freak." Brian smiled some more.

Daphne had discovered the whole commitment thing by chance the day Brian returned from New York. That evening when she came home, he had walked out of the bathroom with only a towel around his waist. She spotted the necklace immediately, but said nothing. The same evening, she called Justin through the webcam and when he stepped into view, she spotted the same piece of jewelry around his neck.

She didn't say anything, but she sent both of them a web card, with the word "Congratulations" on it. That evening Justin tried to make her promise not to blab it to everyone, and Brian just kissed her on the cheek.

~ October 2005

He had planned to travel to New York this week, but since he had returned to Pittsburgh, it was

hell on earth.

First when he came home, Daphne told him that the building she had lived in for the last three years had been sold to a holding company. They had decided to tear down the whole building in six months and she had to find another place to live.

During a web cam conversation with Justin, he told her she could stay in his part of the loft that she already had already taken as her own, He was sure that Brian wouldn't object to the idea. Brian snorted, but agreed after two heated hours of discussion, and came to the conclusion that it was for the best.

What Brian didn't know, was that this arrangement would cost him a lot more than he planned.

\* \* \* \*

The next day, Michael came by unannounced, and almost popped a blood vessel, when he found out where Brian had spent the last two weeks. And he got even angrier, when he asked Brian to go to Babylon, and Brian said no.

"You just spent two weeks with him, you could spend some time with your best friend!" yelled Michael.

"Yes I could, but I can't right now because I have a shitload of work to catch up on, so if you don't mind," said Brian.

"I mind plenty, I never see you anymore, you're like a phantom, and when I ask you to go out with the boys you always say, "No." You're my best friend, and I hate to see you in this state."

"Which state?" asked Brian tiredly.

"You're moping, that's what you're doing. You're always moping."

"I don't mope, Michael," replied Brian. "I told you before; I really have a shitload of work to do".

"Yeah well, maybe if you hadn't stayed so long in New York, you could go with us. God he isn't here anymore and he still turns your life upside down," ranted Michael.

"What was that?"

"I said he isn't here and he still rules your life."

"Michael," Brian had this low voice that normally warned people to back off. Michael didn't seem to notice, but Daphne did, and she moved closer to the two friends.

"You know I'm not sure this long distance thing is good for you," said Michael pacing the loft floor in front of the kitchen counter.

"Michael," tried Brian again.

"You know I wouldn't be surprised if he broke up with you. I really have problems imagining you with him. I don't know what you see in him."

Brian was boiling, he tapped his hand on the counter, when he felt a warm hand on his forearm. It was Daphne. She shook her head, walked slowly toward the door, and opened it.

"Michael," Brian tried to catch his friend's attention. "Michael!"

"What?"

"I think it's time to leave," was the only thing Brian said.

"What are you talking about?" asked Michael incredulously.

"I'm talking about you, coming here unannounced, ranting in my home about the man **I** love." Brian sighed deeply, "I thought we fixed everything a while ago. But it seems you can't understand my feelings."

"But ..." began Michael.

"We know, you're his best friend, and you love him so much," Daphne interrupted. "If you really love him so much, why can't you be happy for him, why are you such a freak?" The door was still open and she walked past Brian, "I'm in my little space if you need me, okay?" Brian nodded.

"You know Brian I don't understand what she's doing here. Why is she living here with you? I really have problems understanding you lately. You were gone for two weeks, not once did you call me to tell me where you were, not once did you call me to ask me if I wanted to come with you, what am I to you?"

Brian looked at Michael and ran his hand through his hair. He then stood behind the kitchen counter hand flat on it, as support.

"You're my friend, Michael; you're my friend, nothing more. I don't have to give you my schedule when I'm heading to New York to see Justin; I don't have to give you my schedule when I go see my son, and if you don't understand that I can't help you. I'm too tired today to fight with you, so just go, I'll see you another day, and please, don't come over again without calling first."

Brian turned around, opened the fridge door, grabbed a water bottle, and walked around the counter toward his bedroom.

"You're just going to leave me here?" asked Michael.

"Yeah, I'll leave you there. Now, go home to your hubby and your kid, so that I can get on with my work, and spend some time online with Justin." He stopped on the stairs, turned around and said, "Oh, by the way, give me the key,"

Michael looked shocked.

"The key you made without my approval, the day I forgot mine at your store. Do you really think I'm that stupid? I know you, and if I don't get the key, I'll change the lock again." He extended his hand, "So give me the key!"

Michael looked hurt, but he plunged his hand in his jeans pocket and gave the key back to Brian.

"I didn't want ..." but he was cut off by Brian's hand. "Stop right here, I don't want your excuses, so just go." He grabbed Michael by the shoulder and moved him toward the still opened loft door.

Michael walked through the door and before he could turn around to say something else, the door was closed and locked.

On the other side, Brian was leaning his head on the door. It had been a bad day.

\* \* \* \*

Earlier in the day, they had practically lost a \$25,000,000 account, because his art department fucked up a whole layout, but the worst thing about the day was that he hadn't been able to reach Justin on his cell.

Finally about 3:00 pm Justin called back, and with the fusion between them, they fixed up the pre-layout for the account. But it wasn't without pain. At 6:00 that day, Brian headed home with a headache and Justin had an aching hand. Two hours later after the Michael fiasco, Justin was on line with his splint on his hand. Brian frowned, it was his fault, but Justin assured him he was fine.

That night neither Brian, nor Justin slept well. Brian thought he must be in hell, and hell had a name today: Pittsburgh.

\* \* \* \*

Daphne woke first the next morning, and fixed Brian's breakfast, just as Mrs. Stevenson the owner of the third floor apartment knocked on the door. Daphne opened the door, saw the older woman, and smiled at her, just as Brian stepped into the kitchen.

"Son, you're the person I need," she said bypassing Daphne and walking straight to Brian.

"Me?"

"Yes, a while ago you wanted my apartment on the third floor. If you're still interested, it's yours," she said matter of factly.

Brian looked at her like she was crazy, but in fact she was dead serious. When he had brought Justin home just after the bashing, he was looking for more space, to give Justin and him some room of their own. But after the Ethan debacle, he forgot the idea.

Now Mrs. Stevenson was in his kitchen, treating him like a son. She told him, that she had lost her husband years ago, and that her children moved to California two months ago. She couldn't stay alone in such a big apartment. Brian didn't know why, but he asked if she had somewhere to go. She told him that she would probably go to an assisted living facility.

Brian smiled. He decided that the mansion could use a motherly touch. He didn't know why, but he loved the older woman. Maybe because Justin had made sure, the first week after he was gone, that she had checked on Brian every now and then. She was like the mother he never had, sort of like Debbie, but more discreet.

He told Mrs. Stevenson he needed a few days to think about the offer. During that time, he checked with Ted, Jennifer, and a construction company to see about making both lofts into one big apartment. After getting all the facts, he bought it; it wasn't a big deal - he had the money. The mortgage from the loft was paid a long time ago, with the bonus he earned from the Poole Drink ad campaign. And the profit Kinnetik had made last year had allowed him to pay off half of Britin's mortgage. The 'vette had been paid with the commission he got from the GLC for the Carnival, so the only things he was still paying off was his new car and the furniture for the house.

After 10 days of reflection and a visit to Britin, Mrs. Stevenson accepted Brian's offer and moved into the guesthouse. The little house was furnished and Mrs. Stevenson was happy - she had sold her apartment, and now she had a new job. Brian was happy because he didn't need to search for someone to take care of Britin.

\* \* \* \*

Right after Justin had left, Brian had planed to sell the house in West Virginia, but after struggling for two weeks with all the memories, and the promises they had made to each other in that house, he finally kept it and began to decorate it even before considering Babylon reconstruction.

Before he left, Justin had begun to put some ideas together for the house. All the files were still at the loft, and for once Brian was glad that he had forgotten his sketchpad and file ideas, so he could work without having to ask him what he wanted in this or that room. Brian hoped he could finish at least half of the house for Christmas.

\* \* \* \*

The third floor apartment was in very good shape and Brian didn't need to make a lot of modifications. It had almost the same living area as Brian's loft. The main area was on the left of the door, first the living and dining room and on the left wall, the kitchen. The bathroom was in the same place as Brian's, but instead of a huge shower, it had all the essentials, a tub, a shower, a toilet, and a sink. The bedroom was pretty standard. On the right of the door was a study; then a bedroom, which was connected to the first one, then a big room, like a playroom for kids.

The Stevensons had managed to keep the great lighting, by keeping the upper windows in view. On the ceiling of the room along the right side, they had put in a mezzanine, which housed the library. It was perfect, no unused space.

Daphne and Brian decided to create a connection between the third floor and the loft. They opted for a spiral staircase.

\* \* \* \*

During that time, he also learned that Daphne had had this baby idea on her mind, since Jenny Rebecca's birth, but she decided that it wasn't a good time to ask Justin. She told Brian she thought about it again, the night they were babysitting Jenny at the Novotny-Bruckner's. She tried to speak with Justin, but he wasn't ready yet, or rather he told her that Brian wasn't ready to be a full time parent, because at the same time Brian was dealing with syphilis.

Now looking back, Brian smiled, Justin was right at that time he wasn't ready, now it was different. They were committed in more ways than one.

Daphne told him she wanted to finish at least 2 years of college, have the baby, and continue her studies. She also told Brian that she didn't want to be a full time parent. Brian smiled, he remembered the time he said the same thing to Lindsay. But Daphne insisted. He told her they would see if it was possible for a child to have three real, legal parents. He didn't want her to be in the situation of having a child and not being able to spend time with him.

\* \* \* \*

By now it was nearly mid November and between running Kinnetik and Babylon, traveling to New York every other weekend and traveling to Toronto on the other weekends, Brian was exhausted. He needed some time alone. He told Justin, and they agreed to make an exception and spend this weekend apart.

They also talked about Thanksgiving. Brian knew that Justin would probably try to come home. That's why he made some minor adjustments in the loft. The first one was to add some doors at the bedroom entrances. Then the planned staircase was delivered. Before they could fix it they needed to create a hole in the fourth floor, and that would happen during Christmas, because he had planned to spend Christmas at Britin. That would be a surprise for Justin. He got a call from Lindsay a few days after he came back from New York, saying that they would be in Pittsburgh for Christmas for two weeks, she had spoken with Melanie, and they had decided that he could have Gus during Christmas for at least two days. So Brian decided to spend those days at Britin.

Brian couldn't believe it was nearly Thanksgiving time.

## **Chapter 20    New York**

I saw him stepping into the living room and thought one more time 'I'm glad he chose me finally'. When I opened the door to see him standing on the other side the day we signed the commitment papers, I thought I was dreaming. But no, he was really there. Somehow, I always knew he was special in so many ways.

He didn't promise me monogamy or whatever other couples believe they need to prove that they are a couple. No, he only made promises that he knew he could keep - like always telling the truth and that I could rely on him for help. He also promised that he would try to express his feelings a little more.

I must say I'm rather proud of the progress he has made in communicating with me. I'm glad that he had support. Daphne helped him a lot. I remember that she always got me to talk even when I didn't want to, and I'm quite sure she used the same tricks on Brian.

The day after we exchanged the rings and necklaces, he flew back to Pittsburgh. I caught up with all the stuff I had put on hold during the two weeks vacation we took.

First, I called his lawyer. I asked him to draw up my will. I knew that he had been Brian's lawyer for at least the last ten years, so instead of finding someone I didn't know, I called him.

After I answered all his questions, he promised to send me the papers during the week.

Then I had to catch up on the classes I had missed. There weren't too many, but enough for me to put my freelance job on hiatus for three days. I was glad that the AI NYC approved my application after everything that had gone on at PIFA. But after the success of Rage and the fact that I got a

recommendation from Brett Keller, PIFA had agreed to let me try again. I got Brett's letter two days before the commitment dinner. I had wanted to tell Brian, but he convinced me to take the New York opportunity.

Just before I left, I went to PIFA and asked if it was possible to transfer my class credits to AI NYC, because I had finally decided to finish my studies and get my degree. When I dropped out of school the last time, I was working on my final project, now I had to spend a semester at AI NYC, to complete my degree.

I'm glad I did that because I'm not only in the top of my class, but I also took some more classes. I didn't tell Brian, because this was going to be my Christmas surprise to him. I promised after *Rage, The Film*, was shut down to do something with my life, and I am

That same week, I also signed the official paperwork to become an employee of Kinnetik as Justin Taylor and not as Julian T. Story. I didn't need to hide anymore. I'm glad that he didn't fight with me about this one. I know that payback will be a bitch, but for the moment, he didn't use that card.

After I had caught up with all the classes and work, I finally got to read the e-mails Michael and Lindsay had sent me.

Michael had sent me no less than 56 e-mails, half of them asking me where Brian was, and the other to tell me that he didn't see the purpose for Volume II, Issue 1 of *Rage*.

He thought that because Brian and I canceled the wedding, that we weren't together anymore, and that it was time to stop *Rage*. Finally in the last few e-mails, he asked if it was possible for me to draw something around the fact that JT and *Rage* had broken up. I wrote him back and told him that's not what happened, but he still thinks it's best to do it this way. So I'll wait until he sends me a plot line and will draw something from that.

Then I have to answer the Lindsay and Mel inquisition about Brian and me. It's like everyone is having a hard time believing that we were still together. God we worked hard on this. I tried to keep him connected to me. I tried to keep him speaking about his feelings. He still thought he wasn't worth it.

If only I could rewind time and be there for him earlier. Yeah well, you can't change the past, I can only try to make the future better, or I hope so. I really think we are finally moving together.

It is mid November, Thanksgiving is near, but I can't go to Pittsburgh. I have a major appointment with my new agent the day after thanksgiving, Miranda, and the gallery in Manhattan. Miranda is interested in my art, not just in making money.

Brian loved her, because, like him, she gets straight to the point without any bullshit. She says what she thinks and thinks what she says. Sadly, she couldn't manage to move the appointment to another day. I agreed to stay in New York and called Debbie and my mom to cancel Thanksgiving dinner.

My mom agreed immediately, but Debbie wasn't so easy; she told me that it wasn't acceptable, that I had to be home. I told her that home was New York for the moment until I decided to move back to Pittsburgh. She tried to convince me I was wrong, but I stood my ground, and told her that I really couldn't come back right now. We argued for awhile and she hung up.

Two days later, I called back as I rode from AI NYC to home, and got Carl. He told me she was still upset and that I should let her cool off. That same day, Brian called me in a hurry for a new layout. I had worked the whole day on a painting, my hand was aching, but I helped him anyway. At 8pm, I was on line with Brian wearing the splint on my right hand and Brian looked even more drained than he sounded on the phone. I learned that Michael had been a pain in the ass. As I heard that, and despite the fact that we agreed to tell each other everything, I didn't tell him what Debbie said when I told her that I wouldn't be able to come back. I think that for the moment, he had enough to worry about; he didn't need any more crap.

In fact, we agreed to not see each other for a week. It was Sunday afternoon and he had just



woken up. He was stepping down from the bedroom when I noticed that he had changed something on the steps. I couldn't say what, but there was something different.

I had been up since 10 working on a canvas for school, and making some comments on a layout he had sent me on Friday evening on my handheld recorder, when I heard "Hey" coming from the computer.

"Hey, you're up," I tried to seem a little cheery, even though I was concerned.

"Yeah I slept in. God I'm exhausted," he said.

That comment went straight to my gut. I put the brush down and walked toward the computer.

"You're not sick are you? You would tell me if you were."

Seeing the concern on my face he smiled at me, and shook his head, "I'm not sick, I promise, I have just a lot to deal with and this fucked up weekend doesn't help."

"It's not a fucked up weekend, it's a cosy stay at home weekend, and we agreed. It's not like we can't see each other, see ..." I moved toward the camera and looked at him, cocking my head, to prove that I was right.

He moved too, to face me, "Yeah I see."

I asked him what he had changed in the bedroom. He looked up, rolled his lips into his mouth, in that sweet little smile, and moved toward the steps to show me the new doors he had put in there, on both sides.

I was stunned because I never thought he would make such a major change! Doors in Brian's loft were unheard of. I knew that the loft represented freedom for him, the freedom he couldn't have during his childhood. I must say though that the doors were rather beautiful, with chiselled glass.

He returned to the computer "I thought that with Daphne around, if you decided to come here unannounced, that I wouldn't have to put her on the street, that we could have some privacy."

"They're really nice," I told him.

"Yeah, I thought something simple and neat would be great. I chose them from the list you made a while ago, you remember?"

"Yeah I remember, thanks," I replied. He smiled slightly while he shook his head, like he always did, when someone discovered had had done something nice for someone else.

It was getting late and I knew for sure that he had some work to do, so I told him that I was going back to working on the canvas, and on his layout. In case he need me, I would be available.

I can't believe that next week is Thanksgiving.

## **Chapter 21    Toronto**

Lindsay's POV

It's been six months, since we decided to move to Toronto; it was after the bombing at Babylon. We had told everyone, that it was for the security - I'm not sure anymore.

Since we moved here, Melanie and I have fought more often - about Brian visiting Gus, about finding a better job, about the bills, about just about everything.

The worst thing is that Gus has turned into a total brat. He punched a little girl at school and now he's been suspended for ten days. The school social worker suggested well, really, forced us to see a psychologist. She told us that if Gus didn't go see a psychologist, he won't be able to return to school. I tried to explain that a lot of things have changed in Gus's life recently; she said that was

even more reason to get Gus some help.

When I asked Gus why he punched the girl, he told me she had said something bad about his father. He said that since his father was in Pittsburgh and couldn't defend himself he defended himself. He also said he hated being here, that he left his daddy and Justin, and all his friends at home. I tried to explain that home was now here, but he only shook his little head, telling me over and over that home is where Daddy is. I can't even tell Mel what Gus said, because she won't listen to me. She said if Gus was misbehaving it my fault, because I spoiled him, and let Brian spoil him as well. I tried to tell her that he didn't spoil Gus. Brian came every two weeks just to spend time with him. He didn't even bring a toy or anything with him.

The week he couldn't come, Gus was really upset. He pushed us to the limit. So much so that Mel lost patience and spanked him. I couldn't believe what she had done.

That day, Brian called to ask if he could have Gus for a little while. I don't remember what I told him, I just know that I broke the promise I had made him before we left, that he could see his son whenever he wanted. I remember that he told me he was with Justin. Justin, that's why he couldn't come, he had chosen Justin over his own son.

That night Mel and I had a really bad argument. In fact, she told me that one of the reasons she moved us here was to separate me from Brian.

I told her that Brian and I would never be together. Inwardly, I had always hoped that one day, we would end up a couple, raising our son, but it wasn't in Brian's vision. Brian had made that clear to me.

I must admit that I liked his 'no regrets, no apologies, fuck whoever you want' policy because I felt that I was his rock, the one person he could lean on, and then came Justin. Justin stole Brian's heart, nobody saw it coming until Brian sent us that piece of paper, saying 'Commitment', and I knew, I knew that I had to do something.

I never thought I would be jealous over someone that I couldn't have. Deep down, I was jealous that Justin had a part of Brian that I couldn't have. I defended their relationship in front of the others, but secretly I always thought they wouldn't last, that they would break up. And then came the announcement. I thought it was a joke, a real joke, but then I saw the look in Brian's eyes, and I knew that I was wrong. Brian truly loved Justin.

I decided to speak to Justin, and tell him he should take this opportunity and go to New York; he told me that his opportunity was Brian. So I took another way to separate them: I told Brian about Justin's opportunities in New York. I knew what he would do - drive him away, so that he could live his passion, even if Brian would suffer.

I never looked at them as a couple, but tonight I do. My last argument with Mel made me think about what we had done or not down to them.

I must admit that we had been rather selfish. We took everything, and never asked them if it was okay or if they needed anything in return.

I was sitting at the kitchen table with Brian's lawyer's papers in front of me. He didn't ask for custody, he just listed all the money he had given us since Gus's birth, and I must say that I was rather shocked. I hadn't realized that I had asked him for that much.

Wait think about that again Lindsay. He signed the life insurance, only because he interrupted Gus's bris, then he helped me a month after Gus's birth, when I asked him for money. Even during his job problems with Kip Thomas, he gave me money. Without saying anything, he set up trust funds for Gus and JR, even if he isn't her father. He told me since they're siblings, they should have the same things. He paid for the lawyer when Mel and I broke up and he paid for our move. He gave and still gives us so much money, that I can't count.

I really had no right to turn him down when he asked for his son, but it had been a really bad day. And after what Mel had done that day to Gus, I wasn't able to focus on anything except the problems we were having.

Later, as we talked about his request, Mel and I decided that maybe it would be better to let Gus

see his father during Christmas break for a week. Maybe it would prove to Brian that he wasn't meant to be a full time dad, and that he should visit less often. On the other hand, I also hoped that Gus would stop asking for him.

And now it's a week before Thanksgiving and we got an invitation from Debbie which we couldn't turn down. It won't be a problem, because Brian sent us 4 first-class plane tickets for Mel, Gus, JR and I, something more to add to the list he'd done for us.

\* \* \* \*

Mel's POV.

I thought that maybe being here without our extended family would be great; not that I have anything against them, I only have something against one person: Brian Kinney.

I don't think we'll ever get along; we're too similar, too fucking similar. I never understood why Lindsey asked him to father Gus. We could have had anyone, but no, it had to be Brian 'fucking' Kinney. I remember how she managed to get him to sign the papers.

Bitch.

I knew from the beginning that under her WASP exterior was a real bitch. I always thought I was the tough one in this relationship, yeah, think again Melanie.

I'm just the one who deals with everything she can't.

I'm sitting on the stairs leading into our little rental house in Toronto, thinking about how I'm going to tell her (and everyone else) that I'm sick, that JR's birth was a gift, and that I have developed a fucking fibroid tumor in my uterus.

Right now I have pills to take to stop the development of the fibroid. I hope they will help, I'm really too young to die.

I need to contemplate surgery at some point, because the pills won't work forever. They won't cure me; they just will stop the tumor from growing temporarily.

\* \* \* \*

It's the week before Thanksgiving, I'm sitting at the dinner table, Brian's papers spread before me. Lindsay had hers too. The papers are from Brian's lawyer modifying the person in charge of Gus's trust fund, originally it was Lindsay and me, now, it's Brian, then Justin, then the lawyer.

And then there was a list with all the money he had given us since Gus was born.

The \$1,000,000 life insurance policy and nearly \$300,000 in checks accepted by Lindsay, for either Gus or the house, even her fucking lawyer when we decided to break up and were fighting about the kids. Then the money he gave us for Gus.

He also paid for our wedding from the first ribbon to the last flower, nearly \$15,000. I can't imagine how much money he has given us, and how many bills he has paid for us, and he still does - I saw that today in Lindsay's account. I told her that she was totally nuts, she told me that without his money we couldn't survive.

Even if I didn't appreciate Brian, she had no right to accept his money. He comes up to see Gus every two week, and he spends all his time with him. I try to avoid him most of the time, but one Sunday morning he came to the house about 7:30 and brought breakfast for everyone.

Lindsay is teaching art in a private art school. She makes a decent income, but we are a little short every month, and without Brian's money we would certainly be in debt every month.

I hate that man more than I thought possible, because he has everything - love, money, arrogance, style, everything, even his son's love.

And yet, he's here every two weeks, and his son asks for him every fucking day. And every day he

asks if he can call his dad, and every day Gus calls him.

The only thing left like I told Lindsay, is to let Brian see Gus for a week during Christmas break. It won't be difficult -Brian sent us tickets for both Thanksgiving and also Christmas.

God right now, I hate him.

## **Chapter 22    Thanksgiving Time**

Thanksgiving 2005

Thanksgiving came but Justin wasn't able to make it to Pittsburgh. He was too busy preparing his next show with Miranda, the job at Kinnetik and finishing his studies.

He called Deb to wish her a Happy Thanksgiving knowing she had forgiven him. He also sent an email to Brian telling him that he moved his free time around Christmas and New Year so they could maybe have some time together then.

When he got the email, Brian smiled and went about canceling dinner at Deb's. Of course Deb was not one for being informed of cancellations. She made it quite clear to Brian under no circumstances was he to miss Thanksgiving dinner as the girls would be coming down from Toronto with the kids. She reminded him that he should be with his family especially for this occasion and most differently because of Gus. Brian's response was simply to tell her that he will indeed be with his family or at least a big part of it, but not in the way she expected. Brian knew for sure Deb was pissed with him as she didn't seem to listen to any word he spoke, he seriously didn't give a shit. He knew that the few small days he would get with Justin were worth all the trouble he was bound to encounter.

Meanwhile, Jennifer called him and asked if he wanted to spend Thanksgiving with her. He declined but asked her if she wanted to go to New York with him. She said yes.

He called Lindsay and asked once more if he could have Gus a few days during Thanksgiving. She told him she had a better solution - 'what about the whole Christmas holiday'. Brian knew that his lawyer's letter had arrived when he heard her proposition, and smiled. He would have Gus for Christmas.

Brian then called Justin after some small chatter were exchanged he asked Justin what his projects were for Thanksgiving. Justin's answer was easy he wanted to sleep. Brian immediately told him to wait for him and that he had a surprise in store.

\* \* \* \*

Everyone at Deb's asked where Brian was.

"He told me 'Sorry Deb, I can't come' ..."

"Something came up," finished Michael and Hunter laughing in unison.

"Yeah, just said he had a lot of work to do. Ted told me, he practically finished everything before he left today!" Deb said pointing her finger towards Ted.

"Well you know maybe he wanted some time alone," said Blake, trying to see the situation for what it was.

"For what? To get his dick sucked instead of sitting here with his family and seeing his son?" asked Debbie angrily.

"It's not like he doesn't see his son," reminded Lindsay.

"Yeah, every two weeks - two full days spent with him. He's at our house more now then when we were living in Pittsburgh," Mel flatly stated.

"You know, I think maybe he's with Justin," suggested Emmett.

"Always the romantic, Emmett," huffed Michael, "don't fool yourself. He saw Justin in October when he came back from his little 'New York expedition,'" Michael quoted with his fingers "and I can say he was pretty beat. He didn't say much to me, but he acted the same way as when Justin was with Ethan. That's why I'm sure that they broke up again." He sighed deeply, "You know, I told him, it wasn't a solution to be in separate cities, and trying this long distance thing."

"Could you tell me how they could break up, when they've been apart since Justin moved to New York?" asked Mel. "You know that Justin never traveled up to Toronto, to see us, or Gus." She brushed some hair from Gus's forehead and continued. "Before we left I told you they wouldn't last long, should have bet less than one month."

An uncomfortable silence took place around the table as Ted looked over at Blake, who then looked in Ben's direction, who moved his eyes over to Emmett, in which Emmett looked knowingly at Ted and broke the icy silence.

"Ted I completely forgot to ..." began Emmett.

"Yeah you're right..." added Ted as he got up from his chair, Blake followed suit with Ted in standing, while stammering his words.. "Yeah, I ... I ...,"

The three men stood up and headed toward the door to grab their coats.

"Hey!" shouted Deb, "Where do you think you're going?"

"Out," stated Ted, pointing toward the door.

"Where do you think you're going, you haven't even touched the appetizer." asked Debbie trying to move to the door, to block their passage. When it opened Drew appeared in the doorway, "Sorry, lost all my manners, hi everyone. You're already leaving?" asked Drew puzzled.

Ted, Blake, and Emmett nodded in unison and pushed Drew with them.

"Anyone interested in coming with us?" shouted Blake as he was leaving.

That's when Ben stood up and followed the others without a word. Leaving a stunned Michael at Debbie's table, thinking that some people really didn't get the fact that Brian was no longer in the market and committed in his way to Justin.

"Ben!" shouted Michael, but Debbie's arguing cut him off.

"What the fuck was that, and when did Drew get back with Emmett why didn't I know about that? Carl, do you know something? And you Michael why is your husband not with us, where did he go? What was that all about?" asked Debbie.

Hunter always the pragmatist said, "Doesn't matter where they went, more for us, can you pass the smashed potatoes? Please?"

The happy family tradition dinner was a little chilly, but Deb was still happy to have her kids.

Mel despite her mixed feelings, continued to curse Brian and Lindsay while dealing with her own feelings, tried to chastise Mel a little, especially since Gus was eavesdropping.

Michael & Carl tried several times to reach Ben, but they both got his voicemail.

After dinner, Michael was busy with his daughter and Gus, and didn't care about what the others were talking about.

\* \* \* \*

Drew took everyone to his place, a simple two-bedroom apartment in the suburbs. Ted was amazed at the timing, and Drew told him 'I was called to the rescue by text message.' Emmett

blushed, and everyone knew he was the little Santa.

As soon as they were out of Debbie's house Drew told them it would be take out for dinner, and that didn't seem to be a problem for anyone at all.

Before stepping into the apartment, Drew stopped in front of Emmett, "Did your date forget the family dinner?"

"No, he forgot me the last three months. Why's that?" answered Emmett.

"I'm 21," whispered Drew into Emmett's ear.

"You're..." asked Emmett. "OH MY GOD, OH MY GOD, you're 21," Emmett beamed with happiness and started to sing to everyone, "He's 21, he's 21."

"If you want, you can stay the night," Drew explained while trying to hold Emmet still and kiss him.

"I can ..."

"Yep."

"Alright, I'll stay," answered Emmett with a smile and a glitter in his eye.

Once that was established, the five friends enjoyed a calm and happy Thanksgiving.

\* \* \* \*

Ben knew that tomorrow would be hell, but he thought 'what the fuck', he preferred staying here and enjoying his friends, than talking about what Brian should or shouldn't have done at Thanksgiving. Since Justin moved to New York, Brian and Ben met every other day at the gym during Ben's lunch break. Since the vigil and Brian's rescue, Ben had changed his opinion about Brian. He couldn't say they were friends, but they were getting to know each other slowly. That's why he hated when Melanie always tried to diminish Brian. He couldn't understand why she was always against him. From what he knew, Brian paid for everything for Gus: clothes, school, toys, everything. He also had paid for the plane tickets and the rental they had tonight. And the girls were staying at Deb's, he simply couldn't understand.

\* \* \* \*

After the impromptu dinner, Ted called Brian to tell him that Drew Boyd was back and Justin picked up the phone, "Hey Ted."

"Hey, I was trying to call Brian," Ted Answered a little surprised.

"Wait he's in the bathroom. How is everyone?" inquired Justin.

"I don't know; we're at Drew's," answered Ted.

"Huh? And who's we?" asked Justin with curiosity.

"Blake, Emmett, Ben, and I. "

"Why is Ben with you? And why are you at Drew's and not at Debbie's," asked Justin.

"Who's that?" inquired Brian stepping out from the bathroom.

Justin mouthed, 'Ted'. Brian moved his hand to get the phone but Justin slightly moved away from his capturing hand. "Ted, give all the information to Brian, bye," Justin quickly said to Ted as Brian took the phone from his ear.

"Theodore, what can I do for you?" asked Brian, with his patented tongue in cheek smile.

"I just wanted to let you know that Drew Boyd is back, and that he's available... you know, for the Brown account, the next ad campaign which said no discrimination."

"Uh-huh, and ..." asked Brian "How do you know that?"

"Because we are staying with him, Blake, Emmett, and Ben, and before you ask, we left Deb's. Too many women and I didn't want to create any problems," continued Ted.

"I see Mel is on the hunt," sighed Brian deeply.

Ted chuckled, "Yeah, you can say that."

"In front of the kids?" asked Brian, knowing all too well what Ted's response would be.

"Yeah..." replied Ted "And you're at... ?"

"I'm in New York, with my sort of mother-in-law, her beau and my sort of sister-in-law and Justin. Is that a problem Theodore?" asked Brian sarcastically, seeing the face of Jennifer and Molly at the 'in-law' comment.

"No, it's good for you - see ya"

"Yeah, sure."

And they hung up.

Before he could say something to the people sitting around the dinner table in New York, Jennifer's cell phone rang. It was Debbie. Brian let Jennifer explain that she wasn't in town, before snatching the phone from her hand. "Hey, it's Brian, yeah, listen, I'm in New York, with Justin and my sort of-almost in-law family, so if you don't mind call tomorrow or the day after. Night night, Debbie." He closed the phone and turned it off. Seeing Brian turning all the cells off, Justin moved toward the home phone to unplug it also. Jennifer laughed at that, Tucker only shook his head.

"Years of practice," was the only thing Brian said before sitting back at the dinner table to enjoy the dinner.

Brian leaned toward Justin and whispered into his ear, "When did I get so domesticated?"

"You aren't," stated Justin.

"Yes I am, look at what we have here," Brian answered gesturing toward the table where everyone is seated.

"You aren't because if you were, they would be sleeping here. If I recall you paid for a hotel room for them so that we could have the loft to ourselves. So I say that means you're still definitely evil."

"No, I'm sweet, and you know that," Brian smiled back.

\* \* \* \*

After dinner, they spent time together in the 'living room' catching up with everything Justin had missed in his mother's life. Brian excused himself after an hour so Justin could spend some time with his family, and headed up to the bedroom to work on some files.

To spend Thanksgiving in New York, Brian had taken Friday off from work and he needed to prepare at least his presentation for next week. The information that Drew Boyd was back and available was good news. They were working on the new Brown athletic ad campaign. Brian thought that he should inform Leo Brown so he e-mailed Leo the news.

\* \* \* \*

Toward 1:00 in the morning, Justin called Brian to come down to the living room as the guests

were just leaving. Jennifer thanked Brian, she really appreciated the time she had spent with her son, and she loved their apartment in New York. Brian said good night and they all thanked him for his hospitality and the wonderful dinner. As planned Jennifer and Tucker would fly back in two days which she would surely contact them through email. . She knew that they would probably leave the phone unplugged until at least Monday. Brian smiled at that, Yes they would probably leave the phone unplugged and he was sorry, because he would probably miss his son's phone call during the weekend, but it was impossible for him to leave Justin alone during Thanksgiving.

When Brian showed up with Justin's mother, sister, and boyfriend Justin had tears in his eyes. He could only say thank you over and over before Brian pulled him in a long kiss that got an "Ewww," from Molly and a good laugh from all the grown-ups.

Justin and Brian went back to the bedroom.

"They're coming back tomorrow evening to take us out for dinner. My mom insisted, I couldn't say no," explained Justin.

"Come here," whispered Brian.

Brian flipped Justin on his back, and began trailing kisses along his jaw.

Brian didn't say anything he just extended his hand to entwine his fingers with Justin's, and pulled him towards him. He worked on Justin's shirt, pants, and underwear with smooth and slow movements. Once Justin was naked, he pushed him back on the bed and kissed him like it was the end of the world. It was one of those breathtaking and earth-shattering kisses that only Brian could do.

Once they came up for air, Justin tried to turn to lie on his stomach, but Brian held him in place on his back as he continued to caress Justin's side, slowly and languorously.

"No fucking tonight, Mr. Kinney?" asked Justin suavely.

"No fucking tonight, Mr. Taylor!" stated Brian, "Tonight, I want it long and slow, like ..."

"... the first time?" finished Justin.

"Yeah, like the first time. But this time, I want to see you," finished Brian with a kiss.

"Why tonight?"

"Why what?" Brian enquired back.

"Why 'no fucking'?" asked Justin, as he shifted his legs to make room for Brian.

"Because... you're asking too many questions, shut up," said Brian, as he kissed Justin while he moved slowly to cover his lover's body. They kissed each other, until their bodies took the lead, as Brian carefully prepared Justin. Once Justin pushed back against Brian's fingers, Brian slowly and carefully slid into him, invading his warm tight channel, claiming him as his own.

Justin opened his eyes wide, it was always the same, when they made love this way, and he couldn't believe the feeling and the sensations going through his body. As he looked up, he saw into two deep hazel eyes, showing everything the man couldn't say. It made Justin ache to see so much passion and so much love in his lover's eyes. This was always the moment when Justin let his body speak to Brian's. He tightened his grip on Brian's lower back, and tightened his legs around Brian's waist to drive him closer and deeper into him.

Brian thrusts were long and slow; the room was filled with low, deep moans. Justin grunted as Brian angled his hips to hit the little spot that always drove him crazy. Justin tightened his hold on Brian, meeting each of his thrusts.

They reached orgasm together, Brian buried deep inside Justin, and Justin between them both. Brian fell down on Justin, who didn't complain; he pulled the duvet over them, and they drifted to sleep in no time.



They woke the next morning in almost the same position, usually it was Justin pinning Brian on the bed, but today it was Brian who had Justin pinned.

As Justin opened his eyes, it took him a few seconds to understand why he had difficulty moving, until Brian moved and tightened his embrace around him. Justin smiled and brought up his hand to caress Brian's hair.

"Mmmmh," came the sleepy reply.

"Hey, good morning," whispered Justin.

"Two more minutes," answered Brian in a sleepy daze.

Justin smiled. This morning was going to be a slow morning for Mister Kinney, but he didn't rush him. "Want breakfast?"

Brian slowly shook his head against Justin's chest. Justin continued to lightly caress Brian's back when Brian began to put feather light kisses on Justin's chest and began to move downwards toward Justin's crotch only to stop at his stomach where he laid his head.

Justin felt Brian smile. "And I don't cuddle," came Brian's soft words.

Justin chuckled slightly but let his hand wander over Brian's head and neck. Slowly they drifted back to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

As planned, the evening before Jennifer came to the loft to take the boys out for dinner. Brian dreaded the dinner, but in fact, it was rather nice. Jennifer didn't make any lame remarks about them, and Justin and Tucker didn't fight. Molly was happy because Justin was happy and she hadn't seen him that happy since Brian came to bring him back to the loft.

Justin learned that his father was still in a relationship with Molly even though they never discussed him he was aware that his father had been with the same woman for the last three years. He told Molly he would probably marry her in a few months, Justin only nodded.

Brian was thankful that Molly gave Justin that information at the end of the dinner as Justin became quiet after that. After the dessert Jennifer said she was tired, Tucker understood the underlying request and took the women back to the hotel. They would leave early the next day.

\* \* \* \*

The ride home was too quiet, even for Brian, but he knew better than to push Justin. As they got home to the loft, Justin went straight to the liquor cart, Brian soon following a few steps behind stopping Justin's arm mid motion from grabbing the whisky bottle. "Talk to me," was the only thing Brian said.

Justin only shook his head, and tugged Brian towards him.

"I don't know why it's always the same thing when I hear about my father."

"Because he made you choose," answered Brian quietly as Justin nodded his head. "Because he loved you when you were young and when you decided to lead your life your own way he couldn't face that he made you choose."

Justin nodded some more, "He's still my father."

"I know, I know, and no matter how many times he pushed you away, you will still love him, because it's who you are, Justin." Brian sighed deeply. "Now come on, two days with your mother, you must be exhausted."

Justin smiled, nodded, and moved toward the bedroom. Once there they slowly undressed each other and lay under the covers. Justin lay on his side as Brian spooned him enveloping Justin's body into his own as if to shield it from outside issues.

"When are you going home?" asked Justin quietly.

"Sunday afternoon."

"Do you need a ride to the airport?"

"No, you know that I don't need a ride to the airport, I call you when I land. Now sleep," answered Brian.

Justin drifted slowly to sleep and Brian tried to focus on his breathing so he too could try to sleep, but the name Craig Taylor was on his mind and he couldn't stop thinking about him.

After listening for two hours to Justin's breathing he finally gave up the battle to find sleep and headed downstairs to the couch where he began to read. Finally he felt asleep around 3 in the morning.

## **Chapter 23    After Thanksgiving**

Monday Brian was back at the office and Cynthia handed him his messages. A good portion were from his extended family and the rest were from his clients. He smiled at the ones from Michael and Debbie, threw them in the trash, and frowned at the one from Lindsay. He looked at the rest of the messages and opened his email.

Twelve messages were from his clients the most urgent was from Eyeconic Optics. They wanted a new ad campaign. They had called on Friday. One message was more interesting than the others, the one from Leo Brown saying 'Go for it'. Brian smiled.

He also had a message from Jennifer Thanking him and that she was glad both men had finally found a way to stick together and she was here incase he ever needed any motherly advice.

Another message that was left was from Daphne, the first to let him know that she wouldn't be in the city before next Wednesday. The second sent this morning asking if someone could pick her up at the airport at 5:00 today. Brian called his rental agency and arranged for a car with a chauffeur telling them to drop Daphne at Kinnetik.

Of course Justin had left him a message saying he would send the board this morning by FedEx and how much he loved him. He smiled and made a note to send him an email sometime today.

Drew Boyd wanted to thank him for his new engagement at Brown Athletic and he had a message from Emmett saying the same thing with an 'I love you' and 'I owe you' at the end.

Two were from Lindsay asking that he call back immediately. The first one said 'I want to understand why now'. The second, 'It's about Gus, don't worry nothing happened I promise.'

The last two were from his doctor saying he had missed his last appointment and he should reschedule it as soon as possible.

\* \* \* \*

He picked up his phone and began to return the calls. The first one was to his doctor to reschedule his appointment. He then started the long task of calling back his clients and responding to other emails received.

Just before his scheduled Monday morning meeting he called Lindsay back. He got the machine and left a message, "I thought I should remind you that I'm not just a drop in Dad. Call me back. If I'm not available make sure Cynthia knows it's you and she will put you through. Bye."

\* \* \* \*

It was 5:45 when Daphne got to the office when Brian decided to call it a day and head home. Daphne didn't say anything but Brian could tell she was pissed. He figured Daphne would talk to him when she was ready.

When they arrived at the loft, Daphne dropped her bag in her area and began to unpack. By seven, Daphne still hadn't spoken. Brian knew she was supposed to have been at her parents for a week but the trip must have been cut short.

Finally, after dinner and chatting with Justin for a while, Daphne sat near Brian on the sofa. "I told my parents that I had moved out, and that I want to have a child. I also told them that I wanted Justin to be the father," she huffed. "They told me I was nuts," Daphne sighed heavily. Brian nodded. "I told them that I was living here temporarily and that I would continue my education." Brian nodded again, and she continued. "They asked me to move out and use the money they give me so that I can live by myself. My father called a lot of his friends over the weekend and he thinks he found another place for me to live but it's on the other side of Pittsburgh."

She stood up and began to pace back and forth in front of the sofa.

"I tried to tell them that we are doing fine. That after the owner of my apartment building told me the building was going to be torn down you said I could stay here. I miss Justin less when I'm here and I can keep the promise I made to him."

Brian raised his eyebrow in a silent, 'What promise?'

Daphne continued, "He told me I should look after you every now and then. I told him that you were a big boy and that you didn't need me but he insisted. He said that I was his only friend that you accepted from the start. He also told me what you said about me in which you appreciate me and that I was alright for a girl."

"That little shit."

"At the beginning I didn't want to intrude on you but when I came back from New York after meeting with a school and saw Justin's behavior and how thin he was I thought that maybe I should hang around you so you wouldn't forget him."

"I couldn't forget him."

"Yeah I know, but I could also talk to him every evening which was nice. Then came the whole thing with my building and your two weeks with him in New York and I never moved out. Now my parents want me to do that. But I don't want to move out, well, until you ask me of course," said Daphne.

"I'll never ask you to move out, hell I never asked you to move in in the first place," huffed Brian. "I woke up one morning on the couch and thought damn, a girl in my loft that's not possible. Then that evening I came home to find you still here and the day after, and the day after that. At the beginning I thought it would be awful but if you recall I used to live with someone the same age as you, remember? young, blond, good looking, you know the one I asked to marry me."

"You are married," stated Daphne.

"Yeah well forget it, no one knows and I hope it will stay that way," said Brian.

"I know, I know."

"Well anyway, where was I," asked Brian running his hand through his hair. "Yeah, I said I didn't ask you to move out. I always tell you when you get on my nerves and more than that you learned how to deal with me, probably by hanging around Justin." Brian stood up and began to pace, "Listen, the third floor is practically finished, if you want you can move there so you can still keep an eye on me." He turned around, "The stairs should be put in during the Christmas holiday, but if you want we can move for a few days to Britin and ask that they do the work now." Brian walked to the counter in the kitchen, "You can tell your parents that you found someplace else that fits your needs. I'll charge you the same rent that you paid for your old apartment and you can have another roommate if you want, of course." He then turned around and noticed the big smile on Daphne's face. "Do you think your parents would approve of that arrangement?"

"Yeah I think they'll agree to that," said Daphne while moving to her 'personal space'.

Brian exhaled slowly, "Good, then it's decided." He moved toward the bedroom, "I think it's time to

go to bed. Night Daphne."

"Night Brian," and she heard the bedroom door close.

\* \* \* \*

The next evening Brian arrived at the loft and sighed deeply passing his hand over his face. He decided he would never again turn down Debbie's dinner because dealing with the consequences was a lot more difficult than dealing with a queening out Justin. 'God, what a day' Brian thought.

\* \* \* \*

After calling all his clients Brian had set up a meeting with all of Kinnetik's employees as some accounts needed adjustments. There was normally a meeting every Tuesday from 10:00 am to 2:00 pm anyway. The meeting started smoothly with Justin in videoconference from New York explaining what changes he had made on the layout of the Komen account. The changes Justin made were a lot better than those planned by Brian's own direct workers.

They were discussing money when Debbie barged into his office and headed directly to the conference room with Michael at her heels trying to stop her.

"You little shit because of you my Thanksgiving dinner was a disaster!"

"Ma." Michael said, in hope to, at least, calm his mother down before she made a complete fool of herself. Especially in front of everyone in the meeting.

"Deb!"

"Don't Deb me, where were you? Getting your dick sucked? You're a fucking asshole Brian. In 16 years, you've never missed a family dinner. I can't understand why now ... "

"Would you please excuse us?" asked Brian sweetly to his staff before moving Debbie and Michael toward his office and closing the doors behind them.

"What are you doing here?" barked Brian.

"I'm here to get answers," replied Deb with her hands on her hips and smacking her gum.

"And you? What are you doing here, bringing support?" asked Brian, while moving behind his desk to put on the videoconference with Justin.

"No, I'm playing chauffeur," answered Michael.

"You finally bought a car," asked Brian sarcastically. He looked at the computer screen where he saw Justin mouthing 'Be nice!'. He turned around, "Sorry, you bought a car? I'm happy for you."

"Yeah, it's for when JR come to visit so we can get around without depending on someone else's car," answered Michael. "The girls are planning to come for the Christmas holidays."

"I know. I already sent them their tickets," answered Brian absently.

"You what?" asked Debbie.

"I already sent the tickets and arranged for their car."

"Why are you doing this Brian?" asked Debbie.

"Why I am doing what?"

"Being such a shit?"

"I'm not being a shit. I went up to see Gus two weekends in a row and decided to cancel Thanksgiving dinner because Justin couldn't come. My decision was much easier once I knew that I

could have Gus a few days during Christmas, so what do you want to know?" asked Brian still looking at his computer screen where Justin nodded and smiled at him.

"Why are you paying for them?" came Michael's question.

"Why, would you pay for them?" asked Brian while looking over to where Michael was standing.

"No, well I couldn't do that even if I wanted. But why are you paying for them?"

"They didn't say anything while they were down here? They only bitched about the fact that I wasn't there and that was all. Did they tell you that I travel up there every two weeks to spend a whole day with my son? Did they tell you that Melanie still isn't working because she needs a Canadian degree to practice? Did they tell you that Lindsay is a teacher in a private school? No obviously they didn't!"

"Brian..." a voice came softly from the computer. Justin didn't want to interfere but with each sentence Brian's voice became louder and Justin knew that maybe it was time to say something.

"Sunshine!" shrieked Debbie. "How are you?"

"Debbie! hi," came the simple answer.

"Since when are you in contact with him?" asked Debbie, pointing to the computer screen.

"Since a week after he moved to New York. It was the first thing we did, we setup a computer connection between us. Listen Debbie why are you here?"

"Huh, I came to tell you that it won't happen again, you not coming to an official family dinner. I won't tolerate it," she stated.

"And what will you do to me? Tie me to a chair? Listen, it will happen again as long as I have to deal with Toronto and New York. Fuck! Why do I bother to telling you this? It's not your fucking business so I would appreciate it if you would leave now. I was in the middle of a meeting with my staff before I was rudely interrupted."

Debbie hesitated and started to say something but before she had a chance Brian had simply had enough. "Fuck you Debbie, I have no need to explain anything to you do you understand. Now get out! And that's not a request, that's an order. You're here in my office yelling at me for something I already explained to you. So get out!"

"Brian!" said Debbie.

"Com'on Ma," said Michael, while trying to tug Debbie toward the office door. "I told you it wasn't a good idea to come here to Brian's work." Turning toward Brian he continued softly, "We tried to reach you but you wouldn't return our calls so Ma decided to just come down here. It was wrong." Brian nodded and Michael knew that for once he was right. He should have insisted that his mother wait. But she had been such a pain in the ass since seven that morning that he finally gave in.

\* \* \* \*

As Michael moved toward the door Brian pinched the bridge of his nose. He suddenly looked up at Michael. "Michael, would you tell Ben that we have to postpone our lunch meeting tomorrow. I just got called for an unexpected meeting before lunch and I'd rather cancel than make him wait."

"Wait, you're having lunch with Ben tomorrow? He didn't say anything," said Michael, looking a little confused.

"I didn't say I was having lunch with Ben. I said I meant to be having a meeting with him at lunch," replied Brian casually.

"Yeah but Ben didn't say anything about it."

"Do you always tell Ben everything?" asked Brian.

"You know Brian not everyone is like you. Keeping things from the man they're living with!" stated Debbie.

"I am, not were. I'm still living with him."

"Like hell you are. You're fucking him, that's something else. You can't live with someone, just count how many times he left you," yelled Michael

\* \* \* \*

Brian turned his back to both of them and passed his hand over his chest where he felt the little bump created by the ring in the necklace. He looked up and inhaled deeply to calm his nerves. One deep breathe then two. He finally turned toward them again, "Listen, I don't have to tell you what I do or not do with Justin. It's between him and me. So Michael can you tell Ben that I have to cancel? Yes or no?" asked Brian while tilting his head to the right.

"Yeah, I'll tell him. But can you tell me why you see him during lunch? That's usually the time he goes to the gym."

Brian looked expectantly at him as Michael continued, "You're going to the gym with him, that's it! You're going to the gym with him, that's why you can't go with me! You always tell me you can't because you have too much work."

"Yes, that's right. That's why I'm going at lunch, I went one day and another, and Ben was there. After a few times we just agreed that we would go to the gym together during lunch, that's all."

"That's all? You turned me down every time I ask you to come with me to the gym because you were already going there! And you didn't tell me, I don't understand why."

"Why what, Michael? Why don't I tell you everything? Why did I change my schedule to get home earlier? I'm not fucking married Michael. I'm free to do what I want, so are you. You can't go to the gym during lunch; I can, what's the problem. You're going to Woody's every evening I choose not to, so what's the problem?" stated Brian.

Debbie looked from Michael to Brian trying to take in all the information she just heard. Michael stood stunned trying to wrap his mind around the fact that Brian preferred going to the gym with his husband, and preferred going home to his loft instead of spending the evening at Woody's with him. Suddenly they heard, "Brian, do you want me to send the layout with the modifications to John or do you want to go over them again?"

"No it's all right. Is the meeting over?" They didn't hear the answer only Brian's reply, "Okay, I think the only thing left is talking numbers with Ted."

Brian walked over to them. "You will never again barge into my office like you did today. If this happens again, I'll call security. There's an invention called a telephone. I would have called you back this afternoon but no you wanted answers right away. Well you got your answers so get out of here, both of you."

Brian walked over to the conference room and went in closing the door behind him. Signaling to Debbie and Michael that he was finished with the conversation.

\* \* \* \*

As Brian stepped back into the conference room the artistic staff had moved and only Cynthia and Ted were still there along with Justin on videoconference.

Cynthia informed him that all the accounts were wrapped up and they didn't need anymore work on them. Justin informed Brian that he had sent every modification through email to John and a copy was sent to him. Brian simply nodded. The main meeting was over, Cynthia left, Justin ended the connection, and Ted stayed with Brian in the conference room it was time to speak about money, big money.

\* \* \* \*

In his bed, Brian smiled. Ted had told him that the New York account would generate \$5,000,000.00 over the next three years. They even had gotten the first wire transfer sent through this morning. Ted informed him that they had five potential new clients who wanted to work with Kinnetik. Right now Brian didn't have to worry about his job or his firm. Maybe it wasn't such a bad day after all Brian thought to himself.

## Chapter 24 Merry Christmas

### - December 2005 -

For Christmas, Justin came back to Pittsburgh. Brian was pleased that Britin was finished. He had made the choice that during Christmas they would live there. He couldn't have achieved that without Daphne and Mrs. Stevenson's help, and that he listened to Justin when he was in New York. He used every suggestion Justin had made from the moment he knew Brian had bought the house.

For a little more help, he snooped in Justin's possessions. The day Justin went alone to the gallery to see Conrad, Brian borrowed his sketchpad, and asked the receptionist to make a copy of every page that had a picture of the house. That made it easier to decorate the main rooms they would use in the house.

With the help of the two women, they finished to decorate the master bedroom and the study where Brian asked Justin to marry him, Gus's bedroom, the kitchen, and a guestroom for Daphne. The rest of the rooms just had furniture.

For Mrs. Stevenson's help, Brian gave her, a 10-day trip to California, so she could spend some time with her kids and grandchildren. She was leaving the day before Justin's homecoming.

He wasn't sure that he would have the house finished in time for it to be a Christmas gift for Justin, but everything was finished 2 days before he came home.

\* \* \* \*

Justin came back on December 23rd, like planned, Brian was at the airport. The flight had a two-hour delay and Justin landed at 5 pm instead 3. Justin was a mess when Brian saw him, he was exhausted, and Brian could see fear in his eyes.

Brian extended his arms for a welcome hug. Justin smiled but the smile never reached his eyes. Once he was in front of Brian, he snuggled into the man's welcoming embrace not embarrassed by the looks of several people in the terminal.

"Hey, are you ok?" asked Brian.

"Bad flight," was Justin's only answer.

**Brian leaned toward him and Justin kissed him softly but Brian pulled him closer, wrapping his arms around him. He deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue against Justin's soft lips. Justin parted his lips and allowed him to enter. They sensed more than heard the terminal falling into silence. They parted and looked around, they were the center of attention, Justin blushed, and Brian pulled him towards him.**

"Any luggage?"

"Yes"

"Com'on," Brian said grabbing Justin to retrieve the luggage. .

They headed toward the recuperation luggage area and then out toward Brian's car. He was there with a brand-new [black Mercedes ML 350 SUV](#) with beautiful seats in Ash Alcantara inserts and with



Aluminium composite trim.

"You bought a new car?" Justin asked astonished, while Brian put the luggage in the trunk.

"Yeah, I bought a new car." Justin smiled wildly. "What?" asked Brian.

"Nothing, I'm just imagining all the good times we could have; it's good you bought a new car."

"Why?" asked Brian, putting the car in gear.

"So we can go buy a Christmas tree," Justin answered smiling at him.

"Too late, Sunshine, and I have plans for tonight," replied Brian.

They fell silent for a moment. Justin closed his eyes, savoring the soft material of the seats. When he opened them, he noticed that they weren't going towards Pittsburgh, "Hey where are we going?"

"Surprise, now, enough and relax, you look exhausted," stated Brian.

"Yeah I had a bitch of a headache even before I left. I took my meds, but the flight was a real mess," replied Justin.

"Is your headache better?" Brian asked. Justin nodded slowly. "Well then, relax." He saw Justin leaning back a little in the seat and closing his eyes.

Brian put on some music and Justin smiled. It was soft Christmas music. He whispered, "You never play Christmas music on your radio."

Brian looked over and saw that Justin still had his eyes closed and said, "I ran some errands with your mother yesterday, and we used this car. I thought that Christmas music was more suitable than the other stuff I have in there. Should I change it?"

"No s'fine," came the sleepy answer.

\* \* \* \*

Thirty minutes after leaving the airport, Brian pulled in the driveway of Britin, he opened the automatic garage door, and parked the Mercedes inside. He leaned toward Justin and woke him up by trailing soft kisses on his face.

"Huh."

"Come on, we're home," whispered Brian.

"Where are we?"

"Come and see."

Justin stepped out the car and saw the Vette parked next to the Mercedes. Brian grabbed the luggage, and led the way into the house.

They stepped into a small hall leading to the foyer. That's when Justin recognized where he was. His eyes went wide. He was at Britin, their house. Brian smiled and pushed him toward the door of the study, where they had made love the first time in front of the fireplace. Justin noticed immediately that all the furniture they both wanted and that he had listed on his sketchpad was there.

The dark red lounge chair, the desk, the sofa, and the rug, everything he had wished for this room was in there, even the soft drapes on the windows.

"How, how ... how did you get, why, well, how..." and let his hands fall along his sides.



"Running out of words Sunshine?" asked Brian rolling his lips into his mouth and closing the door. He stepped behind Justin and wrapped his arms around him, saying, "Welcome home, Justin."

He began to kiss his way along Justin's neck, toward his shoulder, tugging on his sweater. Justin leaned his head back on Brian's shoulder to give him better access.

Brian moved them from behind the sofa toward the entrance and toward the staircase running along the wall. Justin reached out and touched the banister. Breaking the contact between them, he looked around him and noticed that Brian had not only furnished the place, he had also made some architectural changes.

Brian pushed him up the stairs, and once on the top, Justin noticed that what was earlier a balcony with only a view of the parlor was now an open balcony with a view of the foyer also. The old library with its open space was now a room by itself. At the end of the hall, Brian had added back the 2 doors to the master bedroom that the prior owner had taken down. . Brian moved him backwards all the way, never breaking the kiss. As they stepped into the master bedroom, he turned Justin around so he could see the room.

It was a beautiful bedroom, just as Justin had imagined it; all in black and ivory colors, modified like he had planned it in his head. The far wall across from the doorway was covered in windows, letting in the morning sun. On the right was a fire place – a fire place that wasn't there the first time he saw the house.

The king-size bed was black, with ivory and dark red bed linens. It was facing the fireplace, and the windows were draped with ivory shades.

Over the mantel above the fireplace hang a masterpiece called 'My Life' that Justin had sold at his first show.

On each side of the bed were rolling doors - the one on the left gave access to the walk-in dressing room, the other one to the bathroom. Between the window and the fireplace, Brian had installed an ottoman sofa and a coffee table.

Justin was about to say something as Brian turned him around again and smashed his mouth over his, and tugged on his shirt, stripping him naked. Before Justin could say anything, he was lying naked on the bed, and Brian was sliding into him.

"Oh God, Brian ..." hissed Justin from the intrusion.

"Too long, far too long," said Brian in a long and low moan as he pounded into Justin's body.

The sex was almost animalistic, each trying to have the upper hand in their frantic fuck action. Before long, they reached their orgasms, and they fell in a heap on the bed. Brian lying on top of Justin.

"Woah that was ..." began Justin.

"Amazing," finished Brian. After a few moments of silence, he looked at Justin and saw him wince as he moved to sit on the edge of the bed. "Did I hurt you?" came his concerned question.

"No, not at all, it's just been a while since the last time you fucked me like that, I wasn't really prepared for it," chuckled Justin as he got up.

Brian handed him a robe. "Here," he stood up, wrapped himself in a robe and reached for Justin's hand. "The bathroom is this way."

Like the master bedroom, the bathroom was a piece of art. A huge sunken bath in the corner with a Balneo system, a shower stall, and everything they could possibly need.

Justin smiled, "How did you manage to accomplish all this?"

"I hired the people, paid them, and the rest his history," said Brian standing under the spray of water, and pulling Justin toward him.

"No, not that, I mean the decoration, how did you manage to get that done the way I had imagined it?"

"Oh that?" Brian smiled, "I snooped." Brian waited for a sharp remark or a hurt look, but instead he was rewarded with a huge smile.

"I'm glad you did," Justin answered.

The second round in the shower was a lot slower, than the first one.

\* \* \* \*

Later that night, while Brian was sleeping, Justin wandered through the house and opened every door to see the work done here and there.

Gus's room was finished, it was like he had imagined it; it was in a shade of blue-green colors. Brian had even finished the nursery too, in a yellow-orange pastel color that would fit any baby. He smiled. That was something he hadn't even discussed with Brian, it was a wish, just a wish, and Brian had already set up the room.

Two other rooms were decorated too, one in white and mocha shades and the other in white and purple shades. At the end of the corridor was the old master bedroom. As he opened the door, he was taken aback by what he saw. The big room with the mezzanine was now his studio with a library, furnished with everything he needed. In the middle of the room was an easel with a red ribbon, and a note on it:

"Merry Christmas, I'm glad you're home"

B.

He turned around and laughed out loud. His dream was becoming true.

He went downstairs, the great room was on his left, in front of him was the front door, and on the right was the family room. He opened the door and let out a gasp. In the middle of the family room was a decorated Christmas tree, as tall as Brian with blue lights. He stood there in awe. He didn't hear Brian walk in until he wrapped his arms around him.

"It's not finished," whispered Brian in Justin's ear.

"Huh?"

"The tree - your mom, helped me, but it's not finished," Brian moved to the coffee table where the last item for the tree was waiting, 'the Angel'.

"Thought, you might want to put it on the top, well your mom told me you loved doing that."

Justin took the angel from Brian's hand and moved toward the tree. He moved a chair to step on it, when he stopped mid motion and turned around looking at Brian.

"What?"

"Do you want to help me put the angel on the top?" asked Justin.

"I'm not sure if that's a good idea, I never ..." began Brian.

"I know that's why I asked you, do you want to give me a hand?"

Brian didn't answer. He just moved behind Justin and helped him put the angel on the top of the tree. Once that was done, Justin turned around and gave him a huge smile, which widened even more when he saw that Brian was slightly embarrassed.

He knew from earlier talks that Brian hadn't ever decorated the Christmas tree when he was young, that Christmas was not a happy time for him and that most of the time he spent it in his room, alone.

Brian looked up, saw Justin's smile, and smiled back, the rare real smile he gave sometimes when he was happy. He helped Justin get down from the chair and moved into his personal space. He moved his hand, removed the belt from Justin's robe, and moved his hands under the material. Justin smiled and linked his arms around Brian's waist. Brian lowered his head and trailed kisses along Justin's jaw.

"Wait," whispered Brian as he moved from Justin; he knelt in front of the fireplace and lit a fire. He turned around and moved again toward Justin, removing his own belt. Justin smiled seductively, as his eyes roamed over Brian's slender form.

Brian extended his hand, and Justin linked his fingers with his. They moved together on the floor, Brian covering Justin's smaller body. He looked deep into Justin's eyes, "I'm sure it was one of your fantasies," said Justin. Brian raised his eyebrow in question. "Fucking me on the floor under the tree," finished Justin.

Brian shook his head, "Well before I knew I was totally gay, I thought I would do that with the mother of my children. Then when **I knew** I was gay, the dream moved into something like this," said Brian gesturing toward the scene they were playing.

"You really thought that?" Justin asked astonished. .

"Yeah," replied Brian, as he moved his lips to cover Justin's.

The kiss was deep, slow, tender, and sensual. Hands were moving together over each other's body. The room was only enlightened from the fire and the tree. The flame's gleam reflected into the rings hanging around each of their necks.

They were moving slowly, exploring each other's bodies, "God you're so beautiful," whispered Justin, as he trailed wet kisses over Brian's chest. Brian cupped Justin's face in his hands and pulled him toward his mouth, "You too," came the slow reply.

Justin was starting to turn over to lie on his stomach, when Brian shook his head, and linked his legs around Justin's waist. The movement made Justin gasp. He wasn't prepared for that; he assumed Brian would make love to him under the tree, not the opposite. He didn't ask anything, he just opened the lube and squirted some on his fingers, and moved his hand toward Brian's opening.

He looked into Brian's eyes as he moved his finger into his hole, he saw the flicker of pain from the intrusion passing over his face, and then he saw the abandoned look of ecstasy as he began to move his finger in and out. Brian pulled Justin toward him to kiss him deeply, and moved his hips a little higher to give Justin better access.

Brian groaned as Justin pulled his fingers out, but was rewarded when his lover positioned himself at Brian's entrance, and began to push in slowly.

"Oh god," murmured Justin.

"Mmmh."

Justin moved slowly until he was fully embedded into Brian's hot channel. He began to rock and moved slowly to lead them together to completion.

Brian was beyond words. He didn't submit himself that often to Justin, but when he did, he gave everything to his lover. Tonight it was something special; it was his old, really old, dream coming true. He was 17 and he knew for sure that he was gay. There was always a beautiful tree at the Novotny house, and he pictured himself lying under the tree making love.

They didn't break eye contact as Justin picked up speed, moving in long and deep thrusts. They didn't break contact, as they moved their hands together around Brian's shaft to match Justin's thrusts.

Brian groaned as he felt his orgasm build deep in him, and threw his head back on the rug, as he released his cum between their bodies. He felt Justin follow one thrust later.

Justin slumped down over Brian's chest and attempted to move but Brian wrapped his arms around him. "Stay," was all he said. Justin nodded against his chest and played with Brian's ring. Justin groaned as he felt himself slipping out of Brian once he was soft.

Brian moved and pulled Justin up with him. He draped him in his robe, did the same himself, and led him slowly back to their bedroom.

\* \* \* \*

Christmas Eve day - Debbie's Home.

They woke up the next morning at 9:00 when Brian's alarm went off. They had a big day ahead: Christmas Eve at Deb's, and they couldn't say no.

Brian smiled at Justin. He looked at Justin body, he was still too fucking skinny, and Brian would never hear the end of it from Deb. He also knew that Justin would have a big surprise waiting for him there - Gus and the girls were down and he hadn't told Justin anything.

The girls were staying at Deb's because Emmett had been spending most of his time at Drew's. Brian hadn't told Justin that they would have Gus for a few days either, or that Christmas Day would be spent at the house and Christmas Eve at Deb's.

\* \* \* \*

As Justin stepped into Debbie's house, he didn't have time to say anything as a little boy ran toward him. He barely caught him in his arms.

"Jussin you're home!"

"Gus? Gus!" he pushed the little boy away from him to see his face and once he was sure it was Gus he looked questioningly at Brian.

"Welcome home, Justin," was the only answer Brian murmured in his ear just before Justin was grabbed by the others in welcoming hugs. Justin put Gus down and turned toward Brian, mouthing a 'Thank you' as Debbie rushed toward him pulling him into a big hug. Gus caught Justin's arms and tugged him toward the sofa, asking him to see the pictures from the 'no-fun house' they brought with them.

That comment made Brian furrowed, something was definitely out of place in Toronto, but before he could say anything, Jennifer was at the bottom of the steps, "Hi Justin."

"Mom?"

"Did you have a good flight?"

"Yeah," after a moment of silence looking from Brian who was biting his bottom lip to Gus who was tugging him toward the sofa where Daphne was already sitting Justin finally asked, "What are you doing here?"

"You haven't told him?" asked Jennifer. And Brian only shook his head.

Jennifer took Gus's hand and said, "Now come with me, we're going to let Justin say hello properly to everyone and then you can stay with him." Gus nodded and said, "OK Grandma," they moved to the sofa near Daphne. As she passed in front of Brian, she heard his low whisper, "Thanks Mother Taylor."

As Jennifer moved toward the girls, Lindsay knelt down and asked her son, "Why are you calling Justin's mother Grandma, Gus?"

"Jussin is living with dad, they love each other, so that makes Jussin's mother my Grandma," said Gus.

Lindsay looked up to where Brian and Justin were standing, "You know sweetie, I'm not so sure you can say that your Dad and Justin are living together."

"They are!" shouted the little boy, "Daddy tells me every time he comes to see me, what Jussin is doing in New York and how much he loves him."

Lindsay turned toward Mel, who was rocking her daughter slowly, for some support, but when it came to Brian and Justin Mel lately didn't want to get involved anymore.

"Gus, you know you don't have to make up such stories," began Lindsey, only to be interrupted by Gus again. "I'm not lying, it's the truth, you never listen to me, you never listen to what I say, you always listen to JR," said Gus as tears began welling up in his eyes. "He said he loved Jussin, when he hung up the phone when Jussin read the story on Saturday night! Shit!"

"Gus, enough!" warned the two women in unison.

"Hey, hey, what's going on here?" asked Brian as he entered the room, "Want to tell me Sonnyboy?"

"They don't believe me that you love Jussin."

"Jus – Tin, Gus, there's a T in it, speak slowly," said Brian, while passing his hand over Gus's head.

"They didn't believe me that you love Jus – tin, and that you are still with him," said Gus.

Brian scooted in front of his son, and pulled him toward him whispering in his ear, "You don't have to convince me, you know that." Gus nodded, and Brian continued, "Gus you shouldn't try to convince those who can't understand what Justin and I share, ok?" again Gus nodded his head against Brian's neck.

"Love you Dad," came his tiny reply.

"Me too," answered Brian, "Me too, Gus."

Brian shot an icy glare at the two women and didn't let go of his son as he moved toward the sofa where Justin was sitting. He sat down beside him, and moved Gus, so the young boy could speak freely with Justin.

Justin tried to catch up with everyone, and noticed that he had missed a lot in everyone's life. During the conversation, Gus moved from Brian's lap to Justin's, never breaking the contact with his father, he kept his feet on Brian's lap. As Justin noticed that, he moved closer to Brian, and sat Gus over both their laps, much to Gus's joy.

Debbie had planned a lunch and a dinner. For lunch, only Justin, Brian, Daphne, Jennifer, Mel and Linds, Carl and Deb were there. But for the dinner, the whole family would be there.

Lunch went smoothly, small talk to catch up with Justin. After lunch, Jennifer left, telling the boys that she would see them tomorrow. Brian smiled, for once, he was glad to have a woman on his side. Christmas day would be spent at their house, and he had asked Jennifer if she wanted to inaugurate the kitchen there. Jennifer had happily agreed. Daphne left as Brian and Justin took Gus out for a walk; they walked her to her car and she said she would drop by Britin after Christmas. The boys nodded, as Gus started telling them the story of the 'no-fun' house in Canada.

They walked with Gus to the park, and the little boy explained that moving had been a huge mistake, that he missed his father, Justin and the rest of the family. He also said the mommies were bad to him every time he did something that didn't follow the stupid rules Momma had drawn up after his birthday. Brian smiled until Gus showed him the piece of paper he had ripped from his desk:

Rules of the house:

*Don't ask to speak to your father when mommy is on the phone with him.*

*Don't say that your name is Kinney, because your name is Marcus Peterson*

*Don't ask every day when 'Daddy' will come, you know perfectly well we made you a calendar.*

The list went on and on like that. Brian didn't say anything he just took the list and put it in his pocket. They returned to Deb's around five to drop Gus off and went to the loft to take a shower and change clothes for the evening.

As they stepped into the loft Justin didn't have time to focus on anything, because Brian's hand began roaming over his body, tugging his clothes off and pushing him backwards to the bedroom and from there to the shower.

He registered he was naked only when he felt the water running over his head. They shared an intense moment in the shower. When they stepped out, Justin was exhausted and Brian calmer. They managed to show up at Debbie's on time. For once, it was Drew and Emmett who were fashionably late.

Debbie was happy, her home was filled with the people she loved, her man, her son, his husband and their boy, the girls and the kids, Brian and Justin, Ted and Blake, Emmett and Drew.

Fifteen people at the table, never in Deb's memory was the house so warm and happy.

Like lunch, dinner went smoothly, until Gus said something to Hunter and Hunter replied with a laugh. The young boy turned around and asked his father if he could leave the table. Brian looked at his plate, saw that Gus had eaten enough, and said, "Yes." Gus slipped from his chair passed behind Brian, slipped between his and Justin's chair, and tugged on Justin's sleeve. Justin stopped his story and looked down at Gus to see that his eyes were filled with tears. He asked in concern, "What is it Gus?"

"Is it right that you stay with Daddy for the money?"

"Huh?"

"Hunter, he said you only love Daddy for his money," continued Gus with a trembling voice.

Justin looked over at Hunter who was speaking with Melanie about JR, and moved his chair to make room for Gus on his lap. Justin's movement wasn't unnoticed by Brian who turned his head and watched the interaction between them. Justin used all his love for the boy to convince him that he stayed with his daddy because he really loved him.

Debbie cleared the table a little while later, and everyone moved into the living room, Gus never leaving Brian's side much to his mothers' distress.

It was around 9:00, JR was already in bed, and Gus was trying to keep his eyes open to stay up with the adults. Gus agreed to go to bed when Brian told him that he and Justin would have a sleepover, and that they would be there the next morning.

Once the little boy settled in for the night Brian went back to the living room. Emmett, Drew, Ted and Blake had already left.

"Thanks Brian," said Lindsay as he walked over to the sofa and sat near Justin. "He's just such a handful lately. It seems that he hates us for everything..."

"Don't ask why," replied Mel dryly.

"Okay, can someone explain to me, why he called your house the 'no-fun' house?" asked Brian.

Both women looked uncomfortable.

"Oh, by the way," interjected Justin, looking directly at Hunter, "For your information I'm not with Brian for the money, I don't need a sugar daddy."

"What the fuck?" asked Brian.

"Gus asked me if I stayed with you for the money," Justin explained with a smile, never letting his

eyes leave Brian's. "I explained to him that I didn't need your money, and that we were all right together. Then he asked me if we were like his mommies and I told him, no, because his mommies were married and we aren't. Then he told me that he would have loved walking down the aisle to give the minister the rings, and I just said, I know."

"I wonder where you got the idea that Justin stayed with me for the money," replied Brian icily looking directly at Hunter. "Listen, hustler boy, I didn't want you then, and I don't want you now."

"Hey, I didn't say anything that I hadn't heard before," said Hunter in his defense.

Michael squirmed uncomfortably in his seat under Brian's glare, "Well, um, it was long ago, when I said that, I was angry ... and well, not in the best mood."

"That doesn't justify you bad-mouthing my relationship with Justin," interjected Brian.

"Am I insane or did you just use the word relationship?" asked an astonished Debbie.

"Yeah I just said the word ... you know its Christmas, miracles happen," smiled Brian.

"Good for you!" stated Debbie. "As for you, young man," she began waving her finger toward Hunter, "I don't want to hear you say something like that to Gus again. He's a kid - you can't just mess with his feelings like that. Do I make myself clear?"

Hunter nodded.

"Now, I want you to excuse yourself," added Debbie.

Hunter looked up directly into Brian's eyes, "I'm sorry, I didn't think he would take it that badly. I said it as a joke, but it didn't come out like one."

Brian nodded toward him, saying silently that he accepted his apology.

Melanie, who was quiet until then, couldn't stop herself from saying, "Yeah you just said you're in a relationship. I wonder how many times you've brought a trick home."

"Never -" replied Brian sharply.

"What? I don't believe you," snorted Melanie.

Before Brian could say anything, Justin began to speak, "Listen, even though I love you very much, all of you, please just butt out. Like I said to Gus, we are good."

Justin turned his head toward Brian, and moved towards him as Brian answered simply, "Yeah, yeah, we are," and Justin mouthed the word 'Forever' against Brian's lips, before he kissed him lightly.

"God, get a room," snorted Melanie.

"You asked for it," intervened Brian. "You began this conversation, and when we show you that we're fine, you..."

He was interrupted by a loud cry from the baby monitor: "Daddy!"

Everyone looked concerned at the girls, as Lindsay sighed deeply and Melanie looked at the floor.

"Shit, not again. God if he could sleep through the night," said Melanie standing up.

"Forget it, I'm going," Brian said as he stood up. "He's mine until the 2nd of January, right?" Lindsay nodded her head, "I will try to calm him down."

"What do you mean Brian?" asked Justin.

"We're keeping Gus until after New Year's day."

"Oh,"

"And now I'm going to calm him down so he can go back to sleep," said Brian while climbing the stairs.

You don't want to move him...," Justin pointed outside the windows.

"No, we're sleeping here - it's Debbie's revenge for the Thanksgiving drop out."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, you coming?" Brian asked with a smile.

"Yeah, Hmm well, night guys," said Justin while following Brian upstairs.

"Night," came the mixed replies.

As Brian went upstairs, he distinctly heard his son crying in the girls' bedroom. He went in, took his son, his teddy, and the blanket, and moved towards Justin's old room, just as Justin stepped into the corridor.

They stepped into the room, to see that Michael's old bed was still here.

"Do you think we can all three sleep in there?" asked Justin.

"We've done more than that if I recall correctly," smiled Brian.

"Yeah."

Brian set his son on the bed and wiped his face, "There Sonnyboy, all set, want to talk about it?" Gus shook his head. "All right, I'll tuck you in. We'll be back in a few minutes, all right?" again Gus nodded.

While Brian was dealing with his son Justin went to the bathroom and got ready for bed. He noticed that in the little bag that Brian had packed were two pairs of pajama bottoms, one long and black the other shorter and blue and two white T-shirts. He didn't know that they would sleep here, but was glad that Brian had packed the pajama bottoms as he slipped the blue ones on.

He padded back to the bedroom, with his clothes over his arms, just as Brian walked out the door. They stopped and Brian kissed him deeply.

A few minutes later, Brian was back. Gus was sound asleep in the middle of the bed. Both men decided that Gus would stay in the middle. As they slipped under the covers, they created a little nest for the young boy, preventing him from falling.

It was near midnight, when Ben, Hunter, and Michael left. All the gifts were under the tree. They would be back at 8:00 in the morning to open them .

As Debbie passed in front of Justin's old bedroom door, she couldn't stop herself. She opened the door to see a lovely picture - Brian and Justin were sleeping on each side of Gus. She smiled to herself and closed the door.

\* \* \* \*

Gus opened his eyes and looked around. He saw that he was in bed with his dad and Justin. He crawled slowly out of the bed and went to the bathroom. When he was finished, he headed back to the bedroom. He hadn't been gone long, but when he returned, Brian had reached out and brought Justin against him. Justin had turned in his sleep. Gus smiled as he walked toward the bed and slid back under the covers just in front of Justin. Instinctively Justin linked his arm over the little boy, who settled into his chest.

Brian had heard the little steps and knew that his boy was up. He waited to see what he would do and smiled when he saw Gus climb back into bed in front of Justin. He linked his arm over Justin's,



and brought both boys nearer to him. He listened a few minutes, and was rewarded when he heard his son's deep breathing and knew he was sleeping.

## **Chapter 25    Christmas**

The next morning the girls were up first, JR woke up at seven, as they stepped in front of the boys' room, they couldn't resist and opened the door. They were taken aback by the vision in front of them.

Gus was spooned into Justin's body, which was spooned into Brian's body. Both men had their limbs so entwined the women couldn't tell whose were whose. Both men had their arms linked over the small boy in an attempt to protect him from the outside. All three were still sound asleep.

Mel shook her head like she couldn't believe what she was seeing. Lindsay smiled sadly, realizing that she would never have that part of Brian, never, even when she got the most beautiful gift he could have given her: Gus.

They went downstairs to retrieve Debbie and Carl. Debbie was making breakfast for everyone.

"Good morning."

The girls sat at the kitchen table each lost in her own world. They were brought back to reality as JR squealed when she saw her father stepping into Debbie's kitchen.

"Hey, Honeybun, how are you?" asked Michael as he walked in, before greeting his mother and the girls.

"How did you sleep?" asked Ben.

"I think that we probably had a better sleep than Brian and Justin," grinned Mel.

"Why did you say that?" asked Michael, while playing with JR.

"Because Gus slept with the boys," stated Carl.

"Carl, if you want you can wake them up," stated Debbie, but before Carl moved from his chair, Michael was on the steps. "It's all right, I'll go." And he jogged upstairs.

He walked to the door, but wasn't prepared to see the scene that was playing out under his eyes. The boys hadn't moved since Mel and Lindsay looked into the room. Michael opening the door, made Brian move slightly against Justin who tightened his hold around Gus. Brian began to stir, and Michael moved into the shadow of the doorframe, and listened to the two lovers waking up.

"Justin?" whispered Brian.

"Mmmh," came the sleepy reply.

"It's time to get up. It's almost 7:45 and in less than ten minutes Debbie will yell from downstairs for us to wake up." Michael heard moving, and when he looked, Justin had snuggled closer to Brian. "You know that Gus will be hyper because you know who left you know what under the 'C' tree," continued Brian while kissing the right side of Justin's face.

"Huh-hu," answered Justin.

"I'm glad you're home," continued Brian with the same voice.

"I'm glad to be here," whispered Justin back, "Morning."

"Morning."

"All kissy me too," came Gus's little voice.

"You want kisses too," asked Brian softly.

"I want kissy too," replied Gus.

Michael moved from the doorframe and headed back downstairs, knowing deep down that Brian and Justin were together, maybe even stronger than before, and that they loved each other. He couldn't believe that he needed so long to figure that out.

As he arrived downstairs, Debbie was on her way to go up and call everyone for breakfast, but Michael stopped her.

"They're awake, let them brush their teeth and in a few minutes they'll be down," he said quietly.

"Hey, what happened to you? Did they say something to you?" asked Debbie with concern as she saw his pale face and sad look. She moved to get by him.

Michael stopped her, "No, don't; you know, I just saw something I never thought I would."

"Oh and that's ..."

"They're happy, you know Mom, Brian is really happy," stated Michael, "I just saw them with Gus, I thought they were apart because of New York, but they are still together, it's so ..."

"So what? Sweetie," asked Debbie.

Michael shook his head, "So strange, I never thought that, well you know."

Michael moved to sit near Ben, who just smiled at him. He knew that Michael had finally accepted Brian's five-year relationship. That was a great improvement. Ben squeezed his thigh and smiled up at Michael.

\* \* \* \*

In Justin's old room, Gus was now lying between Brian and Justin, "Kissy, kissy," he was chanting, as Justin and Brian kissed him on each of his cheeks.

They were rewarded with a huge laugh coming from Gus. He turned toward his father and said, "Love you dad," and snuggled closer to him.

As Justin looked into Brian's eyes, he saw them glistened with tears, "I love you too, son," came his strangled answer.

"Do you think Santa brought something for you Gus?" asked Justin in an attempt to lighten the mood a little.

"Santa, Santa," began to chant Gus.

"So much for a little peace, Sunshine, Thank you," said Brian with a smile.

"Come Daddy, get-up, get-up," began to chant Gus, while tugging the covers from both, his father and Justin, "Come Santa was there, Santa was there."

He began to jump up and down the bed. Brian caught him just in time before he fell from the bed.

"Stop, Gus, I know you're excited, but I don't want to run to the ER today," said slowly Brian while looking into his son's eyes.

Gus turned his head toward the door, "But Santa came, I saw the gift under the tree this morning, we must go ... we must," but Gus was interrupted from his father, "Gus, first, toilet, I don't want an incident today, and you don't need to be punished for something we could prevent, and then, the gifts, all right?"

"All right Dad, now hurry, Santa came," pointed Gus.

Gus excitedly went into the bathroom, followed by Brian, who cursed softly when he stepped in, "Fucking dykes!"

Justin, who had followed them, looked at Brian and then at Gus, who was sitting on the toilet to take a pee. Justin smiled he knew exactly why Brian cursed. No way would Brian accept his son sitting on the toilet to take a pee. He also knew that in the next few days, Brian would teach his son how to aim correctly.

Once finished, Brian remained his son to wash his hands, and then Gus ran downstairs, before neither Brian, nor Justin could say anything. Once in the living room, Gus shrieked, "Look Daddy, Santa was here, Santa was here, come, come," and he ran a few step up to grab his father's hand to drag him toward the Christmas tree. Brian rolled his eyes, and looked over at the girls who were handling JR.

Rapidly Gus was seated near the tree and began to open the gifts that have his name on it. In five minutes, he disappeared under the wrapping paper and the gifts that were for him.

After twenty minutes, he looked around, and said proudly, "I got almost everything from my list."

"Almost?" asked Lindsay with a chuckle.

"Yeah, almost," said Gus and began to read the names on the gifts, and hold them out. He made a pile with the one for his father and Justin, but stopped suddenly, looking around, "Daddy, Santa forgot Justin"

"What's the problem Gus?" asked Brian,

"There's only three gifts under the tree for Justin and a lot for everyone else," explained Gus.

"Maybe the rest of the gifts are at home."

"No! I'm sure that Santa mixed up the gifts," stated Gus as he moved to Justin. "Or maybe everyone forgot that Jussy would come for Christmas, and didn't ask for a gift for him in the letter to Santa!"

"Gus!" was the general reply from the elders.

"I heard you Mommy, you said that he probly won't be there, and Momma said, that it was the bestest he stay in New York," pouted Gus.

Lindsay, shifted uncomfortably, and looked at Melanie. She remembered exactly that moment it was a week ago. Melanie and she were speaking about the trip, they assumed that Justin wouldn't be there, and they chose not to bring a gift for him. Gus should have been in bed but obviously he had eavesdropped on the conversation.

The little boy was furious, and his breath was ragged. During the conversation he had moved into Justin's lap.

"Gus, breathe with me," came Justin's whisper, "Slowly, in, one two three four, out." Justin used the same technique Brian usually used with him when he had a panic attack. A few moments later, Gus's breath was normal.

Gus looked up, directly into Brian's eyes, "I'm sorry Dad, I didn't want to hear things, but Momma said that Jussy is better in New York, and that he, that he, that he...."

"Gus, slow down, it doesn't matter, that I don't have many gifts..." said Justin hoping to calm the little boy, still rocking him, while thinking that for a five-year old, the boy was a bundle of nerves, more than his father already.

The only thing he could do was to tighten his hold around the little boy, while rocking him. He looked up to Brian, and his gaze shifted over to Gus's moms and the others who came to Debbie's while they were in the bathroom.

Emmett said hello and handed Gus a paper bag, in which he had some gifts, explaining that Santa

left Justin's gift under his tree, because he knew that Emmett was invited this morning and that maybe Justin would be there.

Emmett's explanation settled the little boy down and he looked expectantly at Ted and Blake. Ted mentioned that they too had some gifts for Justin. Gus's smile grew at each mention of another gift.

Ben looked at Justin and Gus, and gave Gus a big paper bag with gifts in it. Most were for the little boy, but at the bottom, Gus found four little gifts, two with Brian's name and two with Justin's name. Gus smiled at Ben. Obviously, Santa had mixed up the gift's destination.

Justin and Brian smiled at the little boy, and mouthed a general thank you to everyone.

For the first time this morning Justin took time to look around him and thought that he was happy, that he missed everyone, and that's there was no other place like home.

The morning went smoothly. Gus opened all his gifts and never left his father's side. Just before lunch, Mel and Linds went upstairs, and everyone could hear they were arguing. They came back downstairs twenty minutes later.

Lindsay's cheeks were flushed and Mel had been crying. They didn't speak for a while, but the tension between both was perceptible.

It was near noon, when Brian and Justin began to gather all their things, they had planned to be at the house around one and have a late lunch with Justin's mother.

"Did you collect everything?" asked Brian, and got a nod from Justin. "And you Gus, do you have everything?" the little boy nodded enthusiastically.

"Okay, then, time to leave," Brian said smiling.

They were saying good-bye, when Lindsay noticed that Mel was about to say something, "Mel, don't."

"Don't what," exploded the other woman.

"Don't begin, it's not the time, it's not the place," Lindsay stated.

The only answer she got was a huff from her wife, and a dark look. It seemed like it was always that way between them lately.

As Brian leaned toward Lindsay to say good-bye, he whispered, "You should fix your problems."

But even if he had whispered the words, they didn't go unnoticed from Mel, and she couldn't be silent, "And look who's speaking, the man who can't keep his ..."

She was suddenly interrupted, "Mel, enough!" said Debbie while crashing a plate on the table, "Enough."

She moved around the kitchen and began to stock some food. Once finished she moved over to Brian, and handed him the bag, "There, go and have a nice Christmas, at home."

Brian looked up as Debbie said, "I'm sorry for the mess this morning, I have something more for you, I'll give it to you when you're at your car," she said as she patted his cheek.

Brian moved, followed by Justin and Gus. They didn't say anything, as Gus put his coat on, and rushed toward Debbie to give her a kiss, and then he turned back and headed to the car.

Brian looked up and saw the hurt look on Lindsay and Melanie's faces. Then he looked over at Justin and saw the pained look he had. He sighed deeply, buckled Gus in the back seat, and sat in the car.

## Chapter 26 The last Gift

It was around ten, when Brian carried a sleepy Gus into his room. He pulled off his clothes, put him in his pjs, and then into his bed.

Once Gus was tucked safely in bed, Brian met Justin downstairs in the study. He sat near Justin having a late drink. From the first moment he began to renovate the house, he knew they would love the study; it was an important place for him, because it was there he had asked Justin to marry him, and where Justin agreed. Therefore, he tried to make the study as comfortable and inviting as possible. In the early stages of renovating, Brian took all the ideas that Justin had had in mind for this room. In front of the fireplace was a little coffee table and on each side, a comfortable couch, one in cream, and one in mocha. He also made sure to place a white rug under the coffee table.

In the far left corner, he put the desks with the computers and along the wall, books and cd's for the music center and a bar with everything they would need. Instinctively, he knew they would pass most of their evenings here in front of a fire.

\* \* \* \*

Earlier when they had come home from Debbie's, Gus was bursting with delight in being at the house, but Brian and Justin were simply relieved in seeing Jennifer already there.

Like the morning, the afternoon went smoothly and Jennifer, Tucker, and Molly left around six. Gus asked Brian why Justin had so few gifts and Justin simply explained to Gus that the house was a big gift and he didn't need anything more.

\* \* \* \*

Tonight, they were both sitting on the couch. Justin had moved into Brian's arms, while enjoying the soft music in the background .

"This is like a first Christmas at home for us," stated Justin.

"Yep."

"Gus was happy to see his room," continued Justin softly.

"Yeah... I'm happy too," admitted Brian quietly.

"I thought you loved the loft."

"I love the loft, but for the moment I love the house more," Brian responded with a real smile.

"Too bad we won't be able to spend our time between both.".

"Yeah but until you go back, I'm keeping you prisoner."

"You are?"

"Yep. Enough family counsel, enough family shit for the next year," stated Brian.

"Don't forget Gus. You have to deal with the family."

"That's not a problem, and you know that," said Brian.

A comfortable silence filled the room. After a few minutes Justin began to speak, "Did I tell you that next spring I will be getting my degree?"

Brian looked down at him, with an eyebrow raised, "No, how come?"

"I managed to transfer all the PIFA credits to AI NYC, and complete the trimester I missed at PIFA. I planned everything so if I needed to come back here I could finish the year at PIFA and earn my degree. I even signed a paper for the Dean certifying that I wouldn't compromise the University

with my behavior," answered Justin casually.

"You did? Whoa, I'm impressed," answered Brian.

"Don't make fun of me. I thought that maybe I could teach or something when I can't draw or if my art doesn't sell."

"Mmmh, I'm not making fun of you, I'm really proud. Now I know why you were so tired and thin, and why you didn't eat enough. Why didn't you just tell me?"

"Because I wanted to do it myself. To prove that I could take care of myself, and be someone. That I could be your equal; that I could be as successful as you. But I must say the first six months were hell," whispered Justin.

"Well, seems you achieved your goal, but not smoothly, you're still too thin."

"I know. I'm working on it; I gained half the weight back that I had lost since you first came to see me. I'm an obedient little patient," teased Justin.

"Lucky me, so I can spank your bubble butt again!" Brian grinned mischievously.

"You think? Maybe it would be me spanking you for once," Justin grinned back.

"I think I won't complain even if you did."

Brian leaned in to kiss Justin but their moment was short ended, when they heard a slight knock on the door. They both turned around to see Daphne walking into the study with a gift in her hands.

"Hey guys"

"Hey"

"I called your mom and she told me that she had already left."

Brian nodded, and she continued, "You told me that you would spend the holidays here, so I drove directly here. Hope you don't mind." A slight nod from Brian told her everything was fine. "Well then, I came here to give you this," she handed the gift to them. "It's for both of you. I thought it could be something you would appreciate." Seeing the questioning look she got from both men, Daphne added, "Well I asked every friend from the 'so called family' and I also got some help from former students from St James and PIFA.

She saw Brian's jaw clench and Justin blanch but continued, "And I used every free minute I had to make this."

She handed the gift to them, turned around, and headed toward the door. She brought a dozen candles into the study and began to light them while she was speaking.

"Hope you won't be angry with me, but I think this could help you both. I remember what the doctor in New York asked you to do.. Before you open it, wait until I'm out of the room, it's kinda private."

She put down the last candle, "Well that's all from me. It's time to get back to Pittsburgh." She stopped walking when she heard Brian's voice. "Third door on the left, the one decorated all in purple," he added with a smile.

"Yeah the one you said, and I quote, "What color would my best friend love."

"Yeah that one," stated Brian.

"Well, all right, good night."

"Good night Daphne," came the reply in unison.

As she stepped out, Daphne dimmed the lights, and closed the door behind her, then headed to 'her' room.

"Do you think it's a bomb in there?" Brian asked to ease the tension that had filled the air.

"Brian!"

"I know, I just wanted to make fun of it," he replied.

"Do you know what it is?" inquired Justin.

"How the fuck should I know?"

"You spent the last six months with her, no let me correct that, **\*YOU\*** spent the last six months living with her."

"And you think that maybe..." asked Brian.

"She may have confided in you?" finished Justin.

"No, such luck Sunshine, sorry."

"Ok, let's go then..."

He took the gift from the coffee table and unwrapped the paper. It was a photograph album, entitled:

Brian & Justin

He looked up at Brian.

"If you want I can look at it while I'm back in New York," whispered Justin.

"No, I'm all right. Daphne said it was a Christmas gift, so go on open it," answered Brian. Despite the fact, he had problems keeping the emotion from his voice. He ensconced himself on the couch, pulling Justin and the scrapbook with him.

Once comfortable, Justin opened the album. On the first page, there was a letter in Daphne's handwriting.

*"I didn't want to make you uncomfortable, but I had the opportunity to find some pictures of both of you since you've been together and some pictures from the prom. I know that you're not fond of pictures and that Justin doesn't remember anything from that very moment. I also know that Brian doesn't like to speak about what happened. I'm not dumb, and I know that both of you have trouble sleeping. You're both living and fighting this moment; scientifically and medically, it's called PTSD.*

*I know this because I have talked to you. You also know that to heal you have to be able to talk about it, with the person you choose to confide with. It could have been me, but you never tried; it could be a shrink, but that's not a choice with you two.*

*In your case, it's in both your hands. Look at the pictures, try to remember and let the emotions run through you.*

*I didn't want to make just a prom scrapbook, that's why there are so many pictures ... even some from the "evil-ex(s)."*

*Love. Daphne"*

Justin looked up into Brian's eyes, and saw a flicker of pain pass there, "You sure, you want to do this?"

Brian nodded, "If you don't feel comfortable we can always stop."

"Promise me you will say something too, even if it's too much," replied Justin.

"I promise," whispered Brian. "Now, let's go, open it, I'm rather curious to see what she has made up."

Justin opened the scrapbook, and the first pictures they saw were two baby pictures, under the first one was written, Justin and under the second, Brian.

"How the fuck did she found that?" Brian asked completely amazed.

"You don't know her, huh? I told you she's resourceful. Do you want me to stop?"

"No, no, go on. I think, I'll see more pictures of my youth, and I think I know where she found them. Remind me to ask her that very question at Breakfast. I'm sure it will be an interesting discussion to have. Plus I know that we'll have a great breakfast, because she always makes up that way!"

"In fact, I was wrong, you know her quite well," smiled Justin.

"Like you said, six months with her, and you really get to know how she thinks. Now come on, keep turning these pages. I think, we'll have more surprises in store for us just yet," said Brian. Turning the page, they saw two other pictures where he and Justin must have been around six or seven years old. The one with Justin was taken at a birthday party, and Daphne was in the picture too; the one of Brian was taken in a yard, where he happened to be riding a bike.

They kept going through many pictures from their youth. Each time, Brian wondered how Daphne managed to give the pictures so much kindness and interest, it seemed, that she chose just the right pictures for both of them for the very right moment.

Then the pictures started to change. They came to the part where they began to see each other together. The first picture was taken at the hospital with Brian and Gus, another one at the munchers also with Justin and Gus together, and pictures of Gus alone. Both agreed that the picture taken at the GLC art show and a few others that Daphne had taken, unbeknownst to them, were really good.

There were some other pictures from the rest of the year, Christmas time, and New Years, mostly of Justin. Vic, or someone, had taken some of the dinner where Brian and Justin were together and some of the pictures were of Mel and Lindsay.

It was all after this they finally came across the prom picture, taken at Deb's, just before Justin went to pick up Daphne.

Justin shifted a little and Brian tightened his embrace, having no real clue how to Justin may react "Do you want to continue looking at the pictures with me, or save them for some other time?" asked Justin knowing this was the moment they both had feared for quite some time.

"No, I'm ok, we can go on," said Brian, thinking to himself that maybe tonight was finally the right time to do this.

"Promise that if it's too much, you will say it, ok," whispered Justin.

"Promise," replied Brian, kissing Justin's head. "Same for you, alright."

"Yeah."

Justin turned the page and there was the picture the school took of all the couples that attended the Prom. He smiled, "Daphne was hot."

"Yeah, not bad, but you were hot too," added Brian with a chuckle.



"Yeah, I see that," he passed his hand over the picture and stopped just at the bottom of the picture, "But I still don't remember this moment."

"Don't try to force your memory, just look at the pictures, and let the rest come to you, ok," said Brian, caressing Justin's head where the scar was.

"Okay." Justin gestured toward Brian's empty glass, "Want another one?"

"No, I think, for once, a clear head will help us, don't you?" asked Brian. Justin nodded and turned the page of the scrapbook. His eyes fell on a beautiful picture of him and Brian dancing.

"How, ... where, ... why ..." started Justin, as Brian passed his hand over the picture. "You were beautiful, Brian," whispered Justin, "So beautiful."

He continued to stare at the picture and inhaled deeply, turning the page. The next picture was the one where Brian was lifting Justin and twirling with him. Brian saw the picture and tightened his hold around Justin, asking himself how Daphne had actually managed to get those pictures.

Brian never spoke about it but the pictures had come by mail a year after Justin's accident. He remembered the irony of the situation. Justin at the time was with Ethan, when Brian opened the envelope, he saw two pictures, along with a piece of paper on which simply said, "Hope he remembers." Of course, he tried to find out who had sent the pictures, but he wasn't able to. There was no return address and he didn't recognize the handwriting. Brian put them away with the many other personal items and forgot about them, but obviously, Daphne had found them while they were moving things from the loft to the mansion.

As much as Brian was happy to see them in the scrapbook, because it was a very good moment for them both, he wasn't sure if Justin was ready to be confronted with the photos.

\* \* \* \*

Justin looked at the picture closely, letting his emotions guide him. He still couldn't remember a thing from that very night. The only thing he seemed to remember was asking Brian to come to the prom and Brian turning him down. Then someone calling his name, over and over, and praying God to let him live. After months of doubt, he decided it was Brian.

Now Justin had something more to hang on to, those two pictures, made him feel warm inside. He looked at them and saw so much more than just two pictures. He saw the openness in Brian's eyes, the love that was there. Justin could tell Brian was happy, that he loved the young man he had in his arms. He saw also a hint of tenderness and peace in Brian's face.

Justin wished he could remember the moment, or yet even some of the emotions that were going through him at that time, but he couldn't. He remembered nothing. It was just a blank space in time.

He turned his head and looked at Brian, "You told me," whispered Justin. "You told me everything, here, look at your eyes," said Justin caressing the picture.

"Yeah," came Brian's strangled reply, "I wanted, I wanted ... I, and then ...," Brian stopped, struggling with the words to get out.

"I know, but it wasn't your fault. You know that, don't you?" asked Justin.

"Yeah..." came the quiet answer, "But you know human beings often feel responsible. It's how we work, and even though you said it wasn't my fault, I felt that it was. Your Mom felt that way too. You felt that way, because you said it was your fault," he sighed deeply.

"You know Brian, I think it's much simpler than that." Brian raised his eyebrow, waiting for Justin to continue. "Yeah, Hobbs wanted a hand job and I gave him one. He enjoyed it, but of course never told anyone. He came to Liberty Avenue, where I outed him in front of his friends - that was my fault. He couldn't face what he was, or who he was and took it out on the only openly gay member of his class, me. The night of the prom, he saw red, because you came to give me the best night of my life, and he was trapped with his pseudo girlfriend. I don't think what he did was calculated, I think he was really out of control. I think he was mad that I could live the way I

wanted and he couldn't." He stopped, and rubbed his hand over his eyes, "It was all those things combined that caused him to do what he did to me," finished Justin.

They both sat there in silence for a moment.

"Do you think we can agree on that?" asked Justin hopefully.

"Yeah, I think we can manage that," replied Brian, kissing him on the top of his head one more time.

"Good, what do you think about heading to bed?" asked Justin quietly. "I'm kinda tired, really tired."

"Come on young man, we're going to sleep," said Brian pulling Justin with him toward the door and then the stairs to their bedroom.

\* \* \* \*

They stepped into the bedroom in silence, too many emotions coursing through them. Once undressed, they slipped under the covers, and like many nights Brian spooned Justin, holding the trembling young man as if he was protecting him from the outside. They didn't need to speak, words were not needed between them. Justin shifted into Brian's embrace as he tried to disappear into his body.

Brian waited until the slight trembling in Justin's body seemed to have stopped and put his mouth on Justin's ear speaking to him, just above a whisper, "I came to the prom to tell you that you mattered." Silence. "That I cared for you." Silence. "That you were someone special for me. That I loved you even then," Justin nodded. "I couldn't say the words, and even now I have difficulty saying them, but now, I know that my feelings toward you are real."

"I never doubted that," stated Justin slowly, "I remember that first night you took me home. You were tweaked out of your mind, and you were right, I was fucking terrified."

"I knew it, and I couldn't help myself. All I wanted then was to take you off the street and bring you home to fuck you and in a way to protect you. You were fresh meat for anyone else and I don't know why, but when I looked in your eyes, I just knew, that it would be different"

"I never understood why you asked me to come with you to the hospital," said Justin.

"The words just came out," Brian sighed deeply. "I couldn't stop myself before they came out."

Justin didn't move, in the silence and darkness of their bedroom, on a Christmas night, he finally knew what had pushed Brian to ask him to come with him.

"I liked the way you challenged me from the beginning. When you seemed to be at ease on Liberty Avenue, when you tried so hard to hide your fear. I liked what you told me, trying to convince yourself in the process," Brian chuckled. "I also loved the fake control you tried to have over your own emotions."

Brian moved slightly, in which Justin took this moment to turn around in Brian's arms, so he was facing his lover.

"I loved the way you took the time to teach me how to be a good lover." Brian couldn't help but winced at that comment., Justin smiled, "Okay, how to be a good fuck."

"Better, much better," stated Brian, while kissing Justin's head.

They were silent a moment. Brian thought that Justin was asleep until he heard the young man again, "Love you, Brian."

Brian sighed deeply, and decided that he should have told Justin how he felt from the very beginning. Justin felt a change in Brian's behavior and lifted his head, "You all right?"

Brian nodded thinking 'I can do it, I need to do it'. He sighed again, and began slowly, "I want to, I

need to, I..." and stopped.

Justin didn't move; he just waited. After a moment he moved his hands and asked, "When did you know you loved me?"

Brian sighed he knew this was coming. He gave a sigh, but it was more a sigh of relief than anything else, "The moment I saw you," he quietly spoke.

"No honestly, Brian when did you know?" asked Justin again.

"I saw you under the streetlamp and I felt something different, something that told me that I would probably be in deep shit in a snap." He moved his hand up and down Justin's back. "I don't know when it was, it came to me slowly. One day you were a real stalker, and the next you were there, and everything seemed good, and it felt right." Justin nodded. "The first time you came back to me and told me that you needed me, I felt, I don't know, it was strange, and I didn't know the feeling, or rather I didn't know what loving someone felt like." Justin tightened his hold around Brian's waist.

"I didn't know what love was, until I saw you lying on the ground, while I prayed that you would live. It was like someone ripped me in two."

Brian inhaled deeply as Justin caressed his arm.

"I guess I began to feel the effect when you won the contest at Babylon. I followed you in the backroom, and felt a sentiment I didn't know 'til then, it was jealousy."

"That was only because I stole your trick," said Justin.

"No, yes. NO, it was because you were with him. Thank god you fucked him and not the opposite."

"Yeah, well I never, you know ..." whispered Justin.

"Bottomed for others?" asked Brian tentatively.

"Yeah, most of the time, I was the top."

"Mostly."

"We're moving away from the topic," stated Justin. "Tell me when you knew?"

"The moment I told you," whispered Brian kissing him softly.

Justin knew that he had lost the battle. Brian wasn't ready. Brian's mind was in overdrive knowing he should tell Justin. Although Brian knew all too well that one day he should tell Justin that he saw his future under a lamppost that first night, so many years ago.

~ Finis ~

## **Consequences, Finality and Life choices.**

### **Chapter 1     Pain Management**

#### **December 2007**

"Negative."

Brian read the paper again: "Negative."

The word hadn't change since the last time he had looked at the letter that had arrived today. "Negative." It should be a relief, but he didn't feel relieved.

He felt relieved when the "Negative" was for his last cancer results, but he felt disappointed when "Negative" was for Daphne's pregnancy test.

It could have been so simple for him, not getting married, not getting involved. But everything changed on the night of September 2000 when he stepped out of Babylon and looked across the street and saw his future; it was that night he fell hard for a blond boy virgin with blue eyes. He figured out quickly that he fell for him, but couldn't show it to anyone, not even to Justin.

They went through a lot during those 5 years, constantly on and off, falling apart, fighting, or wanting different things, but in the end they were still together, despite all the setbacks.

Brian sighed, the word hadn't changed; "Negative" was still on his HIV test.

#### **\*\*December 2005\*\***

Gus spent nine days with Brian and Justin, and they learned the little boy dreaded returning to Toronto. For Gus, Toronto wasn't the dream come true story. He was a lonely boy without friends, and with only one real Mom, Lindsay. Melanie was rarely available, her daughter coming first, and when she was available, it was only to correct him.

During the time Gus was with them Brian and Justin tried to avoid the Toronto subject. As they were playing and spending time with Gus, they learned a little bit more about his living conditions and how the girls felt toward each other.

It was then Gus told his father that Melanie had slapped him several times. In hearing this Brian almost turned into his old self. What helped him the most was Gus saying that no matter what his Momma told him, he knew that almost everything was not true, and that he knew his father and Justin loved him. That evening Justin slept alone at the mansion while Brian spent the evening at Deb's giving Gus's mom a piece of his mind.

Brian sighed deeply remembering the conversation. First he tried diplomacy, asking Lindsay if everything was all right in Toronto. Lindsay sadly told him that without his money it was difficult some months, and she was glad he paid for some expenses.

Brian told her that nothing was too good for his son, and Lindsay smiled remembering the first cheque Brian had written a month after Gus's birth. He never asked for the money back, and now, he paid for almost everything that concerned Gus.

Slowly, he directed the discussion to the "no-funhouse" subject. Lindsay shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"Cut the crap and tell me what happened, because, I sure as fuck see that Gus isn't happy," Brian said while moving from his chair to stand along Debbie's kitchen sink.

"Well you know, everything isn't like we had planned," began Lindsay quietly, "it's a lot more

difficult than we thought, and a lot more, well, a lot more ..."

"A lot more what?" Brian asked in annoyance. He began to understand that both Mel and Linds were going to break up or they were thinking about coming back to Pittsburgh. Before he could express his thoughts, Mel stepped into the living room, looking at Lindsay then at Brian.

"Look, who's here; Was this visit planned?"

"No it wasn't planned, and I have the same right as you to be here. It's Debbie's house, not yours, as I recall."

"Yeah, well, what do you want?" Mel asked unkindly.

"I thought it would be a good time to say hello and ask a few questions about my son," Brian replied not disturbed with Mel's behavior.

"OUR son," stated Mel firmly back, her eyes shooting daggers between Brian and Lindsay.

Brian moved around the kitchen, grabbed a mug, and filled it with coffee, "Well, you know, OUR son, like you love to call him, told me lately that he hated his new home in Toronto. The school isn't great, that he didn't have any friends, and that he hated the rules you made for him."

"He will learn to appreciate Toronto, and he will learn to listen to me," shot back Melanie.

"The hell he will," Brian answered with a raised voice. "I didn't give you my parental rights so you could slap him when you're angry, or when you disagree with him! I gave you my parental rights because I thought he would be better without me, because I didn't feel I could raise a child."

"You have no rights to come in here and tell me how to raise MY son," yelled Melanie.

"OUR SON, Mel OUR son," Brian pointed out.

Lindsay, who was quiet until now stood up and moved between Brian and Mel. "Would you two just stop?"

She placed her hand on Brian's chest and pushed him slightly backwards, while she grabbed Mel's forearm and held her firmly in place. She stood between them looking back and forth, trying to cope with everything.

"You ... you, God you can be so childish, sometimes," she finally said turning toward Brian, who looked at her like she had just lost her mind.

"I'm what?" he gasped.

"So childish sometimes. Brian, Gus is under our care, Mel and I are trying to educate Gus the best way that ..."

"By what, slapping him when he asks to speak with me or Justin? Punishing him when he wants to see us or maybe by lying to him, when you're telling him that Justin and I are apart. Maybe it makes you feel better to believe that so you feel less guilty for showing me that article in the Art Forum magazine. Is that your idea of true family Lindsay?"

"I, we, never, well, you know ... " Mel began, not able to finish her thoughts, knowing full well that Brian was right. She never should have slapped Gus even if it was a bad day, especially since she was really angry at Brian, not Gus.

Their conversation had stopped when they heard, "You did what?" coming from the doorway. It was Debbie and Carl who just came home from their visit to Michael's house where Jenny was spending the night. While Debbie moved into the kitchen Carl made a silent escape for the first floor knowing that Debbie would chew a new one at everyone in the kitchen.

"Listen Debbie, it happened just a few times. I lost control of my emotions, and Gus, well he was a handful, he disobeys me all the time, and he pushed too far..." Mel tried to explain.

"Listen to me, I don't give a shit what made you slap Gus, but I can tell you one thing, I never raised my hand to Michael, just because he disobeyed me. It's not the way I imagine you raising children."

"Deb, I never slapped JR."

"Of course not, she's your daughter, and Gus is only Lindsay's and my son," Brian interjected bitterly.

"Listen you asshole," began Mel, only to be cut off by Debbie. "No, you listen I don't give a shit why you moved up there and took the children with you. What I give a shit about is that you respect them, BOTH of them, do you hear me. There should be no difference, because one is Michael's child and the other Brian's."

"Gus is Lindsay's and mine and JR is OUR daughter," spat Melanie.

"What?" Debbie asked in confusion.

Brian huffed and bitterly explained, "Well seems the little evil devil didn't tell you everything Debbie." Debbie looked at Brian, her brow furrowed. "You know that Michael didn't give up his parental rights, like I did," Debbie nodded, "But after they decided to give it a go, they never considered asking me if I wanted my parental rights back."

Debbie looked between the girls and Brian and asked out the blue, "Do you want your rights back?"

"I..."

She moved quickly and grabbed Brian's chin, "Don't think, Brian, just answer." Brian slowly nodded his head and whispered, "Yeah, I wouldn't mind," and stopped talking.

"You didn't know you would love him, huh kiddo," Debbie asked softly. Brian shook his head and she patted his cheek, "And more important you didn't think that he would love you."

Lindsay looked over at Mel and saw the defeated look in her eyes. Then she looked over at Brian and saw the pain in his eyes, and whispered, "Oh my god, what have we done?"

"What are you talking about?" Mel asked.

"Do you realize what we have done?"

"Created a family," Melanie huffed,

"No, we made them different, our daughter has a father, our son, doesn't."

"Fuck you Lindsay. You agreed with that, you were there when we decided," said Mel angrily. "Like always, Brian, it's your fault."

"Why, because I asked what's going on in Toronto? Because even if you think that I have no right to Gus I still care, because I send you money, because I defend my son who can't because he's too young. Because I think that, you played me, or maybe because I think you played Justin. Tell me if I'm right, or it is all of the above."

"Mel, maybe..." began Lindsay, but she stopped mid-sentence when she heard Brian's cell rang.

Brian opened his cell and listened to the other person on the phone. He looked at his watch and said, "No, I'm leaving in less than ten minutes, I'll be there in no time, yeah, I'm fine, thanks." While speaking he turned his back to everyone in the room and passed his hand over his chest, stopping at the bump where he felt his ring. He inhaled deeply, and finished the conversation. When he closed the phone and turned toward everyone, he was much calmer than before.

"Gus can stay with me, until January 2<sup>nd</sup>, that's the plan am I right?" he asked Lindsay, who nodded her agreement. "You won't barge into my home, without notice. You won't call every five minutes to know if he's all right, and you won't come before January 2<sup>nd</sup> to take him, is that clear?" Again, Lindsay nodded.

"As for the money I send you, I would seriously think about the fact that without my money you couldn't live there. If I really wanted I could get my parental rights to Gus without too much trouble. I assume you got the mail?" Looking at both women he knew they had gotten it, "Don't push me, you won't win, neither of you."

With that last comment, he leaned over to Debbie and kissed her on the cheek, "Good night, Deb."

"Take care kiddo."

And with that Brian walked to the door. He never heard what happened in the kitchen once he left.

\* \* \* \*

As planned Gus left Brian's on January 2<sup>nd</sup> and clung to his father like a lifeline. He made Brian promise to call that evening. Lindsay assured Brian that everything would be fine, and that she would call the moment they landed.

A few days later, Justin went back to New York.

Brian and Justin were fine during the first semester, traveling back and forth between Toronto, New York, and Pittsburgh. During that time Justin graduated, and began to come home more often, giving Brian some rest from traveling constantly between the two cities. When Justin came back for the weekend they usually spent it at the loft, but when he came home for a little longer they stayed at the house. When Justin came back the first time after Christmas the work on the loft was done, and they could move between the third and the top floor without going outside.

A few weeks later Justin began to be increasingly involved with Kinnetik and his six-month long show. Even while they had tough schedules, Justin made sure to keep their routine. They were online almost every evening and spent most of their weekends together. During Gus's school break, the little boy spent his time with them at Britin. They even spent some time at Justin's when the opportunity was available.

\* \* \* \*

The first time Gus went to New York, Brian and Justin had to childproof the NY loft. Once the loft was childproofed, they decided to put Gus in the bedroom with them more for safety than anything else. But Gus told them he was old enough and wanted to sleep on the futon cushion in the living room.

It was those moments Gus loved the most. Because it was time he spent with his father and Justin; it was also moments he cherished because he didn't have to prove anything to his father or Justin, unlike he had to with Melanie and Lindsay.

Even if Brian spent time with his son and his lover, he couldn't stop the suffering he felt each time one of them returned 'home'. But that wasn't what pushed Brian to trick.

\* \* \* \*

Brian huffed when he remembered the circumstances.

**\*\*July 2006\*\***, Justin was dealing with his show. He had more and more pressure from Miranda, so he was on line less and less. Brian felt neglected, he went to Babylon, and as he stood there he felt out of place. Babylon didn't have the same appeal that it once had. He missed something - Justin. He went to the catwalk and looked at the moving crowd beneath him, when Ted appeared standing next to him.

"See anything you like?" Ted asked, while looking down.

"No, you?"

"I have what I need at home, thanks," Ted smiled at Brian.

"How are Mr. and Ms Schmidt doing?"

"We're fine, thank you. You?"

"Justin's busy with his new show, Daphne has a late class, Gus is in Toronto, and I'm here."

"Checking out the next victim?"

"No, just checking out how my club is doing. It's been a while since I was here at night, at least," Brian answered with his trademark grin.

"Oh, do you want something to drink?" Ted asked while moving to the staircase.

"No thanks, but you can go and get something for you."

Brian followed Ted downstairs and headed to the exit when he was hit on by a gorgeous tall young man late twenties, early thirties, brown hair, green eyes. Ted watched from his spot near the bar and smiled when Brian shook his head, 'no' and read on Brian's lips 'I'm not interested.'

Ted shook his head, damn the lion was really tamed.

Brian smiled to himself, knowing full well that the man he just rejected was quite hot, but when he looked in his eyes, he didn't see what he was looking for. He only saw lust and desire. And most of all, he wasn't Justin.

Brian headed back to the loft, logged on to his computer, and sent an email to Justin.

### **\*\*September 2006\*\***

The biggest shock for Brian happened in September 2006 when he opened the mail and saw some legal papers.

The papers set up Lindsay, Melanie, Brian, and Justin with joint custody of Gus.

A letter from Melanie was with the papers. She wrote that she thought it would be easier this way if something happened to Gus when he was at Brian's. Brian could make decisions about his son. She also wrote she finally understood why Brian gave up his parental rights, and that it was her way to say thank you.

It was one of the best moments in Brian's life besides the day he became a father and met Justin.

That day, he asked Cynthia to clear his schedule for the rest of the day and the next one. He left early, took the first flight to New York, and celebrated with Justin who also received the same paper that needed his signature. In his letter, such simple words were written from Melanie, "In case Gus is staying only with you."

\* \* \* \*

A few days after the great news, Michael called Brian telling him that Hunter was at the hospital due to an allergic reaction toward one of his meds, and that he needed him there. Brian tried to explain that he couldn't fly back anytime soon as he was in Chicago, and that Ben would be more helpful than he would be.

Brian knew that that he would hurt Michael's feelings, but this was all for the best. Michael called him an asshole, and Brian told him the old times when he dropped everything to run to him were over. In short terms he had a business to run.

Brian had to deal with 'Queen Michael' for a week until Hunter called and told Brian that it was just an allergy and that he had stayed in the hospital only a few hours.

Brian was glad that Hunter was fine. He knew that Michael couldn't deal with him or Ben being sick again.



\* \* \* \*

In **October 2006**, Brian decided to celebrate their 'non-commitment' anniversary. He couldn't believe that one-year ago he put a ring on Justin's finger and that he decided to give the tricking up. For that special occasion, that accomplishment, he reserved a suite in the Mandarin Oriental Hotel in New York. They stayed four days at the hotel before heading back to the loft.

Brian stayed a little longer than a week. He took the opportunity to visit some clients, and see some places. His desire to open a branch of Kinnetik in New York was more powerful than before.

He finally made his choice just before Thanksgiving 2006. He discussed all the possibilities with Ted, Cynthia, and Justin, and finally chose to stay where he started his firm: Pittsburgh and expanded his company there. He could always start another branch later should he choose to. Once he had made his decision, Brian began to hire more people and even let Justin manage the art department interviews.

Once Kinnetik's clients knew that Brian had more people working for him and, a new art department it allowed the company to expand into new levels where they were able to work and promote websites.

\* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, Justin's own show was running in Manhattan, six months of showing all his art. For the show, he created new pieces, and he was showing old ones too. Once the show started and was running, Justin concentrated on another important project and personal wish, **TJay's Art**, Kinnetik's subdivision, in charge of all the graphic web designs for the ad campaigns.

At first Brian was reluctant, but he agreed because it was a real personal accomplishment for Justin. Brian knew that Kinnetik needed a good web design firm. Most of his clients asked for an ad package with a website integrated. And as he liked to say, he only hired the best. And with Justin, he knew he had the best on board.

\* \* \* \*

March 2007

Ten months prior to march 2007, Lindsay called Brian to tell him that she and Melanie had officially broken up.

Brian laughed at the news, asking who had cheated and with whom. Lindsay told him that neither she nor Melanie had cheated; it was just a mutual decision that was necessary for both of them. Lately they were arguing over everything and nothing. Even a book that was on the wrong shelf was a motive for an argument. Mel progressively lost interest in raising Gus, and it was something more to add to the list of why they were breaking up.

When Brian finally assimilated everything Lindsay told him, he drove to the airport and took the first flight available to New York. When he landed, he took a taxi to Justin's loft. That night, he vented his anger. He was in complete pain management mode. Usually, in this state of mind, he went to Babylon and tricked. But the way he was acting and yelling at Justin, Justin knew that something was up.

The next morning, Brian was the first up, He avoided all the mirrors and tried to sneak out of the loft unnoticed by Justin, but failed miserably. Justin told Brian that he would be forgiven if Brian told him what had happened that had made him such an emotional wreck. Brian shook his head and headed back to Pittsburgh. Two days later he was back in front of Justin's door with a bag of food and some pot.

It was that night Brian talked and told Justin everything. Justin held him tightly, and repeated over and over that they were fine, really fine.

\* \* \* \*

May 2007

Eight months ago, Lindsay called again, and that was the moment, Brian decided to avoid Justin and go to Babylon.

Lindsay called one night, after Brian had had a very bad day, and told him that she had a great opportunity to go to France to teach and work and that she planned to take Gus with her.

As Brian heard the news, he threw his phone across the room, changed into his club clothes and headed directly to Babylon. Daphne, who heard the crash, followed him. She wanted to be sure Brian was all right. As she arrived at Babylon, Brian had already downed three shots and was in the backroom.

Brian spent over an hour in the backroom. Once he came out, he headed straight to the bar, and asked for a shot, and another, and another. He was on his fourth when he saw Daphne leaning nearby. She didn't say anything, just took him by the arm, and led him out to the car. During the ride home Brian made her stop. He got sick and threw up. Daphne thought it was because of all the shots he had drunk in the short time he was at the club but Brian knew better. It wasn't from the booze, it was something else, and it was something he couldn't figure out. Once he was back in the car again, he shut his eyes and tried to analyze his sick feeling.

After they got home, Daphne put him into bed. She hoped she could get him to talk, but she didn't.

The next morning Brian stood up alone and hung-over worse than he'd been in the last two years. He was still sick but now, it was clear as to why.

The day he and Justin exchanged their rings in their non-conventional way, even if he hadn't promised Justin anything, he made himself a promise, to stop tricking, even when things were at their worst. Even hung over, he remembered what he did the night before. Knowing he had done the one thing he promised he would never do, only made the sick feeling in the pit of his stomach rise to his throat in a deep burn. In Brian's eyes he had tricked and cheated on Justin and there was no excuse.

In the next couple of days, Brian tried to avoid all video contact with Justin, which brought the blond directly back to Pittsburgh, the one place Brian didn't need him to be right at this very moment. Justin didn't ask, he didn't judge, he knew. It was late when he arrived at the loft. He let himself in, closed the door slowly, and headed to the bedroom where Brian was sleeping rather restlessly. The moment he stepped into the bedroom and saw the condom packets on Brian's nightstand, he knew.

He discarded his clothes and slipped between the covers. He spooned Brian and held him tightly, whispering, "It will be all right."

Justin couldn't be angry toward Brian. He had never asked him to change, and yet Brian had changed. Justin also knew that Brian didn't do anything he didn't want to do. So he could only imagine that if Brian broke his own rule, it must be something huge that pushed him over the edge.

The next morning, Brian was the first up. He let Justin sleep and left for the office without a good-bye. Around ten, Justin showed up at Kinnetik and Brian didn't acknowledge him, he told him to leave the same way he did when he had the cancer. He told him to go back to New York, to be powerful and great, and be the best gay artist in the world. He told Cynthia that he had a meeting and dismissed Justin by closing his office door behind him.

Cynthia told Justin, "The last week at Kinnetik had been hell. Brian barely ate, barely slept. He was in the office early and went home very late."

Justin looked at the closed door, defeat written all over his face, he shrugged, and headed toward the new office addition that held his firm and the art department. He looked at the heavy glass door engraved with **'TJay's Art'**, and opened it.

He grabbed the new files on his desk, headed out and walked toward Brian's door. He could hear the meeting taking place in the board room. Justin sighed, he knew that for the moment Brian needed some space, with a last glimpse at Brian's door and a good-bye to Cynthia, he decided to head back to New York.

\* \* \* \*

Three days later, Michael called Justin to ask him to come home as soon as possible because Brian was in self-destruction mode. Justin told him even if he wanted to come home and help, he couldn't do anything, and Brian had to handle it himself.

It was when Daphne called the next day to tell him that Brian was sick and in the hospital that he raced back home.

It appeared that Brian had worked nonstop from Tuesday through Friday, with no food, and only beam, coffee, beer and some water. Friday night he hit Babylon, took some E, and while talking with Emmett at the bar, collapsed into his arms.

In a few days, Brian had succeeded in doing what had taken Justin six months when he first went to New York - he was dehydrated and malnourished. As Justin stepped into the room, Brian was both relieved and angry. Justin stayed a week to help Brian to get back into shape and work on some of Kinnetik's urgent accounts.

After his release, Brian was advised to see a psychiatrist. He huffed at the nurse, but took the address she gave him.

Brian and Justin didn't talk about what happened. Justin told him the same thing he had said the night he first took a plane to New York, that they didn't need rings or vows to prove that they loved each other.

After a week, Brian took Justin to the airport and said they would have to talk about the new accounts in New York, and how to handle them properly. He added that they were fine.

Once Justin had left, Brian headed to his first appointment with the psychiatrist.

\* \* \* \*

Brian found unexpected support in Ben and Daphne. Both friends took time to speak with him and helped him to get over his reluctance to see a psychiatrist.

Both helped Brian more than Michael's freaking out attitude, or Debbie's and Jennifer's hovering.

Even Cynthia helped him, in her own way, she lightened his schedule for a few days so he could at least regroup and face his demons.

He spent a lot of time on his computer, speaking with Gus, and Lindsay, but trying to avoid too much contact with Justin. Daphne tried to spend most of her free time with him.

One evening as Michael was at his mother's, Ben and Hunter stopped by with food and a movie. Brian called downstairs and asked Daphne to join them. Strangely enough, they had a nice evening. When Ben asked Brian how he was doing, Brian moved into the kitchen and leaned on the counter. Surprisingly, he answered every one of Ben's questions.

Hunter took advantage and asked Daphne some questions about Justin, and that's how Hunter and Ben learned some pieces of Brian's and Justin's life and relationship. Hunter had a new respect for them, and excused himself again for all the bad-mouthing he had done toward them in the past.

Ben asked Brian if he felt better now that he had spoken about his past. Brian laughed and told him. "No, but you do." Ben laughed too, and told him, no, because what Brian said was sad enough and that Brian only got some light in his life when he found Justin. Reluctantly Brian agreed with him and said what he told Justin so long ago, "Now you know why Debbie calls him Sunshine, it's because when he arrives somewhere he brings light with him."

Ben looked over at Brian and said, "My you're a softy."

"Yeah but don't tell anyone," Brian answered over his beer.

"Your secret is safe with me, Brian," Ben said with a smile.

The rest of the evening went smoothly, Ben and Hunter left around 11pm, and Daphne headed downstairs, as Brian moved into the bedroom to place a call to the most important person in his life.

\* \* \* \*

## **June 2007**

Brian and Justin worked hard to get their relationship back on track after Brian's tricking. They were doing fine, but they never had counted on Justin's dad.

Brian was in Atlanta seeing a new client a potentially big account, when everything happened.

Justin was working on a new painting for another solo-show when he heard a knock on the door. He put down his brush and opened the door to see a man clothed in a formal black suit.

"Are you Justin Taylor?"

"Yes."

"Here, this is for you, have a nice day."

The man handed him a heavy envelope from a law firm in Pittsburgh and left. Justin frowned when he opened it and saw the papers that were inside. It was a restraining order forbidding him to approach Molly Taylor and a legal letter that disowned him from the Taylor family. He couldn't talk to Molly or see her even at his mother's house. He couldn't have anything to do with the Taylors in Pittsburgh, because as far as his father was concerned he didn't exist anymore.

Justin read the papers twice before he picked up his phone with trembling hands and called his mother. She didn't answer, so he left a message. Then he called Brian, but that call went straight to voicemail also. He waited over an hour and tried again to call his mother.

She finally picked up the phone on the fourth ring. He didn't tell her right away why he called, but asked her if everything was all right.

She said that everything was fine, but that Molly had a little accident and was in the hospital. When Justin asked what happened, Jennifer told him that Molly got into a fight and that she had broken her left forearm and sprained her knee. Justin was speechless, and asked who had done that to his sister.

Calmly Jennifer told him that she was late picking Molly up at school Wednesday afternoon, and Craig hadn't answered his phone, so Molly called the only other phone she had on her notebook - Brian.

He went to the school, picked her up, and brought her back to the loft, where she stayed on the third floor, doing her homework until Jennifer came to pick her up later that evening.

The next day the school called her. Molly had been taken to the hospital, because she had gotten into a fight.

Justin listened without saying a word, too astonished and too shocked to say anything. Once he got his voice back he asked if she knew what triggered Molly's fight. Jennifer told him that she personalized one of her notebooks by putting a picture of Brian and Justin on the front. Hearing his mother's explanation Justin asked, "Which picture?" Jennifer told him it was a picture taken with Gus during Christmas 2005.

Justin had to smile he remembered the moment perfectly. It was in the afternoon; Brian was sitting on the sofa, Justin at his feet with Gus in his lap. They were speaking about something, Brian leaned over him and put his arms around Justin's shoulder, and Gus was looking up, smiling. Justin remembered the moment and the picture so well that he created a painting almost from memory from that moment and sent it to Brian. The canvas was now hanging in Brian's office, just over the sofa in view of every visitor. Brian was very proud of it.

Sadly, the picture didn't suit Molly's class friends and one of them thought it would be great to

tease her about her fag brother. She didn't appreciate the idea and stood her ground. The fifteen-year-old girl, who was on the basketball team and who had taken some self-defense classes tried to defend his brother's reputation. The young boy that dismissed her opinion shoved her in the lockers and she did the same. Of course, Molly was alone and the homophobic friend was with a whole crew, they stepped into the fight and Molly fought back tooth and nail, until a teacher came to stop the fighting. She stayed overnight at the hospital and would go home today.

Justin asked his mother if Craig knew about the picture. Jennifer answered yes, because Molly had the notebook with her at the hospital. While she answered Justin's questions, she wondered why he was calling. First he tried to avoid the question but then after a few minutes he told her that he had gotten some legal papers asking him to stay away from his sister and that from now on, he could only come to see her when Molly wasn't home.

Jennifer wanted to call her ex and tell him what kind of asshole he was but Justin managed to convince her to let it drop, that he still could talk to Molly via email. Reluctantly Jennifer had no other choice but to agree, and asked him when he planned to come home. He told her absently in a little while, maybe a week or two. He told her to say hi to Molly and hung up. He sat down on the kitchen barstool and looked again over the papers that had come today, with complete shock and astonishment.

He tried Brian's cell again but it went straight to voicemail, which seemed to be a common thing of late.

He sat there for a little while, before he made a call that he thought he would never have to make - he called his father. His wife or girlfriend, Lori answered. He asked for his father, and waited until Craig picked up the phone.

His father said "Hello" but didn't speak right away. Justin thought that he didn't recognize his voice, and asked slowly, "Dad? Are you there?"

"You have no right to call me Dad, you lost that right the day you left our home with that man."

"Brian, Dad, his name is Brian."

"I don't care what his name is."

"I got your papers today," Justin said.

"I know. I got a call earlier this afternoon, telling me the restraining order had been delivered," Craig said bluntly.

"Why?" asked Justin.

"Why what?" exploded his father. "Why did I issue this restraining order? Or why don't I have a son anymore?"

"Both."

"I don't have a son since said son, told me he's a fag and decided to leave his home. As for the restraining order, you haven't seen what your sister looks like."

"No."

"Well it's all your fault and I don't want to lose another child," Craig said defiantly.

"You didn't lose me, I'm still here, and the only thing you have to do is try to understand who I am. Not who I could have been," Justin explained in a pained voice to his father.

"No Justin, I had hopes and dreams for you, I imagined you at Dartmouth. You should have been a businessman, maybe then you would still be here, here with me and your sister, a family. You would even be working for Taylor Electronics. You should be living with a nice girl. I should be a grandfather." Craig huffed, "No, you preferred your disgusting lifestyle, you preferred your twisted and perverted relationship with a man. That's why I called my lawyer and we drew up the papers you got today," finished his father bluntly.

"You will never get it will you? You will never understand that I prefer men over women." Justin inhaled deeply, it was time to try to explain himself, "You ... you know, I slept with a girl, and I was her first, but I couldn't lie to myself, I don't love women, and I love one man, Brian. So ... I still hope you would understand," Justin finished sadly. .

"I wish, I wish, Justin, I wish I could, but I can't. Sometimes it would be so simple ... "

A silence crept between both of them.

"It would be simpler if what, Da..., Craig," Justin slowly asked.

"Maybe, that day, it would have been better, if..., " Craig sighed heavily, "There would be less trouble."

Justin gasped at the underlying wish Craig had just expressed.

"You think really that your life would be better without me? Do you really wish Chris had murdered me?" Justin asked with a shocked voice.

"I..., it would have been so much simpler. I would still have a son."

"You have me, Dad, I'm still here," cried Justin into the phone.

"No, I lost you the day you chose that man over me. I wanted you to be happy, I wanted you to get married, have a family, have a future," said his father into the phone.

"I have a future Dad, and I'm doing pretty well. I'm married, maybe not in the eyes of God, but I'm married to that wonderful man I fell in love with seven years ago, and I HAVE A FAMILY. God, Dad, can you just accept that? Why did you have to do this? You could have called; I could have planned my trip back to Pittsburgh around Molly's plans, to avoid her. You didn't have to do this. You didn't have to draw up those papers. I would have ... I would have done what you asked, Dad," finished Justin in a tiny voice.

"I want our family back, like it was before all that crap, can you return that to me? No. Therefore, I did the only thing I was capable of doing, preventing what's left of my family from getting indoctrinated by you. I struck you out. You don't exist anymore. You don't exist anymore."

Justin wanted to say something but heard the line go dead. He looked dumbfounded at the phone and slowly closed it.

He tried to stand but fell back on the stool, his legs wouldn't work, and his whole body was shaking. He was on the verge of a panic attack.

He finally regained some hold over his emotions, grabbed his cell again, and dialed Brian's number, but like the two other times, it went straight to voicemail. This time he left a message, "Please call me back, I need to talk to you." It was just after eight. He couldn't believe that he had spent his whole day looking over those papers. Justin now sat on the sofa looking over the city. When he looked back at the clock, it was nearly ten and Brian had still not called back. Justin looked at his phone and decided to call Ted, to see if Brian would be able to call him back tonight or not. When Ted answered, Justin asked him if Brian would be available anytime soon. Ted told him that Brian was in Atlanta to handle a 65 million dollar account. It was a three-star hotel chain that wanted to change the look of their campaign in magazines and on TV. Then in two or three months, the client would change all their websites. Justin understood that Brian couldn't be disturbed.

\* \* \* \*

Justin moved into the kitchen and opened the cabinet holding the hard stuff. He grabbed a bottle of tequila and a glass, looked at both items, left the glass, and drank directly from the bottle. Once the alcohol began to kick in, he moved into the bedroom, took a shower, and changed into club clothes. He needed to get out badly.

First he stopped at the bar that he had taken Brian to the first time he had come to New York. It was a cool gay club not far from their loft. He spent an hour or so at the bar, drinking beam shot after shot.. Toward midnight he moved to the Pulse, the discotheque he went to from time to time,

mostly during the weekends when Brian was there. They usually spent an hour or two there, and then they went back to the loft, alone, to enjoy themselves.

But tonight, Justin made a big mistake. First he mixed his alcohol, and then, once at the Pulse, he accepted a bump from a stranger. After half an hour, Justin who was past drunk and tweaked found the perfect trick in the moving crowd.

The trick was in his late twenties, good-looking, muscular with a slender body, tall, brown hair, and green eyes with a brown fleck in them, everything that a drunken Justin would fall for. The trick molded his body behind Justin's and they began to dance together. No one on the dance floor could ignore the couple. One dance, two dances, and the trick produced a small vial of white powder. He didn't ask twice and Justin took the vial.

Toward three in the morning, Justin took the trick home with him. Once at the NY loft, they ended up fucking and making out on the couch in the living room. Justin was far too gone to care about anything or anyone.

\* \* \* \*

In Atlanta, Brian was back at the hotel. He had just come back from his late business dinner, and he turned on his cell-phone. He checked his messages, and heard the one from Justin; he looked at the time and decided it was too late to call him. It could wait until tomorrow morning. But then he heard Jennifer's frantic voice asking him to do everything possible to get to New York as soon as possible because her asshole ex-husband had put a restraining order on Justin. She was very concerned, because Lori had called her, and said that the exchange between father and son was really bad. The message ended with, I don't want to lose my son Brian, and I love you both.

Brian closed his cell-phone and pinched the bridge of his nose. He was in the hallway at the hotel and changed his plans for the rest of the night. He walked to the front desk and asked Maria the concierge to book a one-way seat on the next flight to New York. He said he had a family emergency and needed to be there as soon as possible.

Twenty minutes later Maria called him in his room. She had booked him on the first flight that would leave at 6:45am and he would be in New York just before 9:00. Brian packed everything and headed downstairs, where Maria called for a car to drive him to the airport.

\* \* \* \*

The day had been frantic and he was glad he had closed the account. It was teamwork that paid off this time. He had been in meetings from 10-yesterday morning until 3 tonight. But of course he managed to land the account.

Brian knew in his dazy haze that he must have dozed off because he didn't remember the ride to the airport. The chauffeur told him that his flight would leave in less than an hour. Brian thanked him, and headed to his gate.

One of the privileges of being in business class is being able to board before everyone else. Maria had made a good reservation, last seat by the window, no one near him. Brian made himself comfortable and dozed off for the next two and a half hours.

It was near 10:00 AM as Brian opened the door to the loft. The air smelled of sex and cologne. He knew it would be bad, a strange pair of shoes was in the entry, and a streak of clothes led to the living room. He followed the clothes, and found Justin and his one night stand still sleeping on the couch. Fortunately, they hadn't done it in their bed. Looking around he was also relieved when he saw the discarded condoms near the couch. He thought about how to handle the situation, and decided to stay calm.

He went to the kitchen, prepared a pot of coffee and the dishes for breakfast. Once he had done that, he retrieved all the trick's clothes and threw them on the guy's back. That made the trick stir and he opened his eyes slowly.

"Hey,"

"Out,"

"Huh," said the trick with an astonished look on his face.

"I said out," Brian repeated.

"You're his roommate?"

"No, I'm his partner, and I said OUT. NOW."

"Ok, can I at least take a shower?"

Brian began moving around the couch in an attempt to get the trick up and out of the loft, when he heard a muffled groan from Justin.

"Mmmmph,"

"Good Morning, Sunshine, did you sleep well?" Brian asked sarcastically, while handing him a bottle of water and two aspirin he retrieved just before moving into the living room.

"Oh God, what happened last night? When did you get here?" asked Justin swallowing the pills. When he opened his eyes again, he noticed movement at the end of the couch and tried to focus on the person putting on his clothes. When he finally focused and saw the trick still there, he closed his eyes again, muttering, "Shit."

"You can say that again, Sunshine," Brian said. Then turning toward the trick he said, "I told you before, get lost, now."

The trick glanced one last time at Justin, but Brian moved to stand in his line of sight. The man finally turned around and left. Brian walked behind him and closed the door. He stood there a few minutes, resting his head against the door, trying to get hold of his emotions, of his hurt, of fucking everything.

As he turned around, he inhaled deeply, "That went well, don't you think?"

"What are you doing here?" muttered Justin.

"Your mom called me, and told me to come here and look after you."

"Fuck."

"You already said that. Do you want to tell me? I promise I won't..." Brian put his arms around Justin's shoulder, "I saw you were safe last night, obviously my safety lesson must have paid off, I really want to..." Brian stopped as Justin pulled away. His hand flew up to his mouth and he ran upstairs to the bathroom.

Brian waited a few seconds and followed him, only to find Justin on his knees in front of the toilet emptying his stomach. Justin was dry heaving since his stomach was empty. Brian helped him to his feet and moved him toward the shower. He turned it on, and was about to shed his clothes when Justin said, "I can do it alone."

Brian waited outside the shower until Justin was finished and handed him his bathrobe. He waited for Justin to say something, but Justin stayed silent.

They sat on the bed, while Brian massaged Justin's right hand. Justin looked over and stood up, he moved to the window, and lifted his hands to take off the necklace. Brian looked mesmerized at what Justin was doing and understood what was happening the second Justin lifted his arms.

"Oh, no Sunshine, don't dare to do that, not today, not tomorrow, never... "

"I can't keep it, I cheated ..."

"Yeah and what I did last time was... what playing cards?"

"You never promised me anything."



"Bullshit, I told you I took a chance on love - that means I promised to love you no matter what. You didn't throw me out when I screwed up, so cut the crap. Do you want to talk about what happened last night?"

"I went out, got drunk, took some hard stuff, brought a trick home, and fucked him," stated Justin bluntly, while going downstairs to the kitchen.

"No shit, I figured that out. No smart-ass, I was asking what happened before that, what happened?"

"Oh that."

"Yeah that."

"Here," Justin handed Brian the papers he had gotten the day before, and saw the impact they had. Brian began to pace their living room and took out his cell.

"What are you doing, Brian?"

"Telling your asshole of a father what I think," barked Brian.

"I don't have a father anymore," Justin added in a pained voice, handing the last paper to Brian. "I called him and asked him to try to accept me the way I am. He said that he couldn't and he never would and that maybe it would have been better for everyone if I had never woken up on that hospital bed."

Brian's head snapped up when he heard Justin's words, "What?"

"You heard me right," Justin sighed heavily. "I tried to explain to him that I was committed to the man I love, that I had a family. Maybe not the way he wanted it but I tried explaining him that I had everything he wished for me. He of course didn't listen to anything I had to say his mind is set, he's not going to change, Brian, he just struck me out his life, like I never existed, I wanted... I just wanted... Fuck!"

"So that's why I found an empty bottle of tequila and beam? You wanted to ease your pain?" Brian knew from his own experience what good that coping method does. "God only knows what else you took last night," added Brian moving to wrap his arms around Justin.

Justin sighed heavily, "I can't remember a time in my life when I felt so lost. I don't know where I belong, it's just so..., "

Brian inhaled deeply, he had to say something, he couldn't let Justin be alone in this, and for all those time he didn't say anything, he finally said, "Here, you belong here, exactly where you are at this very moment, nowhere else, never anywhere else," Brian whispered in his ear. "Never anywhere else."

If Justin didn't break down before, he did now. He turned into Brian's embrace and cried silently. Brian didn't move and didn't say anything he just let Justin cry.

Brian stayed a week in New York, proving to his lover that no matter what happened, together they were stronger.

When he left, Justin had somehow made peace with himself and accepted that he no longer had a father.

\* \* \* \*

**\*\*July 2007\*\***

Melanie had moved back to Pittsburgh a few months before, just before Lindsay got her job opportunity. Melanie moved back because she needed the money to raise JR. She was able to get her old job back. She even found a little apartment not far away from Michael, much to Michael's joy.

If Mel moved back to save money, Lindsay moved back because Gus was depressed. She made this decision while Gus was with his father and Justin in Pittsburgh. She had ten days to work everything out and put things into perspective.

Like Mel, Lindsay had the opportunity to also get her old job back and went back to work at Sydney Bloom's gallery, but never dropped the idea to go work in France

\* \* \* \*

When they had moved to Toronto, Gus was at the top of his class. Now that Mel and Lindsay weren't together anymore, he was falling behind in school. He was often brooding in his room or crying over pictures from Pittsburgh. Brian noticed the subtle change. When he came to Toronto, Gus was silent and never left his father's side. At first he thought it was because he missed him, but it was bigger than that.

Two weeks before Lindsay made the decision to move back, she called Brian asking if Gus had phoned. Brian told her he was in New York with Justin, and no, Gus hadn't called. When Brian asked what happened, Lindsay said that she had dropped Gus off at school that morning but that he wasn't there anymore. The teacher told her that Gus left school around noon.

They were arguing on the phone, when Justin's cell rang. It was someone from the bus station in Toronto, asking to speak to Mr. Justin Taylor. He said they had a little seven-year-old boy there, telling them he was going to New York this afternoon to be with a Mr. Justin Taylor.

First Justin thought about telling them they should call Lindsay, but after hearing the man insist, he changed his mind. He snatched Brian's phone from him in the middle of his argument with Lindsay and told Lindsay that their son had run away and was waiting for her at the bus station. He hung up, took his own cell again, and asked to speak to Gus.

The boy was crying. It took Justin over a half hour to explain to Gus that he couldn't just run off without telling anyone, and that Lindsay was worried sick about his disappearance. That's the moment Gus broke down, and told them that he wanted to come to New York and live with them.

It was also the moment Lindsay arrived at the bus station and heard her son's confession. She decided then it was time to move back.

In fact it was better for everyone, less stress and more joy. Brian could see his son when he wanted, so could Melanie, and Gus could ask to go to his Momma or Dad when he wanted.

\* \* \* \*

It was during that time that Melanie learned that her cyst hadn't shrunk but instead was growing, and now she had to think about having surgery. Hopefully, it would be nothing. She tried to spend more time with Gus but the seven-year-old boy was a handful, and she couldn't deal with his stubbornness any longer, so she gave up, and let Gus see his father.

As Gus began to be a constant fact in Brian's life, meant he had to make more changes than he had thought. Brian tried to arrange his schedule around his son's plans. Taking him to school, or bringing him back home, the schedule was tight, but he made him less attentive at work.

It was then that Brian chose to move completely into the house. Mrs. Stevenson became the mother or rather another grandmother figure in Gus's life.

\* \* \* \*

He also asked Cynthia to find someone who could take care of Gus when he got out from school, and brought him to the office.

With the help from other parents, working at Kinnetik, Cynthia found a young person, who brought not only Gus to the office but also several other young children.

At first, it was rather unnoticed by Brian, but late one afternoon, he walked out of his office, stepped over a truck, and almost fell. He was about to say something, when Cynthia stepped in, "Don't, the children!"

"Cynthia, what the f... the heck is going on?"

"Well I found someone to stay with the children."

"I don't ask about that, who are all those children?"

"Your co-workers," Cynthia replied with a 'duh' expression.

"Do something, anything. They can stay here, but not in the main entrance."

"Sure boss."

A few days later, Cynthia told him that she had found a solution. The former bathhouse building wasn't used completely by Kinnetik and **'TJay's Art'**, maybe they could use the unused space to help out Childcare a few blocks away that needed more space. Brian looked up dumbfounded. He never thought that they could do that.

Cynthia had already called the head of the school and asked him to come and see the building. He was thrilled, so much space. It was now in Brian's hand, or rather, Kinnetik's hand to choose. After a few days, Brian agreed with that solution.

He told everyone, that he didn't do it for him, he did it for his son and the children of his coworkers.

All the paperwork, the building modifications and the approval where accomplished in record time, and in September, a Childcare facility had moved into the new building. 'Kinnetik's kids' were now just an arm's length away.

\* \* \* \*

Gus didn't bother Brian at all. In fact, one day in September, he looked at the calendar and realized that Gus had been with him for the last four days and neither Mel nor Lindsay had asked to see him. He called both mothers. Melanie excused herself, saying that she was on a difficult case, and that she couldn't take Gus, but that she would spend some time with him the next day at the park. As for Lindsay, she was preparing for her departure to France and she thought it was best for Gus and Brian to spend as much time as possible together. When he was silent, Lindsay told him that he would have Gus every holiday, and that she would be back every year for Christmas and the important moments in their extended family's lives.

He was glad to have Gus with him at the house. That night Gus prevented him from going out and losing himself in sex and drugs. Instead, he called Justin, who was already in a cab heading to Britin.

When Brian asked him how he knew, Justin only answered, "Lindsay at lunch." Brian nodded and let Justin take care of him.

That night, they spoke about Daphne's pregnancy wish. Brian thought it would be a good thing, but Justin knew that he was only trying to ease the pain about Gus's imminent leaving.

The next day, Justin called Daphne and asked her if she still wanted to have a baby. Two nights later, Brian and Justin were at the loft, during their fuck session they managed to collect Justin's cum into a little cup, and they brought it downstairs to a rather anxious and nervous Daphne.

She opted for the simple version, cum, cup, and Mel's help. No chemicals, no doctors. They would try until it worked, even if they needed to do it twenty times.

They tried two times and the tests were negative. The last time they tried was two weeks ago, and she hadn't done the test yet to know.

**\*\* December 2007 \*\***

He put the letter down, took his cell, and called Justin in New York. It was time to have an intimate

celebration again, but he couldn't help in being scared about Justin's results.

## **Chapter 2     The past everywhere.**

December and January fled by like a rush of wind. Justin's HIV test results were negative, and they celebrated for a week. Daphne kept the results of her test to herself until Christmas Eve when she gave Brian and Justin an envelope with her pregnancy test inside, it was finally a positive result.

Christmas 2007 was spent at Brian and Justin's house, with Mel and Lindsay staying with them. Britin had enough room to host the kids and the girls, even though they weren't together anymore.

Everyone was still together as the family they had all become.

Debbie and Carl - Debbie had finally accepted Carl's marriage proposal and married in late fall. Of course under Carl, Ben, and Michael's pressure, Deb finally said yes. It wasn't a religious ceremony, but a civil one. All that mattered in the end was being Mrs Horvath.

Ted and Blake moved in together a year earlier, in a new designer apartment. It was a new beginning for both of them. Ted kept his old apartment and leased it out.

Ben and Michael came with Hunter who brought Callie. When Hunter had come back after Babylon's bombing, he had returned to school. Callie slowly overcame her fears and they soon began dating again. They were over eighteen now, and Callie told her parents she wanted to live her own life. A few months later, Hunter and Callie had moved in together into Ted's old apartment, much to Michael and Ben's dismay. But they were fine; they managed their studies and their jobs well.

Emmett and Drew were still together, but for Christmas, Emmett came alone. Drew was with his family but there was always the next year.

Jennifer and Tucker, like Debbie and Carl, were still together. They hadn't decided if they would get married or not, but Tucker moved in with Jennifer just after Justin's first show in 2005.

Just before dinner, Molly appeared with her boyfriend Dylan. At first Jennifer and Justin tried to tell her she shouldn't be there, but she produced a paper from the court, stating that she could see her brother during Christmas. She explained that she had gone to the judge with the help of a court appointed lawyer, so she could spend Christmas with her mother and brother.

Mel had lost some weight and Linds was talking about moving to France. Brian told her that Christmas wasn't the best time to talk about leaving and that they would discuss it later.

Both children were happy. Gus gave the tour with everyone in tow but avoided one of the rooms. When Debbie asked why she couldn't go into the study, Gus told her, because it's Dad's and Justin's room only.

Jennifer smiled at Gus's comment. Leave it to the young Kinney to explain things bluntly.

Christmas dinner went smoothly, and it was decided that this time the gifts would be opened on Christmas Eve. It was nearly midnight, Gus was half asleep on the couch when everyone started to bring the gifts in.

Within ten minutes later Gus was wide awake and eagerly ripping the wrapping paper from his gifts.

The smallest gift was the best; it was an envelope containing two smaller envelopes labeled Brian and Justin. Each one ripped theirs open, and said out loud, "Oh My God, we're going to be parents."

Suddenly everyone was silent. Brian let Justin explain that since late June, Daphne had been trying to get pregnant with his sperm and that it had finally worked.

Mel smiled knowingly that she had helped Daphne the last time and she knew it would work; she

had just felt it.

Everybody congratulated the future parents. Mel told them that she was available if they needed someone to watch the baby anytime.

Brian laughed saying the baby wasn't even there yet, but thanks anyway.

Lindsay frowned and wondered if it was a good idea. Brian was busy with Kinnetik, and Justin was pretty busy also. Brian looked at her and told her that if he could take care of Gus for 7 days in a row without any problems, they would do fine with the baby.

Jennifer was thrilled and so was Deb, dumbfounded, they both had been silent. Deb had nothing to say for once in her life. After everyone left the house, Justin and Brian celebrated the best way they knew how, in their bedroom.

\* \* \* \*

## February 2008

Justin looked at the paper in his hand. He was running late for an appointment with Kinnetik's new client. He finally parked his car in the private parking, ran to the entrance unexpectedly bumping into someone.

"Sorry," said the man.

"Sorry's bullshit."

"Justin? Justin is that you."

"Shit," looking up, Justin was looking into Ethan's eyes.

"What are you doing here Justin?"

Justin moved to pass Ethan and kept walking, "Listen, I'm running late, I don't have time to talk."

"I'm heading there too, do you mind ..." Ethan said while gesturing toward the elevator.

"No."

They stepped into the elevator, and moved their hands together to the 24th floor, "Volto Inc."

"Sorry," Ethan said with a smile.

The ride was silent. Justin was trying to pretend that he wasn't standing next to Ethan and Ethan was trying to figure out why Justin was in his recording company building.

The elevator opened and they headed to the door at the end of the hall. Ethan slowed down and finally decided to wait and see where Justin was headed. It was definitely towards his producer's office. Ethan decided to wait at the front desk.

\* \* \* \*

The meeting with the producer Colleen Warthon, went well. She was not only impressed with Kinnetik and TJay's work, but also with what Justin had planned to use in promoting their new label and 'product'. She loved the color, the themes, and she also loved Justin, even if she suspected from first sight that he was gay.

She liked his style and his friendliness. That's why she agreed to hire Kinnetik even though the company was located in Pittsburgh.

\* \* \* \*

Justin smiled. He knew the artwork he had done for this project was excellent. He had used the

digital work from one of his paintings he had shown during his last show.

He knew from the start without a doubt the company would sign with them. He used the best painting he had to sell his work.

With a hint of nostalgia he remembered the last show in Manhattan a year ago it was a blast. All the paintings had sold that very night. He had made a great impression, and earned lots of money. He was not only an artist, but a successful one. He now chose when he wanted to paint and when and where he wanted to show his work.

He was living more in Pittsburgh than in New York lately, because his inspiration was there. A fucking inspiration it was. An extended family that loved him, but didn't know that he committed to Brian in October 2005. Brian and Justin had hidden it from everyone. What's that French adage again: 'Pour vivre heureux, vivons caches' (To live happily, live out of sight). That's one of Brian's favorite sayings.

They had managed to keep it secret the whole time, the rings rarely left their necklaces and the necklaces rarely left their necks. Brian removed his just before stepping into the gym, but the rest of the time it was around his neck. They found it easier to wear t-shirts and shorts around Gus than to answer twenty questions.

Daphne knew, but didn't say anything. Gus discovered it one morning just after the Manhattan exhibition. Justin was in Pittsburgh and staying at the loft. Gus was playing in the living room and Brian was in the kitchen, when Justin emerged shirtless from the bedroom toward a shirtless Brian standing in the kitchen.

After a moment of panic, Brian and Justin made the little boy swear that it was their secret.

\* \* \* \*

Justin had been working on the "Volto Inc" account for the last four weeks, and he knew the moment he displayed the idea and the art that he had won. It was a \$25,000,000 account, national cover, signed for three years. He left Colleen's office with a smile - Kinnetik had won, again.

As he stepped out of Colleen's office, he was thinking about taking Brian on vacation when he returned to Pittsburgh, but his thoughts were interrupted when he saw Ethan waiting at the head desk.

"Hey."

"What are you still doing here?" Justin asked.

"Waiting for you. You got the deal?" Ethan asked casually.

"Uh, yeah," replied Justin.

"They didn't tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"I'm the new 'product,' " Ethan answered proudly. Justin sighed, 'Great', now at least he could add the name and maybe the picture of the artist on the concept he had presented. Colleen hadn't told him who the artist was. She wanted a global idea, and didn't want to influence the artwork.

She had sent some music and some general ideas about what she wanted, but she never mentioned Ethan.

Ethan watched Justin's features, and knew that he wasn't happy to have to work with the musician. He wanted to say something, but instead chose to stay silent.

After a few seconds, he asked Justin, "Maybe we could grab a coffee together, there's a cafeteria on the 15th floor."

"Well, I'm kinda busy and late, I don't have time," Justin said while scratching his ear.

"Please Justin?"

Justin looked at his watch trying to figure out if he had time. He could grab a coffee and then go home, work on the new boards, and finish the painting he was working on, "Ok, just one coffee."

"Thanks."

Ethan led him to the cafeteria on the 15th floor. By the time they reached the 15th floor, they were over the uneasiness that first stopped them both.

Now, at the cafeteria Justin asked for a black coffee, with sugar. Ethan, opted for a cappuccino. They both sat in a corner, and began to speak together.

Justin asked about Ethan's career. Ethan said he was doing fine, that he had won several prizes, and that he had this great opportunity here at 'Volto Inc' to began an international career. Ethan told him that after he left for New York, all those years ago he went to Germany, where he got a mixed welcome, and he came back last year.

Ethan told Justin that he was at his Manhattan show, but that he didn't see him. Justin told him he was there the first two weeks and then had gone back to Pittsburgh.

Ethan nodded, "How are things there?"

"Still the same,"

"Are you with someone?" Ethan asked while sipping at his coffee.

"You?" Justin asked trying to avoid the question.

"I found someone," smiled Ethan. "I even, well, I'm even married."

"Who is he?"

"Well, um," Ethan shifted uncomfortably in his chair, which made Justin looked up from his coffee, a questioning look on his face. Ethan smiled at him, sighed, and in a low whisper said, "It's not a he, it's a she."

Ethan's admission shocked Justin to the point that he dropped his coffee cup on the table, "What!" gasped Justin, reaching for some paper towel to prevent the spilled coffee from staining his clothes.

"I married a girl two years ago, her name is Hanna," Ethan looked up into Justin's eyes. "I didn't have a choice, it was either that or loose my career, and I chose what was best for me."

"You sold out, you sold yourself for money," Justin said with disbelief.

"And a lot of it, I may add. It's not that bad, she's cool."

"She's cool, and you how do you live? Can you look at yourself in a mirror?"

"I live with her in the same house, that doesn't mean I don't get my needs met. It's mostly for the promotion and JD," Ethan added with a smile.

"Promotion, hmm," Justin scratched his ear, "I remember that."

Ethan looked up, knowing exactly what Justin was referring to, the moment he signed the deal with his manager after Brian told him, "There's nothing noble about being poor." Yes he sold his soul out there and sold it out a few years later, to fit the mold.

Justin looked up, with a furrowed brow, "Who's JD, if I may ask."

"My son."

"You have a son?" Justin asked astonished.

"Yeah, 18 months. And growing up, he's pretty, blond like his mother, blue ..." the ringing of Justin's cell cut Ethan off.

Justin reached into his pocket, opened his cell, and smiled when he saw the display, "Hey."

On the other end, Brian smiled too, he had been waiting for two hours for Justin's call, "Hey, yourself. How did it go?"

"Fine, like always, how do you think it went?"

"Do we have the account?"

"We have the account," Justin stated with a nod to Ethan who had paid the bill and was about to leave.

"Hold on a sec," he said to Brian; then turned to Ethan, "I have another meeting tomorrow, to promote the new 'product.' Will I see you then?" Ethan nodded and mouthed 'Goodbye' and left Justin speaking on the phone.

"Sorry, I'm back," Justin said into the phone.

"So, what's the deal?"

"Three years, national cover, \$25,000,000 and thrilled to have us doing the job."

"Hey is everything all right?" Brian asked.

"Peachy. Listen, I have another appointment in 45 minutes, I should move, you know traffic is a bitch in the afternoon. Later."

"Later." Brian hung up then cursed himself because he forgot to tell him to call Daphne. She had left Cynthia a message that Justin should call her back during the day.

\* \* \* \*

Justin looked at the phone, 'Great, I'm acting like a real asshole. Why is it every time I come near Ethan I lie to Brian.' He shook his head and trailed slowly to the parking lot, unaware of Ethan watching him from the upper level.

\* \* \* \*

Justin worked on the 'Volto Inc' account for nearly two weeks, and each time Ethan was waiting for him. Each time they ended up at the very same coffee shop with Ethan speaking about the past.

After two weeks, Justin told him finally, that what they had was in the past and that he had moved on; that he was in a strong relationship. Hearing that, Ethan asked him the name of the lucky man, Justin's non-answer gave him the confirmation of what he had suspected. Brian and Justin must be together again. He wondered how this whole relationship worked with Justin in New York and Brian in Pittsburgh, but Justin stopped him even before he could say or ask anything. His relationship with Brian was private and that was all.

\* \* \* \*

Brian didn't come to New York that week, he had too much to do and he had Gus. But he talked with Justin. It was Sunday evening, Brian just got back from dropping off Gus at Lindsay's home. He stepped into the office, plugged in his computer, and logged on to Justin's computer. A note in front of Justin's computer told him he was in the shower.

This simple fact made him miss the blond even more, he reached for the necklace, and ran his finger over his wedding ring. Lost in thought he was called back to reality, when he heard Justin's phone ring on the other side of the screen. It rang twice, before the machine picked up., He



stopped on his way to the bathroom and frowned when he heard the voice. "Hey Justin, it's me Ethan, I thought I would see you today, to finish our conversation from Friday, and well, never mind. Maybe I'll catch you tomorrow and we can have lunch together. I'm back in town, like I said Friday. Well, call me I never change my cell number. Bye".

Brian choose to send a email to Justin telling him that he had work to do, and closed the computer, letting the blond decide when he would explain how Ethan was back in their lives.

\* \* \* \*

### **The Day after.**

Justin spent a restless night after his non-talk with Brian.

It was just after 1pm, Ethan and Justin met with Peter, Ethan's friend who had just come back from a month long play in Pittsburgh for Madam Butterfly opera. The dinner went smoothly. The conversation rapidly moved toward Pittsburgh and Liberty Avenue. Peter talked about the night scene and how he happened to be at Babylon last week; he spoke about how the owner walked in and how everyone was enthralled by his presence. Also how he spent most of his time in the backroom. Ethan mentioned that King Kinney still seemed to be having a great time in the VIP lounge at Babylon. And told Peter, that even if Brian was in a relationship, there was no lock on his door, and clicked his glass with Peter's. Justin frowned at the comment, but tried to keep a blank expression. Neither Daphne nor Brian had said a word about that.

Maybe Ethan was just playing with his nerves to see what would happen. Justin reminded him that Brian never made promises he couldn't keep, so... why was he trying to talk about something that didn't matter to anyone?

They left the coffee shop 2 hours later. Ethan left with Peter, and Justin went home.

\* \* \* \*

Three hours later in his apartment Justin hung up his phone and was throwing his paint stuff in a corner ... nothing. The boards he was working on were for shit. The phone call he had gotten from Daphne didn't help much, Brian hadn't called him, and that stupid conversation about the VIP room was whirling in his head. And on top of all that, he had a bitch of a headache.

He grabbed the phone, looked at it, and put it back in the cradle. He walked to the alcohol cart and poured himself a good glass of beam. He drowned the glass in one-shot and poured a second one.

After 30 minutes his phone rang, it was Brian. He picked up the phone and instantly Brian knew something was wrong, and that somehow Justin knew about Daphne

"Justin? Justin? Are you there?"

"Hey, isn't this mister wonderful?" answered Justin.

"Justin, are you wasted? What did you take? Or drink?"

"Yeah, well, you know Jim here is almost empty ... maybe I should go buy another bottle," Justin muttered to himself.

'Great, Brian thought, he's taking Daphne's news harder than I thought, or maybe something else had happened,' he inhaled deeply and with concern in his voice asked, "Justin why are you drinking, and please switch the computer on?"

"Too far from where I'm sitting, sorry sweetie I can't move."

"Justin!" cried Brian.

"Okay, okay, wait..."

Brian heard rustling, Justin walking up the stairs. Suddenly Justin appeared on the screen. It looked like he was on the bed, but with the dim light, and how Justin was seated on the bed Brian

couldn't see what had happened.

"Justin, would you please turn on some light?"

"Yeah, Yeah, I'm coming," he turned on the lights on and sat back down on the bed, "and not in a positive, life affirming way," he added. Brian noticed that Justin had an almost empty bottle near him and Daphne's scrapbook. "Hey, you're home... that's nice, how was the VIP Lounge?" Justin asked Brian. He saw Brian frown in front of the camera and asked him, "What?"

"Can you repeat what you just said?"

"I said, what did I say, ah yes, I asked how about the VIP lounge, did you find anything you liked?" Justin took a swig from the bottle. "Why, does that ring a bell with you Brian?" Justin asked in a high-pitched voice.

"No," Brian frowned and added, "Okay Sunshine, besides Daphne, did something else happen? Tell me what happened today that was so bad you needed to get drunk."

" Why do you ask? I'm not you, I don't need an occasion to get wasted," huffed Justin.

"Justin, talk to me, what happened?" asked Brian again.

"I don't want to talk about, I don't, I don't ...."

Brian saw Justin flopping down on the bed, he waited for Justin to move or speak.

Five minutes later Justin propped on his left arm and looked over at the screen.

"Still not communicating with me Sunshine?" asked Brian from the other side of the computer.

"Don't call me that, I'm not in the mood," said Justin.

Justin looked hard at Brian, and saw the concern written all over Brian's face. He sighed and began to speak. "Everything is fucked up today. I got that call from Daphne saying, well saying, that, I don't, I won't; and then I ... I ... well someone told me you were in the VIP lounge having a great time a few days ago," Justin said in one rapid sentence without breathing and without looking at Brian.

"And ..."

"Nothing," said Justin.

"Does this have something to do with the phone call you got yesterday?"

Justin frowned and nodded, remembering Ethan's call.

"You want an answer?" Brian asked while running his hand over his face. "Yes of course you want an answer, if you didn't want an answer you wouldn't have drowned most of a bottle," ranted Brian. "May I ask you who your friend was?"

"Huh?"

"I asked who your friend was?"

"I ... huh ... I ... I was with Ethan and his friend Peter. Peter said, just, he said ..."

Brian inhaled deeply when he heard Justin mentioning Ethan's name, "Do you care to explain to me how Ethan is back in our lives, Sunshine? Is there something I should know?"

Justin looked dumbfounded at Brian, "Shit." Justin flopped back with a defeated sigh, "It's not what you think, it's just, God, this is totally fucked up." Justin stopped and looked over at the screen and saw Brian's pained face, and shook his head to clear his thoughts.

"Did you look over the files I sent Cynthia to archive?" Brian slowly shook his head no. Justin continued, "It's the Volto Inc. account, and well the new product they are selling, well, it's Ethan. That's the main campaign, Ethan's new album."

Brian sighed, and made a mental note to find the stupid fucker that brought the account in the first place, it was either Ted, or Joshua his main junior ad exec. Ted would never have done it - he would rather cut his balls off than bring an account putting Justin or Brian in trouble.

"Since when are you on that account?" Brian asked.

"Let me see, two weeks preparation and two weeks since I got the account, that makes about four or five weeks."

"Why didn't you tell me?" Brian asked.

"I wanted to prove to you that I could manage the account. And I managed it well ... we got it. But then, then," Justin sighed, "We had lunch almost every day, and he never stopped talking about the past, you, me, and he didn't stop, he just ...."

"He said pretty words, and played with the words to make you feel like shit. Is that it Sunshine? Tell me, am I right?"

"I didn't say anything, I didn't tell him that we ..."

"He doesn't need to know that to fuck with your brain, Sunshine. He just needed to look into your eyes. And for your information I haven't been at Babylon for a long time."

"I was, I needed, I thought ... and then I got Daphne's call and I..."

"You thought shit Sunshine; you just acted like always."

"I couldn't be home with you, it was a shitty week. I also had this account to close then with Daphne's call it was just too much, it's like a fucking farce. I'm here alone trying to keep a life, and... He's married, and has a child," Justin blurted out.

"You're married too, and you will be a father soon as well," stated Brian.

"No, I'm not married, and I don't want to put Daphne in jeopardy again."

"Of course you're married, and in more ways than you know. And as for Daphne, she has every say in the situation," Brian said.

Justin inhaled deeply, "No, you don't understand, he's really married, to a woman ... they even have a son, named JD," Justin looked up and saw the look of astonishment on Brian's face. "JD for Justin Donovan, that damn asshole named his son after me," Justin suddenly exploded. "He named his son Justin Donovan, and then Daphne called today to say that she lost the baby! Do you understand what I said? She lost the baby, our baby ... she told me she had cramps, went to the toilet, and saw blood so she went to the hospital. They took care of her and after five hours she was back home." Justin sniffled, and took another swig from his bottle. "Did she tell you?"

"Yeah, she called from the hospital. I brought her back to the house, she's sleeping right now. She has four days off. The hospital said that it was a clean miscarriage, within the first trimester." Brian sighed, something more to add to Justin's pain.

\* \* \* \*

Daphne had called Brian that morning, about 10:00 to tell him that she was at Allegheny General, because she had started bleeding that morning. Brian asked her what had happened, and she said that sometimes pregnancies miscarry, but that everything was all right. It was a standard procedure, no complications, nothing. She just has to rest and take care of herself for a few days. The doctors told her that she could try again in a few weeks. She also had to see a specialist in case she had trouble coping with the loss of the baby.

But Brian knew that Justin would have a much harder time dealing with the news.

Brian looked over at his screen. Justin was lying on the bed clutching the scrapbook against his chest. He was brought back to present time from Justin's hoarse voice, saying out of the blue, "I tried to kill Chris Hobbs, the night I came home and told you I quit the Pink Posse."

"God," Brian whispered.

"I followed him home, got him on his knees, and threatened him with the gun. Then I asked him to say he was sorry for the six months I spent in recovery and the nightly nightmares I've had since that day. I put the gun into his mouth and made him suck it, and then I told him to go back into his house and not to call the police."

"Jesus, Justin ..." Brian passed his hand over his face and saw that he was shaking, afraid to hear the rest of Justin's story. He hated the fact that he was in Pittsburgh and Justin was in New York, so he couldn't take him in his arms and give him his strength or just be there for him. He sighed, Justin was drunk enough to talk a little too much.

Over the years, he had tried several times to make Justin talk about that night, but Justin was too strong and kept the story secret. But tonight, Ethan, Daphne, and all the stress from the last few days had opened the gate and Justin was talking, too much for Brian's sake, but he was talking.

Justin continued, like he was talking to himself, "The gun was loaded that night, I could have killed him. God I wanted to kill him. I wanted to see him lying there on the floor in his blood. I wanted him dead. And Cody was pushing me to do it. Suddenly, everything became clear; I tuned Cody out and looked at Hobbs. He was so terrified, that I backed away. I thought that if I pulled the trigger I wouldn't have been any better than him. I just knew that I had to let it go. That I couldn't let him win again, that I had to have a hold on something, and that something was my life. In a snap I understood what you said all those time, that if I could let it go, I'm the winner, not the victim. Cody was trying to convince me to the contrary. God I can be such a fool, and a coward." Justin inhaled deeply, and continued, "I stopped listening to you, after Darren chose to drop the lawsuit. I stopped listening to you when I told you that I chose Ethan. I'm pathetic, you know, now when I look back and analyze the situation I can't find one good reason why I went with him in the first place."

Brian laughed, a bitter laugh. Justin had a way to mix his emotions and situations together when he couldn't understand.

Justin stopped talking, moved a little on the bed, sighed and looked at Brian. "I remember the day when I asked you to come with me to the prom, and I also remember the night before the prom, the farewell party, for Michael and David that Emmett threw at their apartment. I remember that you weren't here, but that eventually I would see you later."

Justin opened the scrapbook, "I remember that," he showed the picture that was taken on Debbie's staircase. I remember Emmett helping me to put the tux on correctly and I remember the joke between Mel and Linds, and even Vic's remark. And then it's all blank." He closed the book and lay on his side, looking straight at Brian on the other side of the screen.

"Tell me something Brian,"

"What do you want to hear?" Brian asked softly, taken aback by Justin's revelation.

"Tell me something, anything, I just want to hear your voice."

"I'm glad you remember more." He looked over at the screen and saw Justin shaking his head, "You don't want to hear that, do you? No of course you don't." He stopped, took a deep breath, stood up from his spot and walked into the bedroom where he retrieved a book he hadn't held in 5 years - "Shakespeare's sonnets" the book he kept on hand when Justin had nightmares. He returned to the computer and settled comfortably on the couch again. He opened the book where the bookmark was, sonnet 102. There had been so many nights with nightmares, he had read the whole book twice. This being the third time- each sonnet represented a nightmare.

He sat on the couch and looked over at Justin. He began to read, slowly, almost whispering,

*"My love is strengthened, though more weak in seeming;  
 I love not less, though less the show appear;  
 That love is merchandized, whose rich esteeming,  
 The owner's tongue doth publish every where.  
 Our love was new, and then but in the spring,  
 When I was wont to greet it with my lays;  
 As Philomel in summer's front doth sing,  
 And stops his pipe in growth of riper days:  
 Not that the summer is less pleasant now  
 Than when her mournful hymns did hush the night,  
 But that wild music burthens every bough,  
 And sweets grown common lose their dear delight.  
 Therefore like her, I sometime hold my tongue:  
 Because I would not dull you with my song."*

When he looked again at the screen, Justin was asleep on his bed. He closed the book, another sonnet, for another bad night. If only he could resolve most of his problems with a simple sonnet, it would be great.

He took his phone and called Justin's agent in New York, Miranda, and told her to go check on him tomorrow morning. Brian spent that very night watching over him through the web cam.

### **Chapter 3      Gus**

Melanie opened the letter from her doctor. The cyst had grown again, and the pills hadn't helped. The doctor said her stress level was the main reason the pills hadn't worked.

Mel had to agree the stress was the major cause of her illness.

When she had moved back in May 2007, she thought that everything would be fine. The cyst had even shrunk a bit. She had settled down, found an unexpected welcome from the family who had stayed in Pittsburgh, and somehow managed to get along with Brian. That was a first. After more than fourteen years she was now able to remain in the same room as him and almost get along smoothly. They still had something between them, but it was less annoying than in the early years.

When Lindsay moved back a few months later, Mel thought that they had finally found some equilibrium in their unconventional family.

It was too simple, too easy, and too good.

Lindsay dropped the bomb of her moving to France just after New Year 2008. She finally chose to leave the country after Brian and Justin's announcement that Daphne was pregnant.

Lindsay organized everything, and finally moved away the last week of February about 2 weeks ago.... Gus went with her.

\* \* \* \*

The calls began almost immediately. Gus didn't bother to look at the clock to know what time it was in Pittsburgh. He waited for Lindsay to fall asleep, grabbed her cell phone and dialed Mel's or Brian's phone number. The first time Gus told them that everything was all right, but that he missed everyone. After a few days, the messages began to change. Gus was often crying and Mel had a hard time coping with that.

It was even more difficult for Mel when her doctor called a few days previously telling her that she needed to be hospitalized for a biopsy and maybe for surgery depending on the results.

\* \* \* \*

When Lindsay and Gus had been in France for three weeks, Brian got a late night call from his son. Brian could tell that the little boy was depressed. He hadn't reacted to his father's attempt to cheer him up, and most importantly for Brian, Gus hadn't asked after Justin, something he always did when he called.

The next morning, Brian called Lindsay in an attempt to understand what was happening in their new home.

He caught Lindsay at a bad moment. Gus was crying and Lindsay too. When she asked Brian what he would do in such situation he simply said, "I would come home!"

Lindsay argued with him, telling him this was her best opportunity for a job. That's when Brian told her to bring Gus home and that she should live her dream. He used the same arguments he used for Justin. "No matter what, we will stay here, and be there for you!"

Reluctantly, Lindsay agreed that Gus would be better off in Pittsburgh, under Mel, Brian, and the family's care. She had to agree that Gus really was depressed and that since their arrival he had lost weight. It's not that he didn't like the food but rather that he didn't eat at all.

After a few more phone calls, it was determined that Gus would stay at Mel's. Melanie agreed to unlimited visits for Brian and Justin.

\* \* \* \*

Brian, Justin, Mel and Jennifer were all at the airport, waiting for Gus.

Brian was the first to see his son, and immediately tensed. His son looked thinner than he remembered paler too and most of all tired.

As soon as Gus saw his father, he left the steward's side and ran to Brian, who reached down to pick him up. Before Brian could say anything, Gus said, "I didn't like it a bit in France!"

Brian laughed and said, "Well hello to you too Gus."

"Hello Dad," said Gus stifling a yawn. "I'm tired."

"Did you notice that everyone else is here?"

"Hi," Gus said with a little smile, reaching out for Mel to give her a kiss, but staying in Brian's arms.

They all went to the loft, and it was decided that Mel would have Gus for a few days since Brian had to leave for Baltimore, and he didn't want to leave Gus with a baby-sitter.

\* \* \* \*

The only other person who knew everything about Mel's condition was Daphne. When Daphne miscarried in February, Mel was at her side, knowing exactly in what state of mind the young woman would be. She went with Daphne to her doctor and her support group.

When Mel went to her doctor for the biopsy, Daphne went with her, and waited in the waiting

room. She brought her home and stayed with her and Gus.

While Brian was in Baltimore, Mel got a phone call from her doctor, telling her she should come to his office for the test results.

Daphne went with her, keeping an eye on Gus. But after an hour, Daphne knew the results weren't good. Mel left her doctor's office with bloodshot eyes and a puffy face.

She had an appointment in three weeks at the Women's Clinic in Chicago, for an ablation and probable follow up treatment.

When Mel called Lindsay, she couldn't come home to take care of the kids so Mel decided on the best option for both her kids.

First she spent time with her attorney to put everything in order just in case something went wrong. Once that was done, she made Daphne promise to not tell the rest of the family about the arrangements she was making.

Daphne told her that between her studies and her work, she hadn't time to blabber around about what would, could or may happen in her friend's life.

Through Daphne, Melanie knew that Brian was at the house each time he had Gus, and that he never left the little boy alone with anyone. That Babylon was no longer his playground, and that Justin was home more often than not.

\* \* \* \*

### **Beginning June 2008**

Melanie had to leave tomorrow. Everything was prepared; she just had to put everything in motion. First, she dropped Jenny at Michael's telling him that she had to lead a big conference in Boston, and that she would be away for a week, ten days tops. Because Michael still had legal rights for Jenny she had no problems dropping her at her father's.

It was more complicated with Brian. Even if she had made sure that he could keep Gus sometimes, he hadn't regained full care of his son.

That would change today.

Mel knew that Brian was staying at the loft after he came back from Atlanta he won a new account for Kinnetik.

\* \* \* \*

It was early and Mel hoped that Brian was up.

It was around 8:00 a.m. when she knocked on the door.

"God, hold your horses, I'm coming," he muttered to himself.

He opened the door and saw Mel standing in front of him. He frowned and looked at her.

"Holly shit, it was a perfect day, until I opened the door."

"Good morning to you too, do you mind if we come in?"

"Yes I mind plenty, what are you doing here? Is everyone all right?"

"Coming to see you, and sort of yes. Can I come in? I'm not here to fight with you."

Brian frowned when he heard Melanie's statement, "All right, com'on in. Do you want some coffee? I made some for Daphne."

"I still can't believe that you are almost roommates - you and her. That's really weird"

As Brian turned around, he saw Melanie pushing a sleeping Gus into the loft, "Let me deal with him." He crouched in front of his son, "Hey Sonnyboy, how are you?"

The young boy looked at him and folded his arms around Brian's neck, "Sleepy; mommy not nice, she woke me up early."

Brian frowned as he lifted his son to tuck him in his own bed.

As he stepped out from the bedroom, Melanie was sitting at the kitchen counter, papers in front of her.

"What's this?" he asked, "Do you need me to sign some more papers about Gus?"

"Yeah, some custody papers."

Brian, who was pouring some coffee, almost dropped the pot, "What did you just say?"

"Some custody papers," replied Melanie, and inhaling deeply added in a whisper, "I'm going to Ibiza."

At that comment, Brian looked up, "What?"

"I'm going to Ibiza."

"Yeah I heard you. When?"

"I have surgery planned on Monday, but I have a lot to do, and Lindsay is at an Italian art convention for three weeks. I thought that this was the best time to pull this together."

"Why didn't you tell me anything?"

"Did you tell anyone that you were having surgery?"

Point taken thought Brian.

"Anyway, that's not the debate. The debate is about Gus."

Brian nodded, waiting for Melanie to continue, "I want you to have full custody before I get to the hospital. If something happens to me, I don't want Gus to be put into the system. I want him with someone who loves him enough to say it to him."

Brian was shocked, he cleared his throat, "Mel, you do know that if I sign those papers, I won't sign them over to you again. Do you realize that?"

Mel nodded, "Yeah I realize that," she added bitterly. She knew from the start that if he were going to sign the papers she would never get her rights back.

"What about JR?" asked Brian suddenly.

"She's at her father's; she will be ok there."

"Did you say something to Michael?"

Mel shook her head, "No need to stress him, if something happens, I know they will take care of her."

Brian nodded.

"Hey, Hi Mel."

"Hi Daphne."



"Did you tell him?" Daphne asked while gesturing between Mel and Brian. Mel nodded slowly, "Good, I told you it would be better if you came by yourself."

"You knew?" Brian asked.

"Yeah. I was with her when she got her biopsy results."

"Daph you should talk to him too," Mel added, as Daphne slowly shook her head.

"What should you tell me?" asked Brian suspiciously.

Daphne played with her spoon in the coffee mug and told Brian in one rapid sentence, "I want to try again to get pregnant. I know I should wait, but I don't want to. I waited until I was sure that all my tests were clear, but the doctor told me that I had Hepatitis B and there's a risk for my baby and me."

"No," whispered Brian, "No, everything will be fine, it has to be."

"Brian?" whispered Daphne, "Brian, listen to me. Not everything can go the way you, Justin, or I want. Sometimes, you have to accept that life has its own reasons."

"No."

"Brian, the risk is simple. Because of my tests, I had to get vaccinated against many things and one of those was Hepatitis B. I was vaccinated. Last summer I wanted to give some blood, and they wrote me a letter saying they couldn't take it because it was infected, or rather because I had Hepatitis B. I told them it couldn't be possible, because I'm immune to it." She sighed deeply. "I had some tests, and I got the news that I had the virus and the antiviral in me. This could put my pregnancy in danger. Brian, I want a child, I really want one. I won't let Justin down, and if you, both of you, have to choose between me and the baby, choose the one that has the best chance to come through."

"Why are you saying that?"

"Because I'm a high risk case. Because I have everything from Hepatitis in me, it could be possible that they would have to choose between the baby, and me it's fifty-fifty, nothing more, nothing less. Brian, like I said before, life doesn't always go the way we want. But we have to take every chance we get."

Brian sighed. He knew that Daphne was holding something from him he just never thought it would be that big. He passed his hand over his face, "Does Justin know?"

"He knows that my last boyfriend wasn't perfect, that he screwed up big time, and that he gave me an STD. I never told him what. He lectured me enough. That's why I want that baby, Brian, I really want it, and I know that everything will be all right." She smiled at him.

Brian didn't return the smile, watching how Daphne moved around the loft, putting Gus's bags in their new place, "I'll stay home today, so you can go to work," added Daphne with a smile as she disappeared downstairs again.

"You knew?" Brian asked Mel.

She slowly nodded her head.

"What are the chances that she and the baby will be safe?"

"It depends on her first condition. Now, if I remember what the doctor said, it would be near zero, but in a few weeks, she should be better and then ..." Melanie stopped, "Honestly, Brian, I don't know," she sighed deeply and drank from her coffee cup.

## **Chapter 4     Another Life**

### **Mid June 2008**

Melanie's surgery went well. She came back after a week at the Women's Boston Clinic and then was at Allegheny Rehabilitation Center. She was staying at Daphne's most of the time. The doctors not only had to remove her uterus, but they also suggested an additional treatment, similar to Chemo.

Daphne picked her up and settled her in her apartment. Melanie was in her second week of treatment. Like Brian, she didn't say anything to anyone, only Brian and Daphne knew the truth.

\* \* \* \*

She was at Daphne's when it happened, waiting for the young woman to come out from the bathroom. She had made her appointment early so she could spend some time with Daphne and Gus. Brian was due home soon too. Daphne had called him and said they were at home and that Melanie wanted to see Gus.

Melanie was watching an old rerun on TV and she sighed heavily, today was a good day, not much pain, and almost no nausea. She passed her hand through her hair and knew that something was wrong when she looked at her fingers and saw hairs entwined there.

She didn't say anything; she stood up, threw the hair in the trash, took her purse and jacket and walked out. Daphne didn't hear her go out, and as she stepped out of the bathroom was surprised to be alone. She wandered to the top floor, and saw that it was empty too. She called Mel on her cell and got her voicemail where she left a message.

Melanie was driving home. She had stopped at the drugstore and bought a hair clipper. Once home, she shaved her hair and put the headscarf she had bought in Boston around her head.

Once she had finished, she called Daphne to tell her that she was okay, at home; then called her office, and asked to have a meeting with everyone the next day.

\* \* \* \*

At the office, she talked about her situation and told them that she would continue to work, less than usual but she would continue to work. After all if Brian was able to do it, she would be able to do it too.

\* \* \* \*

### **July 2008**

Five weeks went by and Melanie was really sick. Gus was now staying permanently at Brian's. And Brian left the loft for the house.

He called Melanie every day to get some news, asking her if she wanted Gus. She always gave him the same answer, "He's better in your care than in mine for the moment".

Michael learned the truth three days after Mel shaved her hair. She had completely forgotten that he was due to take JR that day for the weekend. Michael saw her and asked a million questions; he was so freaked, that Melanie had to call Ben. They decided to move Melanie from her little apartment to their house.

After a few trips, she settled in Hunter's old room, which was empty since Hunter was living with Callie in Ted's old apartment. Once settled Michael and Mel were both satisfied.

It didn't take long once Michael knew, for Debbie to come by and chew her a new one, telling her:

"Just because you're a single mom doesn't mean that you have to deal with everything alone."

Melanie was glad, because now she had someone to keep an eye on JR in case she needed to go to the hospital.

When Debbie asked where Gus was, Melanie told her, "Brian." Debbie frowned when she heard the answer and told her, "I could have kept an eye on Gus too." But Melanie told her, "I made it legal. Gus was with his father, no need to get your tits in a twist. It was my decision, my life and he is happier that way."

Debbie didn't say anything but thought that maybe she should pay a little visit to Brian. Mel knew exactly what Debbie was up to, and cut her off before she could leave. "Listen Debbie, it was my choice. At the moment Brian is a better father than I can be a mother, don't imagine I don't know you. You didn't say anything, but from here you were planning to go to Kinnetik and yell at him for nothing. I went to see him, I asked him to take care of Gus." Melanie took a deep breath, "When Lindsay moved to France, I got calls from Gus in the middle of the night, crying, and telling me that he wanted to come home. When I got the results of the biopsy, I changed all the paper work so if something happened to me Brian could have Gus. He's his real father, like it says on his birth certificate."

She left her room to go to the kitchen, Debbie in tow, "I took that away from him because I wanted Gus to be MY kid. But I got JR, and JR was never Lindsay's legal kid like Gus was mine, and when I got sick, well, I took time to think."

Melanie looked up and saw the astonished look on Debbie's face.

"You never knew that Lindsay wasn't her legal parent, huh?"

Debbie shook her head, "She never said anything."

"Yeah her WASP education couldn't let that slip. We made some papers giving her authority and legal decisions about JR, but she wasn't her legal parent, Michael was and is. So I decided with Lindsay in France, Gus here, and Brian always around that it would be better for Gus to be with someone stable."

At that comment, Debbie huffed, "Brian Kinney stable? My god Mel, you really must be sick."

"Don't laugh, Debbie, he goes every two weeks to see Justin, and Justin comes home every other week. They work together, they live together, I saw them together and with Gus, and I asked someone to investigate them. I learned many things, that I can't reveal, but you can have confidence in my judgment. Gus is better with his father, so don't bother to give him hell, he doesn't deserve it at the moment."

Debbie didn't say anything, and left shortly after her talk with Melanie. She had to agree that she too had noticed the change in Brian in the last two years - less clubbing, more traveling. Less and less gossip about the king of Babylon, his conquests, or his tricks. She was glad that somehow he stopped all his activity, because, she was always worried about him.

Like Melanie suggested, she left him alone. She went by the loft one night, dropping off some food and seeing how he was doing with Gus, and she realized that Melanie was right Brian was a good father.

\* \* \* \*

Justin learned about Mel's condition the week after she moved. He still couldn't believe that she had accepted Michael's help and that Brian had Gus all the time.

Mrs. Stevenson was thrilled, and Gus loved her, he even began to call her Grand'ma much to Debbie's dismay.

Gus didn't complain about his mothers' absence; at almost 8 years old, he was bright and clever, at the top of his class. It didn't take long for the boy to understand that Lindsay was in France for her work. Brian tried to make him call her every weekend using the video system from his computer, and he took him to Melanie when he wanted to go.

At first, Gus called Lindsay every day and then after a time, he spaced the communications, now, after five months, it was once every two weeks.

It was school break and he spent most of his time at the mansion. Brian told him that he could bring Melanie over tonight. Gus was thrilled. Brian told Melanie it was an unlimited visit, she could

stay as long as she wanted. She took JR and accepted Brian's offer.

That week Justin came home, too. Daphne headed to Britin also, after Brian called her to say that Justin was coming in. It was the first time the house held so many people at once without it being a special event.

Mrs Stevenson was happy; the house was full of life.

Brian and Justin, Melanie and JR, Daphne and Gus, she couldn't have found a better family.

Brian had told Mrs. Stevenson a long time ago that Melanie and he weren't really friends, but the fact that they had one more thing in common, made the tension less stressful for both of them. Now they were even able to have a comfortable conversation.

They even found time to laugh sometimes.

Melanie changed a lot due to her illness, unlike Brian who didn't lose his hair, she had, and unlike Brian, she had an additional treatment to take.

Brian wasn't used to being gentle with her, but when he saw her the first time just after she had lost her hair, he played it nice. Maybe a little too much, because Melanie told him that she didn't want his pity and he simply answered, "I don't do pity, it makes my dick soft. But you're one of the mothers of our child, so I'm playing nice." He stopped speaking, moved around the kitchen where they were both sitting, and after a short silence went on, "And I know how you feel right now. Like shit doesn't begin to explain it. You're cold and burning all at once, wanting something to eat, but you know that you can't, because in less than five minutes you will throw it up, and heave for twenty minutes, and nothing to threat nausea will work." He stopped and looked at her, "And don't ever say that I'm a softy or I will kill you, got it?" Melanie nodded, a smile played on her mouth. For the first time since he had cancer, he shared something with someone else other than Justin or Michael. He agreed to himself that even Michael didn't know that part of the story. Justin knew it, because he spent endless hours with Brian on the bathroom floor, keeping him grounded when he wanted to be left alone.

Finally, Brian brought her a mug filled with a sugared peppermint/green tea, "Drink this, it will help you with the cramps and the coldness, among other things."

She took the cup, smiled sadly and looked out the windows where Gus was playing in the backyard, remembering the last time she and Brian were alone in the same room in Pittsburgh. It was just before the commitment ceremony, when Brian stopped in front of Justin's painting.

She never should have told him what she did, looking back she only played with Lindsay's wishes: That Justin should go to New York. In fact looking back, it was Lindsay's inner wish that Justin would go to New York and conquer the art world. She never got the opportunity and transferred her desire onto the only person she could somewhat convince, Justin.

Melanie had agreed a long time ago, that Justin was really good for Brian. Brian had changed so much over the last two years; she couldn't remember a conversation with him without yelling and shouting. Due to Justin's soft influence, Brian and she became 'friendly'. After her diagnosis, she even felt part of Brian's family.

\* \* \* \*

Lindsay learned about Melanie's condition long after all the others.

Somehow Melanie thought that Lindsay didn't deserve to know, because she left the house, the country, and dragged her son to fucking France. Melanie had more than enough bitterness toward her to not say anything. She waited until after the last radiation treatment, and then called her. To say that Lindsay was unhappy to learn that Melanie was sick was an understatement. To say that she was unhappy to know that Brian now had his full rights back, was well... She yelled, threatened Melanie, and cried, until Brian snatched the phone from Melanie, telling her that he would handle it for now, and that she should lie down.

"Lindsay, it's Brian."

"How could you push her to ..."

"Stop right there, Lindsay, I didn't force her, she made her choice alone. We sent you the papers six months ago. But if you did the same as every other time Melanie sends you something and didn't read them, then I can't help you." He sighed deeply, "Lindsay, she made that choice because she didn't want to have to worry about Gus if something went wrong during the treatment."

"What treatment?"

"She didn't tell you."

"No."

"She has cancer, Lindsay, JR is a blessing to her. She won't be able to have another child, unless she adopts one."

"Oh my ... why didn't she call me, why didn't you call me?"

"Because she didn't want to, and because she made me promise. She said you were busy enough, that you didn't need to stress over something like this, that you weren't together anymore, and that it didn't concern you."

"Fuck, Gus is my son too, more than hers. I'll come and get him."

"No, you won't. Gus is with me now and you made that clear seven months ago in your e-mail that you really didn't care where he was, as long as he had what he needed. He has everything he needs and wants here at the house. Moreover, he sees Melanie when he wants. So you don't need to come back, you don't need to play the outraged mom, or wife, or whatever the fuck you are lately."

Brian inhaled deeply and let out the breath slowly. "You chose to leave, not me. You chose to put him in this situation, not me. Now that he seems stable you want to come home, take him and ... I say no, I say that our family has had enough to deal with and that you don't need to add your shit on top of everything else."

"Our Family? Brian? Do you know how long I battled with you for you to just be nice in the same room as Melanie, and now you speak about family? I can't believe you. I don't understand, how did you... how it is possible that ..."

"Maybe because I went through this too, and looking back I can only say that I was glad to have Justin and Gus and you around me then. So I understand her better than you ever will, especially now. Don't you think it's enough for me to try to play nice for the sake of our child? Don't you think I haven't thought about it?"

"You left, Lindsay, without saying anything to anyone, and when Gus began to be a burden, you sent him back, he suffered, a lot, too much in fact. You weren't there. God, you didn't even bother to take that flight home with him. He was alone, with a flight attendant. Alone, do you think he has forgotten that you put him alone on a flight? No."

"I never, "

"Don't Linds, I don't want to hear it."

Silence filled the line, long minutes broken only by Lindsay sniffing, "Brian, how is she, really?"

"She will come through fine, but you should know that. She's tough; she didn't let the illness get to her. She's battling every day, and she's working, she has her children, so everything is fine Lindsay."

"Did she tell you why, why we aren't together anymore?"

"Not my business Lindsay, it was your choice, not mine."

Lindsay sighed deeply. What she missed the most in France was talking to people around her. She

had less contact with her extended family and she could only blame herself for that. She missed her kids, Brian, and everyone else.

She turned around and looked at Roman, the friend she was living with. She moved into his apartment six months ago. He was her contact when she started her job in France.

She earned good money with her job, she was also still in contact with her old boss, and most of the eastern American galleries. But she really was alone. She couldn't wait to get back. Even if she would be alone, she sighed, remembering Brian on the line, "Brian?"

"Yeah."

"Tell Gus that I love him and that I miss him. Tell Melanie that I'm sorry and I will come home for Christmas this year. Kiss everyone for me, please, and give them my love. Bye Brian."

She hung up before she could hear Brian's answer.

\* \* \* \*

Lindsay sighed.

Since Melanie and she had moved to Toronto everything had gone to shit. They broke up, Mel was sick, she had had sex with a man, again, something that she hadn't planned at all.

Since she was in France she saw things differently, she also learnt some things about herself - that she was a lesbian, but that she was in need of a man when she lost control of her life.

Brian had tried to tell her that in his way, but she hadn't understood it at the time. Now she was certain that he was right.

She hadn't planned for everything to go so wrong, the move to another country, Gus's sadness or the way she sent him back. She wanted to go with him, but she really wanted this job. Now, she knew it was pure selfishness. That even Brian hadn't reacted that way during all those years.

Melanie called her a killer once, and she told her that she learned from the master. In fact, she hadn't learned anything, she had it in her since, well since forever, but she'd never used it. In fact, she used it quiet often, but in a softly manner, but only against Brian.

She knew the moment she showed him the article in the Art Forum, that Brian would do everything in his power to give Justin his chance. She should have stayed out of it, but no, as Brian said, she couldn't be happy if he was happy.

She thought about all the letters that she had to write and send before her contract finished in November. All the words she would have to say to explain how sorry she was to each important person in her life.

## **Chapter 5      Not a Good Idea**

Justin was walking into the gallery, looking at the changes the owner was making. He had bought the nearby free space and he was reworking the walls and the walk spaces.

Just as he stepped in, his cell phone rang again it was Michael.

Justin sighed. The last few days had been a mess. Michael had new ideas for Rage after a three-month break, and he wanted the boards yesterday. He didn't let Justin breathe for five minutes. He sent him emails and text messages, called his cell or his landline every time he had a new idea. Justin decided that he would not answer his landline and put a filter on his emails to sort out the important ones from Michael's.

He hadn't had a good night's sleep all week. The last time Brian was in New York, he had asked him to be more involved with certain accounts; and, on the other side, Miranda asked him for a few more paintings; since the gallery owner bought the new space.

Justin wished he could clone himself to fulfill all his engagements.

\* \* \* \*

Justin walked through the gallery in search of Miranda. He spotted her talking to a crew member from the demolition-/reconstruction unit and moved toward her.

He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the man she was talking to. As if he sensed Justin's presence, the man lifted his head and blanched, looking into Justin's eyes.

"Justin, it's so nice to see you, I thought you weren't coming because you had an appointment with a client," said Miranda.

"I, I, I postponed it," whispered Justin staring directly at the man.

"Justin, this is the supervisor on this project, Mr. Christopher ..."

"Hobbs," Justin finished for her, stepping back as Hobbs took a step toward him.

Justin's heart began to race as he looked around him like a frightened animal. The door was out of reach and out of sight; he couldn't flee through the back door because they were moving paintings to another gallery.

He stepped back, feeling the wall behind him. He reached at it for support and activated the alarm. The loud noise increased Justin's panic attack.

Hobbs saw immediately that Justin wouldn't be able to handle his presence and stepped back out of sight, leaving Miranda to deal with Justin.

Justin fumbled with his phone, sending the text message that he and Brian had agreed to almost three years ago.

He remembered the first time he had to use the message it was in October 2005. That day he woke up with a ring on his hand, his commitment ring. The ring Brian put on his finger and that they decided to wear around their necks on a necklace, Justin couldn't reach it right then.

Miranda was doing everything she could to keep Justin from the crowd that was moving toward him, knowing that he was in the middle of a panic attack and that she couldn't do anything.

Justin saw Chris Hobbs in front of him, squatting nearby with a glass of water and a wet towel, which he gave to Miranda to place on Justin's neck.

Justin's cell phone rang. It was Brian, responding to the text message.

When Brian heard the ragged breathing, he sighed and began an old mantra, "Justin? Justin do you hear me, listen to me, all right, take a deep breath, hold on, let's go - five, four, three, two, one... you're there?" asked Brian.

"Yeah," managed Justin weakly.

Brian repeated the action three more times, before he heard Justin breathing almost normally into the phone.

"Better now?" asked Brian.

"Yeah."

"Want to tell me what happened?" asked Brian slowly.

"I, I ..." began Justin, but didn't finish the sentence. He sighed deeply, no need to put Brian over the edge. "I leaned against the wall, the alarm went off, and everyone was running around me, it was a mess, and I was pushed away from the wall a little roughly, and I couldn't breathe correctly. As you can tell, I'm fine now."

On the other end of the line, Brian shook his head. He knew that Justin was lying to him, because of his hesitation when he answered. He let it go for now, but promised himself to call Miranda a little later, to see what the real story was.

"All right, why did you lean on the wall?"

"The owner is changing the gallery, and I went to talk to the demolition men."

"Did you see anything you like?" teased Brian.

"No, the only one I'm interested in is on the phone," whispered Justin back.

"Mmh lucky you. I'll be there in less than a week, so you'll be able to prove to me how interested you are in me."

"I can hardly wait."

"Hard is the word, all right. Listen, I was in the middle of a signature," said Brian.

"Big account?"

"One of the biggest."

"Who?"

"What if I say free running shoes for almost five years?"

"No shit," beamed Justin.

"Yep, you have a meeting with them tomorrow at 3:00pm, about the boards I sent you this morning."

"Good."

"More than that. Listen, I..." began Brian.

"I know, love you. See you later."

"You too. Later."

And they hung up.

Justin sighed heavily... something more to add to the long to do list he already had. When he looked up, Chris was standing on the other side of the room looking at him. Justin inhaled, stood up, and marched toward him. Before he could say anything, Chris asked, "You feeling any better?"

Startled, Justin just nodded.

"I didn't know you were the artist showing here, if I had, I wouldn't have taken the job."

Justin shook his head, "No, it's not . . . you don't . . . well, you have the right to be here as much as I do. I just... I didn't ... I thought you were still in Pittsburgh."

"Yeah last time you saw me I was in Pittsburgh but I moved," Chris rubbed his hand over his neck. "Thank you for letting me live, you could have pulled the trigger."

Justin rubbed his hand, "No, I would have ended up like you."

"Yeah."

They were silent for a moment, then Chris whispered, "I'm sorry, for what I did to you, I ... I'm sorry."



Justin nodded slowly, shocked to see that Chris was sincere.

Chris waited a moment; he sighed deeply and asked, "Do you think you can come to work, knowing that I'm here as supervisor of the building changes?"

Justin shook his head no, but slowly said, "Yeah, I think I can."

Chris was on his way to move when Justin stopped him, "Wait!" Chris turned around, "What happened to you?" Justin could kick himself. Where did that come from, he didn't want to know, and there he was asking Chris what happened to him.

Chris inhaled deeply and looked at his hands, where Justin saw a ring. Slowly just above a whisper, Chris began, "Almost four years ago, a fury stepped into my backyard and pointed a gun into my mouth." Justin dropped his gaze on the floor, as Chris continued, "I was so freaked out that I shit in my pants." Chris chuckled bitterly, "I was so freaked out that I never called the police, because I was just glad to still be alive."

Justin turned red and white at the same time, remembering that night.

"I moved out shortly after, and had to get some counseling because of the nightmares I had every night since then." Looking up he saw the fear in Justin's eyes, "Don't worry, everything is fine, now, the nightmares are gone and the old Chris too. I should thank you for that."

Justin looked at him.

"Where was I, yeah I moved out and accepted the new post the company gave me in Boston, where I met the person I've been living with since then."

"Oh."

"Yeah his name is William."

Justin looked up shocked, "You mean that ..."

"Yeah, you were right in that locker, and on Liberty Avenue. I was a closet case and because of you, I worked on that. Thank you."

"I ... I ... didn't," began Justin.

"You did when you chose to let me live and not pull the trigger that night." He began to walk away, he stopped and turned around.

"I'm sorry, I never should have done what I did, I never ... I was too chicken to understand that you were right, I wanted to be the one who managed everything, I ... forgive me Justin, I'm sorry." Without another word, Chris moved and walked back to his crew.

Justin sighed deeply. He couldn't believe what had just happened. How could it be that he just had a conversation with his worst enemy, who asked for forgiveness?

The last time he was alone with Chris was in 2001 during Pride. He was with Emmett at the Center and Hobbs was mopping the floor. That day Chris told him that he hoped he would get AIDS and die. Justin wondered what Chris would think about that now.

He was jolted back to reality from the relative silence in the gallery. The mess was finally under control, the alarm was silent again, Miranda was there again, and the owner had finally left since Miranda could deal with everything.

"Who was that?" asked Miranda after a few minutes.

"Huh," Justin sighed. "The guy that hit me on the head with a baseball bat the night of my prom," he answered just above a whisper.

He grabbed his bag from the floor, and without looking at Miranda asked, "Do you still need me to

place the paintings, or should I come back next week?"

"No it's fine, I should be able to place them alone. You can go Justin."

"Thanks."

Justin walked out, and headed back to his loft. He rubbed his eyes, and thought, "Shit another headache."

It was the third that week, and it was only Tuesday.

\* \* \* \*

As he stepped into the loft, Justin knew that something was wrong, really wrong. The pills hadn't worked and the headache was still there and stronger than before. He couldn't take anything more as he had already reached his medication limit.

He closed the door, locked it, put his backpack on the couch, and moved upstairs into the bedroom.

Once there, he took a shower, and after closing the drapes went to bed. The last time he had such a migraine was over three years ago and he was still in Pittsburgh.

Justin knew that this week would be difficult. He not only had to finish boards for three accounts, he also had to complete the design for Ethan's posting campaign and to proof Rage's sketches and send them back to Michael.

His head barely touched the pillow and he was already asleep.

\* \* \* \*

The phone rang. Justin groaned and turned around reaching for Brian, but he wasn't there. He opened his eyes and looked at his phone, it was only the alarm. He sat on the bed; he was still dizzy from the migraine. Slowly he began his journey. Shower, clothes, light breakfast. After an hour, he was up to dealing with his meeting with Colleen and Ethan. The meeting was at 9:30 am and it was only 8:00 am. He still had time to finish the boards for Brian.

He logged onto the computer and began to work.

At 9:25, a knock on the door told him it was time to change accounts. He closed the files he was working on and went to open the door.

He was shocked to see Michael on the other side, and even more when Michael pushed passed him.

"Listen, you can't ignore me like you have been the last few days. I have ideas, I need to speak with you, it can't wait," said Michael while passing Justin.

He sat at the table, moved all the files, and began to spread his on the table.

Justin looked from the door to Michael still trying to understand. Michael just put together three different ideas in one pile.

He rubbed the back of his neck and felt another headache coming.

"Michael, I told you ..."

"No, I don't have time, it's important. Brian told us you're having problems finding the inspiration, so it's not a big deal. You should have sent me the files I asked for a while back."

"Michael."

"Listen, if you don't want to work with me anymore you have to tell me, it's just that ..."

"Hey..."

Michael stopped moving when he heard the voice coming from the door. He turned around and saw Ethan coming into the room and walking toward Justin to kiss him hello. Michael went white, "You little shit. I knew you were up to something. I told everyone that you couldn't be trusted. And everyone asked, 'Why?' I'm sure that Brian will be pleased to know that you're back with that little shit. "

Justin had moved from Ethan to Michael, trying to cut off Michael several times, but like always, when Michael was on a roll, no one could break-in the conversation.

"Michael, listen."

"No you listen, I don't know what you said to Brian, but I know one thing, I'm going home and I'm going to tell him everything."

Michael took his coat and in his hurry to head out the door, almost shoved Colleen down the stairs.

"God, he hasn't changed a bit," said Ethan sadly. "Hey are you all right?"

Ethan moved to the fridge and brought back a bottle of water, handed it to Justin just as Colleen walked through the door.

"Thanks."

"Headache?" asked Ethan.

"Yeah."

"Do you need anything?" asked Colleen.

"No it's fine, just let me put the files in order, and then we can finish everything," murmured Justin.

As Justin moved upstairs, Ethan took his phone and dialed a number.

"Hello, I would like to speak to Mr. Kinney, please," Colleen looked astonished at Ethan, and listened to the conversation, "Yeah ... it's Ethan Gold."

"Bri... Mr. Kinney, hello, it's Ethan Gold. Don't hang up please ... I'm calling because I think Justin may be in trouble when your friend Michael comes home."

"He was here this morning, just before Colleen and I arrived."

"All right, I will talk to him. Goodbye"

Just as he hung up, Justin came back to the living room, "Sorry, about that."

"Don't worry, I called Brian, he said you have to log in."

Justin looked up and Ethan could see a sparkle of anger in his eyes, "Why did you call him? How did you know?"

"Do you think I would put the ad campaign in jeopardy because 'Michael the best friend' can't keep his mouth shut? No, I took the opportunity to play a card I didn't play a long time ago, honesty."

Justin looked amazed at Ethan, "Thanks." Just at that moment, the computer logged into the video account and he saw Brian on the other side.

"Hey," whispered Justin.

"Hey Sunshine, god you look like shit."

"Thanks," answered Justin with a small smile.

Brian looked a little distraught. He cleared his throat and finally said, "Ethan called me to say that you had an uninvited guest." Brian saw Justin nodding. "I also see that Colleen's there too." Again Justin nodded, Brian continued, "So today is the final touch?"

"Yeah."

"Michael fucked up big time, huh?" asked Brian. He saw Justin nodding and left it that way, "Go on I think you have a contract to complete."

Justin smiled and turned to Colleen and Ethan who were waiting at the table. He was finally able to sort all the files out and was now able to present the finals to Colleen and Ethan.

Two hours later, with a few changes, everything was closed.

Ethan and Colleen left the loft. Justin sent all the files to Brian, and called Fed-Ex to send the originals to Kinnetik.

Justin sighed deeply, that account was closed. He wouldn't see Ethan anymore, or at least not as often as in the last six months.

Colleen was happy. Since Kinnetik was handling her accounts, sales had increased more than thirty percent.

Before Justin agreed to take on the account, Ethan told him that he had demanded Kinnetik, because he knew that Brian was the best and now he could afford the best.

Justin had to laugh at the situation. Ethan running after the best ad-exec in Pittsburgh, after everything he had told him, Ethan had kept in mind that Brian was one of the best.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning, about 9:00, Brian was in a staff meeting when he heard the commotion in the hall.

"Mr. Novotny, you can't ..." said Marie the new assistant.

"Let me through."

Brian sighed deeply, "Excuse me, one minute." He moved from the conference room, stepped into his office, and closed the door between the two spaces. He walked behind his desk, took his phone, dialed a number, and waited for Michael.

Just then, Michael grabbed the door, Marie in tow, "I'm sorry Mr. Kinney he just..." and Marie gestured toward Michael.

"It's all right Marie, you can go. I will deal with this."

\* \* \* \*

Just as Marie stepped out the office, Frank the security guard was there. On Brian's move, he waited at the door, ready to escort Michael out of the building.

"I can't believe you're still with him, after all the shit you went through," began Michael.

"Michael."

"I went to New York to talk to him about Rage, and you won't believe what I saw. He was with that fucking fiddler."

"Michael!"

"I can't believe that... hey," Michael jerked his arm away. Frank on Brian's nod had grabbed Michael.

"I told you the last time that you and Debbie barged in here without an appointment that I would use Security against you. Listen, not that any of this is your business, but I was in a meeting."

"You were around a table with Ted and Cynthia, your friends."

"No, Michael, I am in a professional meeting, where Ted is not my friend, but my accountant and Cynthia one of the junior ad-execs."

Michael huffed at Brian's precision, "You don't understand."

"No, you don't understand! This is not a playground, this is my job. What you saw in New York was business, not fun. Like I said before, this is not your business, but to be clear, Eth... Mr. Gold didn't go after Justin, he went after Kinnetik or rather Colleen Warthon the CEO of his label 'Volto Inc' went after Kinnetik, on Ethan Gold's recommendation."

"But he kissed him..." whispered Michael still trying to get loose from Frank's grasp.

Brian sighed heavily, "Christ Michael, you should act like a friend for us, or maybe even like a big brother for him, but you can't let go, can you? How did he kiss him? Like the last time you saw them on Liberty Avenue? Did Ethan shove his tongue down Justin's throat? Or did Justin actually kiss him hello like he always does with Emmett, Ted, Blake and Ben when he sees them? Tell me Michael?"

Michael looked up when he heard Brian's voice cracking at the end of the phrase.

"I'm so tired, if you knew how tired I am being caught between you two, Michael."

When Michael heard Brian's plea, he stopped fighting with Frank and just stood there.

"I thought that everything was behind you, that you finally accepted that he was part of my life, our lives, that we were together." Brian sighed, "I thought it was obvious at Christmas, that after everything that changed last month you would see that."

"But..."

"Frank you can escort Mr. Novotny to the exit, and starting tomorrow, you will be at the entrance and check all the people that have access to the building. I won't tolerate another, "I came because I need you now" here. It's my company, my firm, my rules."

Frank moved with Michael in tow to the door, when Brian stopped him. "One more thing, Ethan called me to tell me that you acted like a real asshole, you didn't give them a chance to explain anything to you, did you?" Michael shook his head. "I thought as much, Michael. You're my oldest friend, do something like that once more and you won't be. I told you a long time ago, don't make me choose, because you know you will lose that battle. Now, if you don't mind, I have a meeting to finish, Frank..."

Brian nodded toward Frank telling him without words that this little discussion was now closed.

As Michael was led out of the building, Brian rejoined the meeting. Joshua was at the end of the table and looked up at his boss, "I never thought that this account would bring so many problems, I'm so..."

"Don't apologize, you did fine. We have the account, and the sales have already increased, so I don't want to talk about it, and I don't want to hear your excuses."

"Yeah but..." began Joshua again.

"If I were you, I would sit and stay still," Cynthia advised the young man.

"Yeah, but..."

"Shut it, all right, you're sorry, everyone knows. I know, so move on," Brian sighed. When he first learned about the account, he almost fired Joshua. Cynthia was the fire extinguisher.

It took him two weeks to come around that Justin was dealing with the 'Volto Inc' account alone. It was only after a call from Ethan himself that Brian had calmed down. Not only did he keep Joshua but he also gave the account some special credit for the development.

Now all he wanted to do was move on, and not think about it anymore. The account was completed, the money was coming in, everything was fine and he just had to deal with everything else now. The meeting from this morning was to gauge the available resources at Kinnetik and see if they had to hire some new people, or if the people already working there were enough.

At the moment, they had to work on more than thirty accounts, and some of them were national. They couldn't fuck up one of them. It was Kinnetik's opportunity to be known in the whole country.

\* \* \* \*

Four weeks later, they had hired two new people, and one more in Justin's department to take care of all the emergencies, but after two weeks, Brian saw that Kevin didn't have any work. When he asked him why, Kevin answered, most of the time the job was already done when it arrived at TJay's Art, the only thing he had to do was classify the files and make sure that all the pieces were in it.

When Brian called Justin after the conversation with Kevin, he got his voice mail. When he got home that evening and tried to call him again, he also got the machine.

Justin's computer was off, he hadn't seen or heard from him in two days, and he had an important meeting in Atlanta.

That night he didn't get any sleep. He left Justin another message on his cell.

\* \* \* \*

Justin moved his canvas, another one finished. He turned around and read the request for the new account he was working on. He took the paper, looked it over, walked in the kitchen, took a mug, and poured some coffee and some beam in it. He walked back into the living room, took his sketchpad, and began to work on the artwork. Two hours later, the rough sketch of the layout was done. He scanned it and sent it to Kevin, for Brian's approval.

He moved to the stereo and turned it on. He looked at the clock, it was ten in the morning, and he hadn't sleep for the last two nights. Each time he closed his eyes, he saw that fucking bat coming toward his head, mixed with images of Brian smiling, and the sensation of floating, twirling.

The first night he took almost a whole bottle of sleeping pills and slept 36 hours. Then he was behind in everything, Rage, Kinnetik, his art, so he decided to try to sleep without the pills, but he awoke every two hours from a nightmare. The first time he looked over at the clock, saw that it was after two in the morning, and decided not to call Brian.

The second time he awoke, it was five in the morning, and he decided to stay awake. He dozed off a couple of times, but he jerked awake every time with the same image in front of his eyes, Brian's smile, and a bat coming down on him.

To keep the nightmares at bay, he tried to keep them under control, to control the nightmare he had to control his sleep; to control his sleep he had to control what he could take or not. After all, he learned from the master firsthand.

After trying to drink himself into oblivion and the mix - everything to stay awake, he chose a method, fighting the sleep with coffee and sleeping with pills and some beam. After two nights, he had to say that didn't work either.

Justin looked over the next file, and immediately got the idea for the layout, the visual, and the colors. He put it onto paper, and after that, he looked over the last sketches of Rage, and adjusted some details.

\* \* \* \*

Justin awoke just before six in the morning he had slept at his desk. At least he had kept the nightmares at bay. He looked at Brian's calendar and saw that he was in Atlanta for two days.

Maybe today would be a good day, without headaches and without nightmares.

\* \* \* \*

It was after five in the afternoon. Justin looked over at the phone and hoped that it would ring. But one look at his computer, and he knew that wouldn't happen. Brian was in Atlanta for their biggest account, the Westin account for [The Westin Peachtree Plaza, in Atlanta](#). He sighed, today was going to be another ~~for~~ shit day. He looked at the prescription bottle for his migraine pills, and then at the clock, two more hours before he could take another pill, two more hours to deal with this pain, the throbbing pain.

He went to the freezer took an ice bag out and put it on his head. He sighed 'better' for the moment.

Half an hour later, he looked over the painting he was working on, and the sketchpad lying open on the desk. Always the same images, he couldn't close his eyes without seeing that night, and each time he slept, he woke up with a nightmare, always the same, a bat swinging into Brian's head.

It wasn't Chris's fault, because since that day four weeks ago, he hadn't seen him. Miranda told him that Chris had asked to be warned when Justin was due at the gallery. When Miranda asked Chris why, he told her, in his own words, what happened during their prom night, and told her to take care of Justin.

Justin didn't say anything to Brian, or to Michael, or anyone in the family, they all had their own shit to deal with.

The last news was that Lindsay was coming back in a few weeks or months, he couldn't tell, because each time they talked about it, the version changed. Debbie said a few days, Michael a few months, Brian and Mel a few weeks, and Gus wanted to stay with Daddy and Justin in West Virginia, faraway from everything.

Brian had tried to talk to Gus, but the little boy said that he didn't want to speak about it. When Justin was on the phone, Gus told him that his Mommy would be back, but that he would stay with his Daddy and Justin, because they were always there for him.

Justin smiled at the memory, just then, he almost blacked out, saw blue lights and heard music playing in his ears, a smile, Brian whispering into his ear.

He swayed slightly, and grabbed the table in front of him. He began to tremble, and tears filled his eyes, he passed his hand over his head, the headache was worse than before. He couldn't take another pill. He walked up into the bathroom, avoiding looking in the mirror knowing full well that the image would only worry him more.

He splashed some cold water on his face and couldn't avoid the mirror any longer. He had bags under his eyes, with dark, blue circles because he hadn't sleep well in days. His eyes were red, like they always were when he had a migraine.

He hadn't had a decent meal in the last two weeks, too busy working on all his tasks. So he had lost weight again. He shook his head.

He closed his eyes and leaned against the counter in the bathroom, turned around and walked toward the shower; maybe it would be better after a shower. He undressed slowly and stepped into the shower. Twenty minutes later, he walked out, decision made.

He walked into his bedroom, took out his suitcase and put in his clothes, then he grabbed his backpack in the living room and began to pack all his drawing stuff and his computer.

Two hours later, after a phone call, a last check that he had everything with him, especially his pills, he closed the door of his car and drove toward the Holland Tunnel. It was near 10:00 pm

when he left New York.

## **Chapter 6      Where to Go**

It was just after 9:30 pm when Justin pulled into the driveway of Britin. He sat behind the wheel and waited.

He finally stepped out and headed for the front door. He tried to open the door with his key, but after a few minutes realized that it didn't work. Suddenly, the door flew open and he found himself face-to-face with a young beautiful man. Looking twice to see if he had made a mistake, he tried to absorb the situation.

He finally recovered his voice and asked, "Huh, excuse me, but who are you?"

The young man smiled, "I'm Matthew Anderson, Mrs. Stevenson's grandson. And you are?"

"I'm Justin Taylor, I live here, or so I thought," muttered Justin.

Remembering that his grandmother's employer, the handsome man from the top floor, was gay, Matthew realized that Justin must be his partner. Smiling, he said, "Oh you must be Mr. Kinney's better half."

Surprised at the comment, Justin only nodded and tried to figure out what was going on; especially the fact he was in HIS house and asked, "Yes, but what, where ...?"

"I'm living in the guesthouse for 6 months," replied Matthew.

"You are ..., but... Brian never told me," Justin was surprised that Brian hadn't told him the last time he was there that someone else was living in the guesthouse with Mrs. Stevenson.

\* \* \* \*

At first Mrs. Stevenson was living over the garage but during the last year she had moved into the guesthouse, because she needed more space. During the past year, he had seen the handsome man coming and going from the guesthouse and knew that he was Mrs. Stevenson's grandson. He knew because Daphne never stopped talking about him. But he never got the opportunity to speak to him, and now after almost six months, he finally saw the man. However, Justin was so tired after the almost six hour drive, that he couldn't put all the information together.

Matthew saw that Justin didn't look good and asked him, "Would you like to sit down? You don't seem well."

"No, I'm fine. I think I will go to a friend's house," said Justin as he started to walk back to his car. When he turned around, he handed the now useless keys to Matthew, "I think I won't need these anymore."

"You're sure you won't stay a minute, to ...," tried Matthew.

"No, no, I'm fine. Thanks and sorry if I have disturbed you," said Justin trying to walk back to the car, only to be stopped by Mrs. Stevenson's voice.

"Mr. Taylor, is that you? My god, you look exhausted." She walked to him and hugged him hello, "Come on, I just finished the main bedroom. Come on in Mr. Taylor, please, you look like you are going to fall apart."

Justin reluctantly agreed to follow her, cursing Brian who never told him that Matthew was now a permanent resident of Britin.

It was just something more to add to the long list of disappointments today. Before he came to the mansion, he had stopped at the loft, and even though the building was still here, he couldn't get in there either.



The corner of 6th and Tremont had been heavily modified - a new parking lot with security, new front door, no name on the bells, even the code he had didn't work. For a second, he thought that he was living a real nightmare, or worse, that he was in hell.

When he couldn't get into the loft, he thought about going to his mom's, but she was on a business trip in Columbus, Ohio. 'Shit,' thought Justin. He grabbed his cell and tried to call Brian again, but like the last hundred times, it went straight to voicemail.

He went to Kinnetik, around 8:00 am, only to find that Cynthia or Ted weren't there either. He learned from the intern that they were on a business trip in Atlanta, but the girl couldn't tell him when they would be back.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, 'shit another headache', and took some pills. It was the third or fourth one he had taken since he left New York last night.

After leaving Kinnetik, he finally decided to head for Britin.

\* \* \* \*

Justin was sitting in the kitchen while Mrs. Stevenson was making him breakfast. Matthew was sitting on the other side of the bar looking at his grandmother, and slicing vegetables for lunch.

Mrs. Stevenson was making him pancakes with coffee and scrambled eggs. He watched her making breakfast and knew why Brian loved her- no fat, low sugar, and only fresh products. He smiled.

Justin ate his breakfast while listening to Matthew and his grandmother.

He remembered what Daphne told him, he has the most beautiful skin and green eyes in the world. And he smiled because she was right. He had beautiful eyes, the same as his grandmother.

During the conversation he also learned that Matthew was dating Daphne. It seemed that Matthew was a doctor at Allegheny, and he was Daphne's boss.

Justin smiled, he liked Matthew, and he was so much like Mrs. Stevenson. He finished his breakfast and looked at the clock. It was almost 11:00 am. He excused himself and headed to the main bedroom.

He took a shower and lay down on the bed, hoping against hope that he could sleep. But just like every time since he had seen Hobbs at the gallery, when he closed his eyes, he saw the scene replaying - Hobbs lifting the bat and wrecking Brian's skull.

After two hours he finally gave up, put on some old clothes, and headed out for a walk.

He didn't pay attention to the weather and began to walk into the little forest that was not far away. Ten minutes later it began to rain, he continued. Thirty minutes later, he was soaked to the skin and decided to head back.

He went back to the house and stopped before stepping in; he was dripping wet and didn't want to make more work for Mrs. Stevenson. He inhaled deeply and knocked at the back door into the kitchen.

\* \* \* \*

Mrs. Stevenson and Matthew were in their house, and it was Ben who opened the door. He, Daphne, and Gus were at the house.

They weren't expecting anyone and were sitting in the kitchen eating a snack. Ben stood up from where he was grading some papers and opened the door asking Daphne who could possibly be knocking on the door.

It was Justin, a very soaked Justin.

"Hey," was all Justin could manage.

"OH MY GOD, you're soaked to the skin and you must be freezing! What have you been doing?? Come on, come on in."

"Thanks," uttered Justin with difficulty through chattering teeth.

"Oh my god, Justin, where were you? Here," said Daphne handing Ben an old bath towel they kept in a drawer in the kitchen.

Ben stepped aside to let Justin in, and took his jacket, "How long have you been out in the rain?"

"I ... I ... I ... don't know. Was walking ... no one home ... called ... no one...," stammered Justin through a sniffle.

Ben and Daphne's heads snapped up, and they looked carefully at Justin and took in his appearance. He looked exhausted, dark circles under the eyes, too thin and between the water droplets they saw that he was crying.

While Ben decided to lead Justin to the main bathroom where he could shower and get into something dry and comfortable, Daphne stayed with Gus, trying to answer the young boy's questions.

On their way to the first floor, Ben asked cautiously, "Justin, what is it?"

He got no response and headed to the bathroom to see what Justin was doing, "I'm going to get you something dry to wear. Why don't you take off your clothes?"

He headed back into the room wondering what in the hell happened, to have Justin back in Pittsburgh soaked to the skin like that.

Looking over the rack of clothes, he finally found some sweat pants, a long sleeve t-shirt and a hoody and brought them back. Just before retuning to the bathroom, he stopped and grabbed a pair of boxer shorts and socks.

Knocking on the bathroom door, he waited for an answer, which never came and decided he needed to step in. Justin was under the shower so he put the few clothes on the counter and headed back downstairs.

Twenty minutes later, after a good shower, Justin appeared downstairs in the family room,

"Thanks," said Justin gesturing toward the clothes he was wearing.

"You're welcome. Want to talk about it?" asked Ben tentatively.

Justin only shook his head. Ben tried another way to get Justin to speak "Ok, something hot, coffee, chocolate? I think chocolate would be good. No?"

Justin nodded and followed him into the kitchen.

"Here," said Daphne giving him a mug filled with hot chocolate.

"Thanks," whispered Justin.

After a moment, Justin lifted his head and whispered, "Where's Gus?"

Daphne smiled and said, "I sent him to Mrs. Stevenson's so we could talk."

Justin only nodded and stayed silent; he was sitting at the table nursing his mug, a blank look, sighing deeply from time to time. Daphne heard a sniffle and put a box of tissues on the table.

"Thanks."

Daphne looked over at Ben and Ben looked at Justin trying to figure out what could have happened to the young man. He took in his thinness and the dark circles under his eyes again.

The silence filled the kitchen; silence was a word that doesn't suit Justin, because he was never silent. Justin always had something to tell, unless he was drawing. But he was never silent. Even if Ben wanted to know what happened, he said nothing.

Looking up he saw Daphne looking at Justin, something told him to stay still, until Justin began to speak. And they were rewarded when they heard Justin's voice thick with emotion, "I'm so tired, and I can't sleep. I tried to call, and I called, but it went to voicemail, or I never got anyone. It's been like that for the last few days, like he and everyone else is simply gone."

Ben and Daphne finally understood that Justin had been trying to reach Brian for the last few days, and that he couldn't reach him, or anyone else.

After looking at the diary Daphne kept in her purse, she told him that Brian, Cynthia, Ted, and some people from the artistic staff were in Atlanta to nail the hotel account. The fact that they didn't answer the phone was because they were very busy, probably at a meeting. On the other side of the table, Ben smiled and told him that Michael couldn't answer the phone, because he was at a comic book convention in Phoenix. He also explained that for the first time in years, Debbie had taken a vacation with Carl who took her to Vermont for a few days and, at the same time, Hunter and Callie had taken a few days away from Pittsburgh.

Daphne rubbed Justin's back, and he told her that he finally understood why no one picked up the phone. And when Ben asked why he didn't call his mother, Justin told him that his mother, like Debbie, was on vacation with Tucker.

They spoke a little more and at about 6:00, Ben said that he had to go to the airport. Michael was coming home this evening around 8:00, and he didn't want to miss the arrival.

They kissed good-bye. Once Ben was gone, Daphne called Mrs. Stevenson, and told her that Gus could come back.

While waiting on Gus's return, Daphne put a casserole in the oven to reheat it. Mrs. Stevenson had also prepared a zucchini gratin, but Daphne made some smashed potatoes too. She saw, despite the clothes, that Justin must have been eating less than nothing and that he had once again lost weight since the last time he was there, two months ago.

During dinner, Justin took another pill for his headache, which only got worse and he made Daphne swear to say absolutely nothing about it to Brian.

They ate silently, and after dinner, Justin said that he would try to cure his headache by going to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

It was after 8:00. Justin was upstairs and Daphne was checking on Gus, when she heard a loud thud coming from Justin's studio.

"Justin? Are you ok?" she called out toward the door.

But she got no reply. She decided to check on him and lightly tapped on the door and said, "Justin? Are you in there?" Once again she tapped on the closed door, "Justin?" Getting no answer, she decided to step in, and found Justin in the corner, curled up in a ball, pale, shivering, clutching his head and tapping it against the wall. She crouched near him and tried to get his attention. "Justin, Justin, can you hear me?" She put her hand on Justin's forehead and instantly could tell that he was burning up. "Oh God, Ok, don't move, I'll call for some help".

She looked around for the phone and dialed the guesthouse. She asked Mrs. Stevenson and Matthew to come over.

After doing that, she went to the guestroom, got a throw, and put it over Justin. Then she dialed 911 and gave the information to the dispatcher. After that, she went to Gus and told him that she needed him to stay with Mrs. Stevenson, because she had to take care of Justin.

Once the little boy knew that Justin was sick, he told Daphne that he was going with her, and if she didn't agree, he would call his Dad and tell him everything.

Daphne smiled, the boy was just as bad as his father.

She walked back to Justin and knelt near him. She spoke softly, "Justin, I called the paramedics. They will be here in few minutes." Justin's breathing became heavier from one minute to the next and he was burning up and shivering.

Matthew appeared at the door, with his medical bag.

"He's burning up, Matt," whispered Daphne.

"I can see that," Matt tried to work rapidly, taking his blood pressure and listening to his heart. He heard Justin whisper the same word over and over, "Brian."

Matt looked over at Daphne and asked Justin, "You want me to call Brian?"

Justin opened his eyes, looked at Matt, and shook his head "No ... head ..."

Confused Matt tried to understand, "What?"

"Head ... hurt ..." and he drifted out again.

Daphne looked around and saw the container of pills. "Here," she said handing the container to Matt.

"Apranax and Imitrex, does he take that together?" asked Matt.

Daphne shook her head, "I don't know."

They were interrupted by the paramedic's arrival.

\* \* \* \*

The paramedics were there in record time. They strapped Justin onto a stretcher and carried him into the ambulance. Matt told Daphne to ride with them. Sitting in the ambulance she listened to the paramedic telling the dispatcher from the hospital all the information about Justin.

"Male, 5'8" around 145 lbs, 106 °F, probably dehydrated, irregular heartbeat, low-pressure 80/50, and he's probably had an allergic reaction to something, because he has hives on his forearms."

"Excuse me," Daphne tried to catch the paramedic attention. "He told me he had a headache, despite the fact that he had taken some pills earlier."

The paramedics noted this information on the board and continued to survey Justin's heartbeat and blood pressure.

After a 15-minute ride, they arrived at the Weirton Medical Center.

\* \* \* \*

Daphne was sitting in the waiting area, with Matt and Gus. During the ride there, Justin drifted in and out, and during the little lucidity he had, he made it clear he didn't want her to call Brian. The doctor stepped out from the ICU. It was near 10:00. "Are you Brian Kinney?" he asked.

"No I'm Matthew Anderson, I followed Justin Taylor earlier. Can you tell us what happened?"

"I'm not sure I can," began the doctor. But he was cut off by Daphne's words

"Listen, his lover is in Atlanta on business. His mother is in Europe. His sister is in college and his father doesn't give a shit about him. He came back from New York today, was a real wreck, he scared the shit out of me, so please don't give me the "only family" refrain. In our case you have to understand how difficult it would be to reach someone."

"Well, yes – Well Mr. Taylor had an allergic reaction from an overdose of pills. It's nothing major;

he won't be allergic to the meds he's on now. He's also dehydrated, I think from his traveling today, and appears to be suffering from exhaustion. Also he hasn't been eating properly. Do you know what happened in New York?"

"No, why?" asked Daphne.

"Well, I don't know if you've seen it before, but he had a healing cut on his left wrist." Seeing the frightened look on Daphne's face, the doctor continued, "The cut is not deep enough to say he had tried to kill himself, but deep enough to concern me. He also had a lump on his head where he bumped it earlier so I would like to keep him under observation for the next twenty-four hours," added the doctor.

Daphne nodded, "It's something major?"

"I called to ask about his medical history, and because of his previous injury, I prefer to keep him overnight," added the doctor.

"Okay. Can I see him?"

"Not at the moment, we aren't finished yet," said the doctor, but looking up he saw the anguished look on Daphne's face. "I think we will be done in 15 or 20 minutes."

Daphne sat down again in the uncomfortable chairs and waited. After 5 minutes she stood up, and walked out of the hospital, to make some phone calls. The first one was to Brian's cell.

But like Justin said, the call wasn't answered. She reached in her pocket, found a piece of paper, and dialed the hotel number.

Once she was on line with [The Westin Peachtree Plaza, in Atlanta](#), she asked if Kinnetik's meeting was finished; the receptionist on the other side told her no. She asked him to leave a message for Mr. Ted Schmidt, that he should call her back as soon as possible, and he should keep the message confidential. The receptionist told her he would do it.

Ten minutes later her phone rang; it was Ted.

## **Chapter 7      Explanations**

It was 2:30 in the morning, when Justin's door room opened and a shadow slipped in. It was Brian.

He went over to Daphne's sleeping form and woke her, whispering in her ear that she should go home with Matt and Gus; he would stay the rest of the night.

Daphne nodded, and began to leave the room, when she looked over and saw that Brian was lost in Justin contemplation. He was brushing some hair from his forehead to place a light kiss there. Daphne smiled and left the room, met Matt who was holding Gus and they headed home.

\* \* \* \*

Earlier in the evening, they were allowed to see Justin, one at a time. The doctor told them that Justin would probably be out till the next morning, but he would allow someone to stay the night.

Justin was being monitored and had an IV in his left arm. Daphne took the chair in Justin's room and moved it near the bed.

During the last check up with the nurse, Daphne and Matt learned that Justin's system was saturated with the chemical composition of the Imitrex pill and that he must have taken too much of them over the last few days.

On their way home, Daphne thought about the last time she talked to Justin on the phone. It was last week, what did he said again? Yeah here it comes, "I'm running out of pills again. It's the

fourth refill in two months." Shit she thought, I should have warned someone, that he was getting headaches again.

\* \* \* \*

Brian had settled down in the now vacant chair and was holding Justin's right hand. Christ what a night.

\* \* \* \*

The meeting had gone well. The director of the hotel chain had signed the entire contract, and they were the biggest account Kinnetik had gotten so far, just ahead of Remson Pharmaceutical and Brown Athletics. Brian could see the money they would earn in less than a year with that account.

When he stepped out of the conference room, shaking hands with Calvin Miller, the owner of the Westin Hotel & Resort Chain, he knew something had happened, because Ted had a concerned look on his face.

Ten minutes before the end of the meeting, Ted was called out of the conference room by one of the desk clerks, and had never come back.

He excused himself to Mr. Miller and walked toward Ted. As soon as he was near Ted, he heard the conversation between him and the clerk.

"You're sure there's no possibility of flying back tonight?"

"I'm sorry Sir. I called all the airlines that service Pittsburgh, but there's nothing until tomorrow morning at 8:00."

"Shit, try to tell that to my boss. I know he'll want a flight back tonight," he looked up and saw concern in the clerk's eyes and knew that Brian must be standing behind him, "Shit."

As he turned around, he tried to find the right words. He simply said, "Daphne called, she told me that Justin showed up at the house today. He passed out from a headache and is in the hospital

"Shit, when's the next flight back?" Brian asked urgently

Ted sighed deeply, "Tomorrow morning."

Brian passed his hand through his hair, "Too late, tonight?"

The clerk took pity on Ted and answered himself, "Sir, while Mr. Schmidt called some airlines, I called the one that services Pittsburgh and there's no flight available until tomorrow morning. I'm sorry, Sir."

Brian looked over at Cynthia, and sighed deeply. He pulled out his phone and scrolled through the contact list, when Ted interrupted him.

"She's at the hospital, with Matt and Gus, she won't answer."

"Damn it!" shouted Brian.

His outburst caused Mr. Miller to come near him.

"Something wrong, Mr. Kinney? Maybe we can help you."

Brian shook his head, and Ted decided to intervene, "His partner is at the hospital and there's no flight available till tomorrow morning."

Brian looked at Ted as he had just lost his mind.

"Mmmh I see," whispered Mr. Miller. "Let me see if I can do something." He turned around, walked to the desk, and began to give orders.

"Why did you tell him that? It's none of his fucking business what's happening in my life."

"I know, I'm sorry, it's just... maybe he can help," said Ted.

"How, by providing a personal shuttle? You're delusional, or maybe you smoked something," looking up he saw the words hit home. "Sorry, shouldn't have said that."

"No it's all right. Maybe I'm delusional, or maybe not."

Mr. Miller came back with a smile. "Mr. Kinney, a car is waiting at the front entrance. The chauffeur will drive you to the airport, where my personal jet is waiting for you."

"But. . ."

"No buts Mr. Kinney, your project is excellent, and if I recall you told me that all the artwork was done by your partner. So, go home, take care of the one you love and we will talk in a week. I will go over the details with your staff."

"Thank you."

"Now go on."

Brian left the hotel reception desk in a hurry, leaving everything behind. He gave Cynthia and Ted the last instructions. Cynthia told him that she would pack his stuff and bring everything back tomorrow, that he didn't need to worry about anything.

An hour later he was at the airport.

\* \* \* \*

## **Brian POV**

Brian sighed deeply, looking at Justin he saw that something was missing. He moved to the drawer that kept Justin's personal items and reached for the necklace with the ring. He released the ring from the necklace and put it on Justin's left hand, where it belonged.

God, Justin looked thin again, He also had dark circles under his eyes, probably from a lack of sleep. Why for Christ sake? He had seemed OK the last time Brian had seen him in New York last month. During those few days, Justin had some nightmares, but he seemed to be fine. Brian hadn't noticed the loss of weight or the lack of sleep. What was so urgent, that he had to come back, so suddenly? They had planned to see each other next week at Justin's.

\* \* \* \*

It was nearly 6:00 am and the only noise in the room was the beeping from the monitor of Justin's heartbeat. Brian checked his watch. In a few minutes the nurse would come in and check Justin's vitals.

Brian heard the door open and looked up at the nurse. She checked the records, changed Justin's IV, and took his temperature.

Before leaving the room, she went to the closet and took out a blanket. She stretched it over Brian. Noticing that he was awake, she smiled and told him. "Your friend is fine, you should try to rest a little while. I'll check in again in an hour and a half."

"My partner," whispered Brian back.

The nurse smiled and said again, "Your partner is fine, you should try to rest a little while."

Brian only nodded and moved the chair a little closer to the bed. He entwined his fingers with Justin's who shifted in his sleep and moved toward Brian clutching his hand.

Brian drifted into a light sleep and woke up at 7:00 a.m. to find two blue eyes staring at him.

"Hey," whispered Brian, standing up, and smiling at Justin.

"Sorry, didn't want to freak you out," answered Justin.

"You didn't freak me out," replied Brian.

"Then why are you here?" asked Justin uncomfortably. This reminded him of the time he asked Brian why he was in the loft. He closed his eyes momentarily, wishing the memory would go away.

"Are you all right? Or should I call the ..."

"No I'm all right," answered Justin, "and you didn't answer my question.

"I was in Atlanta; we got the Hotel account, Daphne called." He saw the look of disbelief in Justin's eyes, "And before you yell at her, she didn't call me. She called Ted, and Ted told me everything, once the account was signed, and not before. See they didn't break the promise they made you." Brian looked at Justin, "I'm sorry I couldn't be here earlier, I had to find a flight, at the last minute. The client let me use his jet. And here I am." Justin looked Brian over, Brian said with a smile, "And before you say something about my clothes, I didn't stop at home, I came straight from the airport."

"I can see that," whispered Justin back.

They couldn't continue their conversation because the doctor stepped into the room. "Good to see you're awake, Mr. Taylor."

That's when Justin thought it would be a good idea to move. He sat up on the bed, pushed the covers back and made a move to stand up, when he began to sway and reach out to nothing.

Brian was just turning back to the bed, when he saw Justin move. "Are you nuts?" he asked him, pushing Justin back on the bed.

"I want to go home."

"Not today, Mr. Taylor."

"I'm fine."

"Well, obviously not," interjected Brian.

"Mr. Taylor, I want you to stay here until tomorrow morning, to be sure you're OK."

"I'm fine."

"No you're not, Mr. Taylor."

"I said that I'm ... I'm going to be sick, move..." Brian moved out the way, as Justin stumbled toward the bathroom and heaved in the toilet.

"Great," muttered Brian, following his partner.

"I'll call someone," said the doctor.

But Brian stopped him, "No need." He was wetting a towel and made a move to put it on Justin's neck when he saw the bandage, "What the fuck."

Brian pulled Justin from his position over the toilet and held him up against his chest, "What happened to you?"

"Nothing," came the faint answer. When Brian looked down Justin was about to pass out; he lifted him in his arms and brought him back to the bed, laying him gently over the covers.

"Mr..."



"Kinney, I'm his partner," answered Brian

"It's not unusual after what happened for him to be nauseous. He felt dizzy, that's why I want to keep him here."

"What happened? Christ! Would you answer my question?" asked Brian, while running his hand through Justin's hair.

"We were waiting for him to wake up," stated the doctor while checking Justin's heartbeat. "Good, he's waking up again."

Brian moved the covers over Justin, and let the doctor manage the situation.

"Mr. Taylor, I'm Doctor Kellmann, I was in charge last night when your friends brought you in. Can you tell me what happened to you?"

"Headache?"

"Is that a question or an answer Mr. Taylor?" asked Doctor Kellmann.

"An answer."

"All right, what kind of headache?"

"The kind that won't go away."

"Justin, please," Brian interjected.

"Sorry," whispered Justin while reaching out for Brian's hand. Seeing the movement, Brian sat on the bed, took hold of Justin's right hand, and frowned when he took in the tenseness there. Slowly he began to massage the hand, and his concern deepened when he heard a whimper.

"Justin?"

"Stop please. It hurts."

"Mr. Kinney?"

Brian put out his hand toward the Doctor motioning him to be quiet, "Justin does that hurt?" Justin nodded. Brian moved along the right arm toward the elbow and began to massage it too. But like the hand, Justin flinched. Brian moved over to the shoulder and his concern deepened more when Justin drew back from his touch. "Christ, what did you do?"

"I worked."

"Mr. Kinney."

"Yeah, sorry. Dr ..."

"Kellmann."

"Yeah, Doctor Kellmann, I suppose that you have his records, and you know that he suffered a previous head injury?" The doctor nodded. "Well when he came out from rehab, he had some techniques to relieve the pain, or the tension from his right arm, but, well, it seems that, it, I don't ..."

"Mr. Kinney, I understand what you are trying to say." Turning toward Justin, Doctor Kellmann continued his questioning, "Justin, when you were brought in last night you had almost overdosed. How many pills did you take?"

"What the ..."

"Mr. Kinney, I want you to be quiet, Justin, I want an answer."

Justin looked from Brian to the doctor, back to Brian and finally asked, "Where are the pills?"

The doctor handed him the boxes, and looked attentively at what Justin was doing. He opened the Imitrex box and checked the pills there and then did the same with the Apranax.

"I... I took six Imitrex since I left New York and I took three and a half Apranax since I arrived in Pittsburgh yesterday morning."

"Christ!"

"Mr. Kinney..." reminded Dr. Kellmann.

"Yeah, I'll stay quiet."

"Justin do you know that you almost overdosed? That you are in no condition physically to support the amount of drugs in your body?"

"I had a headache that wouldn't go away. I just tried to ease the pain. I didn't mean to... well fuck it."

"Can you explain the lump on your head?" The doctor waited awhile and looked at Justin. He moved toward the young man, grabbing his left wrist, "Or this?"

Brian didn't say anything, but Justin felt him tense. He looked up and saw a look of pure pain and terror in Brian's eyes.

"Hey, it's nothing, really. I cut myself while I was cleaning the paint stuff. I broke the old glass furniture I had, and I cut myself on the glass. You didn't think that I ... no."

Brian swallowed and asked just above a whisper, "And the head?"

"Nothing seemed to help; I thought that if I hit my head against the wall, it would hurt less. Not one of my finest moves, I agree."

Brian closed his eyes and tightened his hold on Justin's hand.

The doctor was writing on his chart. He looked at Justin, "All right, we have scheduled a CAT scan, an MRI, and some blood work for today."

"I don't need all that, Doctor. I told you I'm fine."

"Justin," Brian whispered in his ear, "Have you seen yourself? You're far from fine." Justin tried to move when he heard Brian say, "Stop, please stop."

Justin looked up, and after a few seconds, nodded. Brian released the breath he had been holding, and sighed, relieved that Justin would be taken care of.

"Mr. Kinney, we should be finished with all the tests around 2:00 pm. I suggest you go home and get some rest. You won't be any good if you get sick also."

Brian nodded, and took Justin's left hand, "This," kissing the ring, "stays here. You won't hide it, and you won't take it off, until they ask you, all right?"

"Yeah."

"All right Mr. Taylor, we're moving to the first test."

"Later."

"Later." Brian whispered as Justin was wheeled away in the corridor to the first test.

\* \* \* \*

Three days later, Justin was in the garage unloading his car, with Brian's help. He had gotten a clean bill of health from the hospital and they had released him.

Brian spent nights with him, trying to understand what could have happened. It wasn't until the third day, when he called Miranda that he got the piece of missing information: Chris Hobbs.

Miranda told him that Justin had worked it out to stay in West Virginia for a time, and work from there. Brian couldn't have been happier, except that Justin hadn't yet talked about Chris.

As they were dragging the canvases and the paintings into the house, Brian noted a huge box with sketches in it.

"What's that?"

Justin reached for the box, "Nothing, just some sketches, they aren't finished yet," answered Justin while putting the box upstairs in his studio.

Every time he had a dream or a nightmare, he would draw the moment, the feeling. There were lots of drawings and sketches, but he couldn't put them together in New York. He still couldn't remember the prom, but still all the images were there

The doctor told him to go easy for a few days, to get some rest, but like always, telling that to Justin was like talking to a wall.

Every night, Brian would wake up alone in bed, finding Justin in the studio with the door closed. Each day when he went to Kinnetik, he made sure to tell Mrs. Stevenson to make Justin's favorite meal. And every evening, Mrs. Stevenson would shake her head telling him silently that Justin hadn't eaten again.

A week later, Brian woke up alone again. He sighed, despite the tender lovemaking they had earlier in the evening, Justin had once more deserted their room. Brian stood up, walked down the corridor, checked on Gus, who was sound asleep, and went to the studio.

The door was ajar, and as he approached, he could hear soft music playing in the background and stopped. He hadn't heard that song for a while, or at least not aloud. It was "Save the Last Dance for Me."

He remembered the last time he heard it; he had been trying to trigger Justin's memory.

With shaking hands, he pushed the door open slowly and stopped at the threshold. Justin was sketching, standing at his easel; sketches were hanging all over the walls. Brian needed some time to find the first of the sketches. Once he found it, he could see that it was a story, the story of their prom, the very one Justin couldn't remember. Justin had captured every important moment, and had put them on paper.

The walls were full of drawings.

The arrival, the kiss on Daphne's cheek, the scarf, the dance, the twirling, and the kiss, everything that happened in the ballroom was there. Their walk in the garage, the kiss by the jeep, Brian's eyes looking into Justin's, they were speaking volumes on the wall, Brian noticed. He hadn't meant to say so much with his eyes that night, but yeah well, he couldn't say the words, so he preferred to speak his own language.

Brian continued to stare at the walls. There was what Justin saw when he walked away, the look on his own face when he called him and then a bat.... Justin had dozens of sketches of the bat, but what disturbed Brian the most was the last drawing: him lying on the ground, a wounded head, and Justin kneeling nearby.

Brian looked over at Justin and saw his shoulders shudder. He walked over and wrapped his body around Justin's and looked over at the last drawing Justin was working on, it was the same as the one hanging on the wall.

"I can't, I can't ..." hiccupped Justin.

"Shhhh," whispered Brian, "Take a deep breath," he inhaled with Justin, "Release it," and exhaled with him.

"I can't get that picture out of my head," whispered Justin moving into Brian's embrace to put his head on Brian's shoulder.

"It's not what happened Justin."

"I know, but I can't help it, it's what I always see at the end," replied Justin.

Brian sighed deeply and looked down at Justin, "I called Miranda, and she told me what happened at the gallery."

"Shit."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"He didn't do anything, he even asked that I forgive him, and I never saw him after that."

"Justin, you remember because of him?"

"No, it began a few days before. First it was all fuzzy, and after I saw Hobbs at the gallery it began to get clearer, until I saw it entirely."

Brian shifted to grab the paper on the table, "And that?"

"That came with the nightmares and the headaches, and heartaches, and lack of sleep."

Brian pushed the sketch back, "The doctor gave you pills to help you sleep."

"I hate to take them; they made me lethargic and I felt like I had a hangover the next day."

"Change the prescription, instead of two, try one."

"Can't."

"Won't."

"Yeah, what if I take them and I can't get it up."

"Then I will lie near you and will sleep with my arms around you," answered Brian with a smile.

"Stop it, it's not funny," replied Justin.

"I wasn't trying to be funny, I wanted it to be ... to be ... I..."

"Ridiculously romantic?" whispered Justin.

"Yeah."

"I remember that too, I couldn't get that song out of my head, and one night, just before I woke up, I heard you whispering the words. I wish I could have remembered them earlier."

"I wish you had too."

They fell silent, the past floating around them. Brian began to sway with the music, pulling Justin with him. They danced for a while, until Justin tried to stifle a yawn. Brian stopped and took hold of Justin's hand, shut out the light and led them to their bedroom.

Once there, Brian went to the bathroom, grabbed the bottle of sleeping pills, took one out, and brought it back to Justin. Justin was already waiting for it with an opened bottle of water.

"Thanks."

"No need. Partner's duty."

Justin swallowed the pill and settled into Brian's arms.

Once settled, Justin rubbed a circle with his left hand on Brian's tummy. He stopped, looking at his hand. Brian looked down, "What is it?"

"I didn't put it back on the necklace."

"You don't need to put it back," answered Brian quietly.

"But I thought..." began Justin, but was quieted by Brian's fingers on his lips.

"Shh, do you want to put it back? I don't, I found that it has its place there, just like mine has its place on my hand."

Justin turned his head to see that Brian still had his ring on his finger too. "Why didn't you, ..."

"Because it's fine there, now go to sleep, you're tired."

"I'm not," Justin tried to argue, but he couldn't finish his sentence - sleep overtook him.

"Yes you are," answered Brian quietly, putting the comforter closer around them.

## **Chapter 8     ...**

### *Chapter 8 - Part 1                      Deb's dinner*

Brian had taken ten days off to spend time with Justin and now they were back at work.

The ring Brian had put on Justin's finger stayed there and Brian didn't remove his either. The first day they came back to work, if someone noticed they didn't say anything.

One night, Justin talked about the fact that they still had their rings on their fingers. Brian shrugged, and said they didn't have to be careful because their life was pretty much, work, Gus, and bedroom.

Justin had to agree, even if they came to work in different cars, Brian drove straight from Kinnetik to the house, and Justin often left the office around 4:30 to pick up Gus and drive home.

The rare times Brian was at Babylon, he was doing paperwork, staying on the catwalk looking down over the crowd, If Emmett noticed the ring he didn't say anything.

Since Brian had put the guard at Kinnetik's entrance, no one came unannounced -not Michael, not Debbie, no one.

They didn't have to hide it from Daphne or Mrs. Stevenson since they both knew..

When they went to dinner at Deb's house, they took the rings off and put them back on their respective necklaces.

They arrived first bringing Gus, Daphne, and Matt along; Deb couldn't wait to meet the 'beau' that had tamed Daphne.

\* \* \* \*

Gus took his favorite place in Carl's chair and began to read one of the Harry Potter books Justin had bought him for his seventh birthday. He was already in third grade having skipped second.

He also had artistic and sports skills, much to Melanie's dismay. His parents, Melanie, Brian, and Justin didn't force him to do anything; he could choose what he wanted to do. The only rule was that once he made a decision he had to stay with it for a whole season even if he didn't enjoy it.

Certain members of the family had asked what Lindsay thought about their decision to have him skip a grade and sign up for art class and soccer practice. Melanie told them that since Lindsay was in France and Gus was under her and Brian's care, she had nothing to say concerning their son. Michael asked what would happen when Lindsay came back. Melanie told him that Lindsay would be able to see him Wednesday afternoons. They couldn't discuss it any further, because Gus said that he didn't want to move, that Daddy's house was just the right place to live, and they dropped the subject.

\* \* \* \*

Debbie was setting the table when the doorbell rang again. It was Melanie with JR and an old acquaintance, Corinne. A few minutes later, it was Michael, Ben, Ted, and Blake who arrived. Hunter was excused since he had a date with Callie. Emmett and Drew were fashionably late.

As everyone took a place in the living room, Justin moved to the kitchen and helped finish setting the table. Not even ten seconds later, Brian and Gus joined him, putting glasses on the table, dish-warmer, and everything that would be needed for dinner.

Brian was putting down the last glass, and telling Gus to go wash his hands, when he sensed everyone watching him; he looked up and shrugged, "What?"

Daphne, Mel, and Matt were grinning from ear to ear; for them it was common to see Brian giving Justin a hand in the kitchen, but for the others it was something new.

Emmett, Drew, Ted, and Blake didn't say anything because they weren't to surprise, that's how partners behaved. They had long ago accepted that Brian and Justin were together in their own way.

Michael had the hardest time realizing what had just happened before his eyes. It was Michael who asked the question.

"Brian, what are you doing?"

"Setting the table," piped up Gus.

"Gus!"

"Sorry Dad, Justin."

"Go wash your hands, dinner will be ready in 5," added Justin. He looked up and saw Michael's eyes moving between Brian, Gus, and him.

Finally Brian broke the silence, "What? Do you have a problem with me setting the table?"

"No, it's just that..."

"What?"

"You're setting the table," stated Michael.

"Yeah and ..."

"You never set the table."

"How do you know that," asked Ben.

"I never saw you set the table."

"Yeah well now you know I can set a table. You know Michael I'm a big boy. I can set the table, put on my clothes."

"Take them off," snickered Justin.

"Smartass," Brian smiled back. "I can take them off, and even help Gus with his homework, not that he really needs me, by the way."

"Yeah but ..."

"But?"

"I never saw you ..."

Brian rubbed his neck and said almost exasperated, "Michael."

"If I were you Michael, I would leave it, and appreciate dinner," added his mother.

Michael nodded and went to his chair; Justin sat opposite him, Brian next to Justin, Gus next to Brian, then Mel, and the rest of the company. Michael sighed loudly. Ben was sitting near him and asked, "Is there a problem Michael?"

Michael shook his head.

Dinner began and went rather smoothly, everyone was involved in one or multiple conversations. Ben tried to catch up with Justin, as Mel was asking Daphne when she planned the next round, but she only got a grin from the young woman.

Gus had long ago asked his father if he could leave the table and was playing with his sister on the rug.

Justin had gone into the backyard, followed by Ted. They were talking business when Michael stepped out.

"Hey, Boy Wonder."

"God I hate that nickname," whispered Justin, rubbing his forehead, a sign of an oncoming headache, but still smiling to Ted, who nodded, and stepped into the house again.

"You know that you are late with the latest boards," stated Michael.

"Yeah, I know,"

"What are you planning to do?"

"Work on them, when I have a minute," answered Justin tightly.

"It would be great if I could have them first thing Tuesday."

"I know, do you think this issue could be delayed."

"Should be doable, not sure, I'll have to call the printer." Michael moved to the door, "You sure you can't finish them?"

Justin sighed, "I have a major appointment I can't move. A business meeting Monday and a meeting at Gus's school Tuesday."

They were walking back into the kitchen when Michael asked, "A meeting at Gus's school?"

"Yeah."

"What are you going to do there? Isn't that the parent's place?" asked Michael awkwardly, without really thinking, "I mean, you're not his father, it's not your role. You know."

Michael stopped walking, when he heard Debbie's gasps, he looked up. "Shit. I did it again?" he asked looking toward Ben, who nodded sadly.

Michael turned around, and looked at Justin, "Huh, I – I'm – Christ I'm a dork, I'm sorry, I

shouldn't have say that."

Justin nodded and smiled. They moved into the living room, sitting down on couch.

"It's just you know, I don't understand, no I understand, but I can't ... Why are you going there?"

"At Gus's school?"

Michael nodded. It was Gus who gave him the answer, "I asked him to come, because I want him there."

Ben sat near Michael, "I find that great, that you can go to Gus's school like that."

"I always thought that it was the parent's place."

"Michael," warned Ben.

"I did it again. Huh?" asked Michael, as Ben nodded.

"You know that you should try to be posed, less stress when you are talking to him," said Ben.

"But I can't."

"Try it anyway."

Everyone was looking over at them, Michael sighed and explained, "I ... Ben is helping me I'm getting some help to deal with..." he gestured toward Brian and Justin. He looked up and continued, "I really want to try to be the best friend and a good friend, but it's just too difficult sometimes."

"Why?" asked Blake.

"It's just that, I don't know," answered Michael with a shrug.

Blake looked at everyone and said, "It's strange, when Ted came back from the ski trip Emmett led him and he told you he was dating me again, it didn't seemed to bother you. Yet we had another past than Brian and Justin. But you were happy."

"Yeah, it's just ... that, well..."

"Sweetie you're a real drama queen sometimes," piped Emmett up with a big smile.

Just then, Debbie came back with coffee and cake. Once everyone was served, they drank the coffee in silence. It was Blake who opened the discussion again, "Why don't you try to explain with your words, without animosity, what you feel Michael?"

"It's just, I know I won't get any answer."

"From who?" asked Blake back.

"Brian."

"Why do you assume I won't give you an answer?" asked Brian.

"Because you never did before," Michael pointed out.

"It was before. Try and you will see."

Michael sighed, and saw Brian sitting near Justin.

"I'm trying to work with Ben on some issues I have where you are concerned." Brian looked at him with an eyebrow raised waiting for Michael to continue. "All right, I never understood why, well how you, Christ it's more complicated than I thought."



"Maybe you should begin with what bothers you now," said Emmett.

"You said you are going to Gus's school," Justin nodded, "How it is possible? Because it's only a parent's duty."

Justin sighed, "I can go, because, well, I have legal papers proving that I can intervene in Gus's education, because I'm Brian's partner. And maybe, because I've lived with him since Gus was born."

Michael looked up and saw the look that Justin and Brian exchanged. He opened his mouth, wanting to remind them of their history, but finally he just mumble, "I always thought you two had a fuck agreement."

Justin looked up, and softly said, "I though you might remember that he asked me to marry him."

Michael smiled, "At the time, I thought it was the biggest farce on earth." He turned to look over at Brian, "I always thought you did it because you felt sorry for him."

Eyebrow rose, Brian asked, "For what?"

"For everything that happened since he came into our life," whispered Michael.

Brian shook his head, as Michael continued, "The first time I thought you lost your mind, was when you agreed to help Lindsay out. I never thought you would love that little bundle of life but you did." He smiled. "But then, you brought him with you, and I couldn't understand why, and you had such lame excuses." He moved on the sofa, "I never understood why you picked him up in the first place, you never answered that question."

Brian looked up, amused at Michael's look "What?"

"I, why did you walk toward that lamp, why did you pick him up?" asked Michael softly again, "Why did you bring him with you, why did you go back to him time and again? Why? I just want to know why?"

Brian moved from his place on the couch, moved into the kitchen, came back, and looked over at Michael, "You want me to say it to you here in your mother's living room?"

Michael nodded. Brian turned around.

"Michael, you shouldn't..." the rest of Ben's sentence died when he heard Brian.

"He was standing under that lamp, and it was like a light in the darkness. He ... he looked straight into my eyes and didn't turn away when I looked at him. No one had ever looked at me, like he did that night." Brian turned around and looked at Justin, "He didn't ask for the Great Brian Kinney, he just wanted to get laid. It was simple to be with him, he was open and honest, because he didn't know who I was. Even inexperienced, he could keep up with me. I don't know why but he saw... he ... he saw through my bullshit from the beginning."

"Why," asked Emmett.

"Why what, Emmett?" Brian asked while rubbing his forehead. "Why him and not someone else?" Emmett nodded. "The fuck if I know. Maybe because he told me the truth from minute one when I told him that we had to leave and go to the hospital. Maybe, because he helped name my son, the son that I love, by the way."

"I'm sorry," whispered Michael.

"What for?" asked Brian in confusion.

"Because I always thought that you wouldn't change, that Gus would be ... that you weren't meant to be a parent."

"Thanks," replied Brian feigning to be offended.

"It's just... I don't understand..."

Brian looked up into Michael's eyes, and whispered as his look shifted to Justin and he locked eyes with him.

"Because I love him, because I can't imagine my life without him, because I've been there, done that and I'll never do it again. Because I saw my future under that lamppost, that's why, Michael. And that's something I never saw when I looked at anyone else."

Justin blinked rapidly against the tears that were threatening to fall, and grabbed Brian's hand. Brian whispered while pulling him against him, "Thanks Deb, dinner was great. Ted see ya on Monday, Mel, Ben." He tugged on Justin's arm, who followed slowly leaving everyone without another word.

From his spot on the couch, Emmett said, "Whoa that was something."

"I never thought I would see a time when Brian Kinney would speak about his feelings," stated Debbie.

Just then the door opened again and Brian stood in front of them, "I never answered your questions, I never told you how I felt, we weren't there. Got it?"

Everyone nodded.

"Good. Bye bye."

Brian was gone. Everyone smiled.

\* \* \* \*

They agreed to sleep at the loft.

Justin was driving; Gus was sitting in the backseat fast asleep.

Brian was slumped in the passenger seat. He hated the sort of emotional trauma he had just gone through with Michael.

Matt and Daphne were driving toward the loft too, bringing Mel and Corinne along with them.

They all parked their cars in the garage and took the elevator. Justin sighed.

"I don't want to talk about it," whispered Brian.

"I ..."

"I said I don't want to talk about it," replied Brian once more, looking over at Gus who had found a place in Justin's arms. Brian sighed and closed his eyes. When they agreed to go to dinner at Deb's he never thought the evening would end that way.

They stopped at the third floor, where everyone stepped out.

Daphne opened the door and let everyone in. Once inside, everyone headed for their rooms, leaving Brian, Justin, and Gus alone in the living room.

Justin took Gus and led him into his room, where he helped the little boy undress, Brian followed, stopping at the door looking over at the scene in front of him. He sighed. Justin ran a hand over Gus's head and looked over at Brian. Brian smiled sadly and walked toward the stairs. He stopped at the bottom of the staircase when he heard Mel's voice.

"Brian, you should talk to him."

Brian huffed.

"You know, maybe..." began Justin only to be cut off by Brian's voice, "I'm going to take a shower. Night."

Justin knew that Brian was dismissing any further conversation, and shutting everyone out. He looked at Mel and asked, "Do you think he'll be all right?"

Mel shrugged and didn't answer. Justin closed his eyes inhaled deeply and when he opened them again, he was alone. Slowly he made his way up to the loft.

\* \* \* \*

The next morning came too soon for everyone. It found Brian in Gus's room, sleeping with his son. Matt and Daphne were up in their kitchen making coffee. Corinne was coming out of the bathroom as Mel followed a sleepy and grumpy JR into the family room.

During the night, Brian, who couldn't sleep, walked into his son's room. When he opened the door, the boy was sitting on his bed crying from a nightmare.

Brian got over the fear he felt in his gut and stepped into the room. Three hours later, they finally fell asleep in each other's arms.

Justin, who was alone upstairs, came down to the third floor too, climbed onto the mezzanine, and fell asleep on the futon there.

\* \* \* \*

When Justin awoke, he looked down from the mezzanine, as father and son ate their breakfast, chatting happily about Gus's birth. Michael's words from last night had triggered a memory, Justin felt dizzy. He tried to sit down until the feeling passed, when Brian looked up and spotted his white face.

Daphne was about to say something, when Brian stood up, knocking over the bar stool he was sitting on and running up the stairs to the mezzanine, followed by Matt, who took in what happened in a second.

Matt reached the mezzanine, just as Brian sat down with Justin on the couch.

"I'm fine," said Justin through the tremor shaking his body.

"I can see that," replied Brian.

"It's nothing, seriously. It's just, just . . . I'm just tired."

"Does this happened a lot?" asked Matt.

Justin shook his head, still trying to control the tremors, while Matt was taking his vitals. Daphne had brought up the medical bag to them.

Matt took Justin's blood pressure and listen to his heartbeat, "How many hours did you sleep? Honestly please."

"Not more than three."

"So doc, what's the verdict," asked Brian.

"Spasmophilia."

One simple word.

"It's the result of his PTSD and the stress from last night. Here," said Matt while preparing a syringe, "First I will help you to relax, and then you will talk to me."

"What's that?" asked Gus from downstairs.

"It's medicine to help Justin," Matt said to Gus. To the others he explained, "It's magnesium, but in concentrated version, to react faster than the pills," He told Justin to lie down and freed his left ass check.

"That's just because you want to see his ass," laughed Daphne.

"Yeah so right," drawled Matt to Daphne. "So it's done."

"Thanks," muttered Justin.

"He'll sleep."

"From a magnesium shot?" asked Brian.

"No, from everything combined and the fact that the magnesium shot will bring some relief." Matt put away his medical equipment and went downstairs, followed by Brian.

"I think he should take something regularly to prevent the crisis, like magnesium and Vitamin B6. He also should eat correctly; drink some fresh juice and take some oligocan, and calcium, to fix the tremors."

Brian looked up once more at the sleeping form on the futon, passed his hand over his face, and muttered, "Christ, Michael did a great job this time."

"I thought he was better," murmured Mel from her spot on the couch.

"I thought so too," replied Brian, "I also thought he still had the medicine his doctor in New York, Hutton, I think gave him."

Matt looked over at them, "Well technically he's better. He's gained weight and his test results are better, but he still has that low-pressure and I overheard him tell Daphne that he didn't sleep well."

"Shouldn't that be confidential?" asked Brian.

"Yeah it should, but he didn't tell you the last time he went to Kellmann, that he changed his sleeping pills, did he?" Brian shook his head. "Or did he tell you that the last time he came home from New York, he gave a sperm sample to Daphne?" Brian shook his head again.

"Well as for the sperm sample, let mother nature do her job; for everything else, he has to sleep... and to take care of himself."

Just then the doorbell rang. Daphne walked over to the intercom, "Yes."

"It's Michael; could you please let me in? I need to talk to Justin."

Daphne looked around and waited for Brian's agreement. Brian nodded.

"Come up, third floor."

Daphne opened the door and moved to the kitchen again. A few minutes later, a light knock told everyone, that Michael was at the door.

"Hello, may I come in?"

"Of course," answered Daphne.

She was about to close the door behind Michael, when Corinne took the opportunity to leave and go to work. She said her goodbyes and reminded Mel that they had a date for next Saturday.

Matt excused himself too, and left to check on Justin. Daphne went to the kitchen to fix lunch for them.

Michael stood in front of Melanie, Brian, and Gus. Seeing Michael's discomfort, Brian asked Gus to

go play in his room. After what seemed like an eternity for him, Michael said faintly, "I'm sorry I shouldn't have said what I said, all those times. You know that sometimes my words are faster than my brain, and, well, I shouldn't, I'm sorry."

Brian nodded. He heard noise behind him and saw Gus heading to the mezzanine.

Michael followed Brian's gaze,

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said anything about Gus."

"You're right, you shouldn't have," stated Melanie.

"I felt left out."

"Michael, you have nothing to do with Gus," reminded Melanie gently.

"I know, but I thought that maybe ... I never really saw the changes," said Michael.

"Sometimes you're too stubborn to see anything beyond your own nose Michael. This is not about who can have a toy. This is about a little boy who's almost eight years old. Who already has a father," replied Melanie.

"Yeah but you never..." began Michael turning toward Brian.

And before Brian could give an answer, Melanie continued softly, "That was then, and this is now. Many things have changed in eight years. We left Pittsburgh for another city, thinking that it would be better to live there. And what did we get? We have gone our separate ways now. I never imagined getting sick, and now, I have to deal with cancer. Hunter came back for good, and is now engaged to Callie, and Gus has found a real Dad in Brian. Look at you, you have a great life, a loving partner, and you're still Jenny Rebecca's dad." She stopped and looked at Michael.

Michael nodded, Melanie was right. So much has changed over the years.

"I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted," stated Mel, "Now if you don't mind, a little girl needs me." She made her way out of the room. Someone knocked on the door, Brian frowned and opened the door, it was Ben.

Michael looked up at Ben, "Sorry, it took me longer than I thought."

"Why?"

"I had to apologize for a lot of things. I think I forgot some important stuff though. Want to give me a hand?"

Ben laughed at the idea, but nodded.

They moved to the couch and looked over at Brian.

Ben began, "You remember that day we were coming home from Woody's? It was just after I had learned what you said to Brian at the girl's party, do you remember?" asked Ben.

Michael nodded looking uncomfortable. Ben continued, "I thought that it must be because you didn't want to see Brian suffer that the words came out the way they did. But since last night I think I understand something important about you. You can't help it, you can't stand to see Brian happy. It's something you can't picture. Don't misunderstand me, you can picture it, as long as he's alone."

"That's not..." but Michael was interrupted by Ben's glare.

"Michael, please, I'm not here to fight, I'm here to help you." Michael nodded, Ben continued, "You can't imagine how many times while Brian and Justin were together, you said some terrible things. Like when Justin asked where Brian was, and you answered, 'Where do you think?' In fact,

Brian was in the bathroom. Or when Justin was low emotionally, you never gave him a break."

Brian shifted on the couch, stood up and walked to the windows. He hated these discussions. Ben grabbed Michael's hand, and asked softly, "When you began to work on Rage, did you ask Justin how he felt?" Michael shook his head, and Ben continued, "Or why the drawings of Rage changed from one issue to another," Michael shook his head again. "Well I did."

Brian turned around, and looked over at the couch.

Ben lifted his gaze and looked over at Brian but continued to speak to Michael, "Did you know that each time you were working on a new issue, and Justin put a part of his story with Brian into it he felt torn apart? Did you actually talk with him?" Michael shook his head in defeat, realizing that he did a really bad job of being a friend to Justin. Ben continued, "I spoke with him once, just after the steroid episode, when he created the villain called Juice Pig. He told me that after the first issue he wanted to stop everything because he couldn't cope with the pain it generated. Did you know that when it was published he wanted to die?"

At those words, Brian began to walk out the room, but Ben stopped him, "He felt guilty, because he made you suffer."

"That's bullshit."

"He thought that you felt the bashing was your fault; but after two hours, I get him to believe that you didn't think it was your fault, but rather that you thought you had failed to protect him. Am I right Brian?"

Brian nodded, much to Michael's surprise.

"I should have protected him, and that night I failed."

"Com'on Brian, no one could have known that Justin would get bashed that night," said Michael.

"No, but I should have been more attentive, I should have led him back; I don't know I should have done something!"

"Something like what?" came a quiet question from the bottom of the steps.

"Hey you're up," said Brian while walking to Justin.

"Yeah. Matt told me that Michael was here, I thought that maybe we could..."

"No. You won't, the issue has been postponed," replied Michael, "I came to tell you that I don't need the artwork before, well, before you can finish them," said Michael with a smile.

"Really?" asked Justin as Brian led him to the couch.

"Yeah, I, you know, it's just..." stammered Michael, Justin nodded and sat near Brian, Michael continued,

"I'm sorry, Justin, really, I'm sorry."

Justin looked up, and nodded once, but asked, "For what Michael?"

"I shouldn't have said what I said all those times, I was wrong."

"I never should have gone to Brian, when I saw you with Ethan."

"You shouldn't have, you should have let me explain," stated Justin calmly.

"I don't mean the New York incident; I meant all those years back."

Brian shifted uncomfortably, fighting the urge to stand up.

"I should have come to see you, like Ben, suggested, and talk to you, but... well... it was... I thought."

"What did you think," asked Justin softly.

"I thought that maybe it was better that you were off without Brian, that things could be like they were before you came into our lives, just the four of us. But then I saw that I was beginning to change. That I had someone in my life that had begun to count a lot and after I talked to Brian, it was too late."

"It was childish what I did. You're too smart Justin, and I didn't and still don't get your ..." he gestured between the two men "...whatever you have."

Brian rolled his eyes, and thought that maybe it was time to explain everything, "He challenges me everyday," he replied.

"I can figure that out by myself, I mean you'd have to be blind to not see that he's a piece of hot ass," replied Michael with a smile.

"I don't think," began Ben, "that Brian was speaking about their sex life."

"No you're right, I wasn't," replied Brian with a smile. "I was talking about all the other things he does - like cooking and asking me to give him a hand. Coming up with simple ideas for an ad campaign when I'm stuck; seeing in 10 seconds what five other dorks don't see in three hours. That's how he challenges me everyday." He said. "And yes, he can keep up with me in bed, that's something else in his favor," Brian said with his patented tongue in cheek smile.

As Brian looked down at Justin, he saw the young man closing his eyes and nodding slowly, smiling.

"And I love him. No Michael, it's more than that. I'm in love with him. Yeah, that's it I'm in love with him."

Michael looked at Brian, who was still looking at Justin. He had learned a lot more in the last hour or so than in all his life about what Brian was capable of. Brian looked up, "I think I answered all your questions didn't I?"

Michael nodded.

"Are you hungry?" Daphne asked from the kitchen.

"We're coming" answered Brian, "Are you staying?" he asked Ben and Michael.

Michael looked over at Justin, "Truce lunch?"

"Yeah."

"We're staying," stated Ben for everyone.

"Great," stated Mel who was bringing JR over for lunch.

They all moved to the kitchen leaving Justin and Brian behind.

"I'm glad you did this for him," whispered Brian into Justin's hair.

"I didn't," answered Justin. Brian tensed. "I did this for us, for you, for me. You know that he will always have a hard time understanding us, but I'm too tired to fight with him, I'm too tired to have to explain myself."

He turned around and looked into Brian's eyes, and whispered, "You know he still doesn't think that I'm good enough to be a part of your life."

"Justin..."

"No Brian, he doesn't," said Justin while moving into the kitchen.

## *Chapter 8 - Part 2*

### *Walking Down Memory lane*

Lunch had gone smoothly. Michael and Ben left around 5:00pm. Brian wanted to get back to the house but Justin told him he preferred to stay one more night at the loft.

It was just after 7:00 Brian was sitting on the sofa, Justin was in the mezzanine reading, Daphne was in the playroom with Gus. Mel and Corinne were in their room and Matt was at work.

Brian was smoking a cigarette, he sighed; somehow he knew that Justin was right. His and Michael's friendship had suffered.

He moved over at the window and looked down at the street; he remembered Debbie barging into the loft telling him that David was good for Michael, that he should do something.

He did something, and made everyone mad. It was Justin who convinced Michael to come back.

He remembered how he stood back during JR's custody fight. The only thing he did was to help Lindsay get a good lawyer, who would help her if she needed it. He didn't say anything, just stood by and watched Melanie, Lindsay, and Michael battle over JR, none of them thinking about the little girl's needs or comfort.

He remembered how Michael pushed him away after Justin left to get his own apartment. Justin showed up at Ben and Michael's door. He still couldn't understand why Justin went there instead of Debbie's or the girls.

Looking back he remembered it was the first time that Michael had been on Justin's side. What had he said, again?

He remembered barging into Michael's house wanting just one thing, to take Justin home with him. But the discussion didn't go the way he expected. The moment he saw Michael, he felt so angry that he couldn't stand the feeling and just started shouting. He remembered the words, like it had happened yesterday...

"Well, Mikey. Congratulations."

And Michael's astonished look asking him, "For what?"

"You won. To the spoiler goes the victory."

And Michael still playing dumb, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Of course you don't. No one plays dewy-eyed innocent better than you." He still wondered where that came from, maybe all the resentment he had felt over the years, but he continued nevertheless, "Although at 34, you're getting a little bit long in the tooth for short pants."

And Michael playing the moralist one, "Speaking of outgrowing your act, nothing's more pathetic, to use one of your favorite words, than an over-the-hill club boy."

And then, he couldn't stop his emotions, he just let out the words, "You infected him... with your petty, bourgeois, mediocre, conformist, assimilationist life. Thanks to you, he's got visions of babies, weddings, white picket fences dancing in his blond little head."

And after Michael tried to make him see that he wasn't the reason Justin had left, he went on, "Before you and your 'Husband' tied the noose around your necks, he was perfectly happy. But now he's a defector, just like the rest of you!"

And then Michael's words, hitting home the second he heard them, "He was never perfectly happy. Waiting for years for you to say, 'I love you. You're the only one I want.'" "

It would have been so simple to admit that Michael was right, but he couldn't, *"That's Not Who I*



Am."

And Michael finally hitting him with his last words, "Don't we all know. But he didn't leave because I infected him. He left because of you. Who wouldn't?"

The words hit home, hard, the pain was almost too much for him, and he finally left.

Then Debbie came to him a few days later, and told him that he had to speak to Michael. He used Justin's art show to do it, but Michael turned him down, "Look, just because we've been friends our whole life doesn't mean we have to stay friends. Especially since... we no longer have anything in common. So why don't we just admit that the "Brian-Mikey show" is over and get on with our lives?"

It was only after they couldn't find a place for their benefit concert that Michael came to Brian, and asked him if they could use Babylon.

Brian agreed without much fuss and didn't even charge them. For him it was a peace offering, but for Michael, it was only business as usual something that Brian always did and still does.

When he heard about the explosion, he didn't think about Michael for a moment, until he knew Justin would be all right. Then he allowed his mind to think about Michael.

It was Ben who brought them together again, telling Michael about the fit he made at the hospital about his blood.

But it was Justin who whispered in his ear to ask Michael to be his best-man, and if he had agreed with the idea, it was because Justin used every erotic skill he knew to convince him. And it worked.

How many times did Brian forgive Michael? Too many to count, but he knew that the last time they fought it was at Woody's when he explained himself in front of his friends, and then, in his office with Debbie there.

He looked around him, and sighed again, Justin was right. It would be much simpler if everyone knew and accepted that they were together, for good, he thought, rubbing over the ring on his necklace.

They took them off for Debbie's dinner and with everything that happened they hadn't put them back on.

They talked about how they should bring it up, but every time they chose to keep it to themselves. It wasn't like they were lying, just that no one ever brought the subject up at the dinner. Justin hadn't even talked to his mother.

Brian realized they were good at hiding things - really good. Even though Daphne had known almost since day one, she had kept it to herself. Brian was amazed. She had grown up too.

It was time to say something to everyone, because in less than 17 days it would be three years since they had signed their commitment papers, and they were still together.

\* \* \* \*

Ben and Michael rode home; Ben was in the kitchen fixing dinner. He thought that Michael had come a long way and finally accepted the fact that Justin would be a part of Brian's life.

Ben and Michael hadn't spoken a lot during their ride home, just trivial things, like if they had to go shopping or if they had enough bread at home, nothing more.

He was still trying to figure out after all these years how the 'Brian and Michael show' worked, and never get a clear idea.

But he knew one thing - Brian and Justin belonged together. He had known that since the first time he had seen them together. He never doubted the feelings he had in him that they were like the yin and the yang of a whole.

He also knew that Michael didn't hate or dislike Justin. It was just that he had a hard time putting Brian and Justin in the same place in his mind.

Maybe Michael should see it in the 'brother way'. He and Michael had been married for over four years now, and Michael said often that he now considers Brian more like a brother. Maybe he could see Brian's relationship with Justin from the brother point of view. Ben made a mental note to talk about that later.

Michael came to him and asked for advice the last time Brian threw him out his office and posted Frank at the entrance.

That evening, he came home to find a distraught Michael. When he asked what happened, Michael broke into tears and told him everything, and how bad he felt. How everything had just gone to hell, when he tried to protect Brian.

Michael and Ben talked for hours, and Michael finally accepted Ben's help to deal with the 'non-situation' he was creating each time.

Ben thought that they should talk; maybe he wasn't enough help for Michael.

\* \* \* \*

Michael sighed. He was sitting on the couch in his living room. He looked around and saw Ben in the kitchen fixing dinner.

He shook his head, he still had trouble understanding the words Brian had said that morning. Brian was committed to Justin and he still couldn't get his mind around it. He remembered the rehearsal dinner, he was so relieved when they called off the wedding. He never thought it was right for them.

He knew they belonged together, and that they are good for each other, but when he heard Brian talking about commitment, or when he heard Justin speak about Gus's class, he couldn't picture it.

He couldn't get past the feeling that he had fucked up again. It's not that he didn't like Justin, he really loved him like a little brother. But every time something had gone wrong in Brian's life, Michael felt it had to be Justin's fault. He couldn't help it.

He really couldn't picture them like a real family, but he had to agree that they were a family. Brian had full custody, Gus was living with them, and well, he wasn't part of the club scene anymore.

He also had to agree that since Justin was back, Brian had been in a better mood.

Michael remembered when he nagged Brian to reopen Babylon. At first Brian didn't want to, Michael really had to go after him, to insist. Even now he wasn't sure Brian changed his mind because of him. He remembered that Brian changed his mind just after Justin called the loft.

He saw him change and yet still his mind preferred to have that perfect 'Stud' picture in front of him. He realized that he had lost the ability to read Brian a long time ago. Justin knew Brian better than him and in a way he never would.

He sighed again and looked at the phone and then at the phone book below it. He took it, opened it, and flipped through the pages. Once he found what he was looking for, he took a pen and wrote down the number and the address.

In the kitchen, Ben stopped what he was doing and looked at his husband, "What are you doing?"

"I'm getting some help; I think I have some issues I need to resolve, before I lose my friends." He wrote another number down, "I want to thank you for all the help you gave me, but I really think you shouldn't be put in the middle."

Ben smiled, "I'm proud of you," he said from the kitchen, earning him a smile from Michael. "Dinner is ready can you give me a hand setting the table?"

"Sure," answered Michael.

\* \* \* \*

As Brian got up, he heard Justin in the shower; as he trailed through the kitchen, he saw that Justin had fixed a salad and a sandwich.

He knew that if Justin was in the shower alone, he didn't want company, so he sat at the bar and began to eat. He noticed that Justin had only prepared something for him and assumed that Justin probably hadn't eaten anything.

A few minutes later, he heard rustling in the bedroom; Justin had finished with the shower and was putting on some clothes.

Brian cleaned the dishes and walked into the bedroom. Justin was sitting on the edge of the bed looking at nothing.

Brian sat near Justin and took hold of his right hand. "A penny for you thoughts," he whispered into Justin's ear.

"I don't want to go back," replied Justin.

"Go back?" asked Brian.

"To New York, I don't want to go back. Miranda said I didn't need to come back, that I can paint where I feel right, and I don't feel right in New York." He sniffled; Brian continued to massage his hand. "I feel right when I'm with you, and lately we are more apart than together, it's too ... I haven't had any inspiration lately, and with me remembering the prom, I... it just gets more difficult."

"I know," whispered Brian, "I know. Maybe you should try to ..." he gestured toward the bed.

"I can't, I have too much to do ..."

"No Rage, or anything else, until you get better, and only if it fits in the plans we will put together tomorrow. As for TJay's art, Kevin will help you out. You chose him, so he must be good, and you will get some rest."

Justin nodded and finally gave up and laid down. Brian put the comforter around him and watched him drift to sleep.

Now he could breathe more easily, Justin was home, finally home. He didn't have to worry anymore about him, it would get better now, and they would spend more time together, maybe Justin would be rid of his nightmares.

Maybe they would finally get a break.

## **Chapter 9      A Twist of Fate**

Justin had been back in the Pitts for almost four months. Miranda came three or four times to plan the upcoming show. Brian and Justin went to New York for the opening and it was wonderful. Justin sold most his paintings the first night of the show, and this time Brian didn't buy any of them.

Miranda was happy, Justin over the moon, and Brian was proud.

Justin had regained all of his weight; he also solved his insomnia problem by getting some counselling once a week.

During the few days they were in New York, he went to his doctor who renewed all of his prescriptions, and changed his sleeping pills to something more natural.

The headaches were almost gone, and now he could get rid of them with a simple aspirin. He kept the hard stuff, Imitrex and Apranax, for the bad ones.

Every morning, they ate their breakfast together; Mrs. Stevenson poured a glass of guava juice for Brian and two pills for Justin, one was magnesium, the other calcium and a glass of orange juice. Justin's doctor had taken Justin off almost all drugs.

They spend they third anniversary at the mansion. It was just a little dinner with friends. Daphne, Matt, Mrs. Stevenson, Mel, Corinne, Gus and JR were there. No one spoke about the occasion, and dinner went smoothly.

Daphne finally announced that she was pregnant, in fact she began her fourth month. She was already pregnant when Justin showed up unexpectedly, and decided to stay in Pittsburgh.

Once Brian and Justin knew that Daphne was pregnant, they put her medical schedule on both of their calendars.

They were both there at the first ultrasound. Daphne's doctor was about to ask Justin to stay out of the examination room, when Daphne told her that Justin was the father and Brian was Justin's partner.

The baby and the mother were in **VERY** good shape. Daphne had gained the weight she needed. They didn't have to worry, with Matt now living with her she was under good care.

At the office, some things had changed too; Kevin was now more involved in TJay's Art, and Justin had more time to paint.

Brian agreed that Justin had made a good choice by hiring Kevin. He had proven to Brian that he didn't have to check with Justin on an idea, because his ideas were as good as Justin's.

Justin decided to split his days in two. He spent the morning at Kinnetik and then he went to pick up Gus and worked on his art in the afternoon. Miranda had negotiated a big show in Philadelphia for April, and he had some orders to finish.

The help that Michael was getting had helped him a lot, and he had gotten over some of his anger against Justin.

Corinne had moved in with Melanie and they were now a couple.

The results of Melanie's cancer test were good. She had not had a relapse, and had no sign of new tumors. The same was true for Brian he too was still cancer free.

Jennifer was still with Tucker.

Over the last months, Carl had convinced Debbie to let go of her wig from time to time, and he took her to the hairdresser. The result was wonderful. They opted for a natural blond color.

The change pleased not only her husband, but also all her friends. They loved it, and Gus found her 'absolutely gorgeous for a grand mother'.

Over the last few months, Gus occasionally called Justin Pa or Papa. He tried to cover it rapidly by calling him Justin just after. No one said anything; even Mel found it better that way. They never corrected the boy; it was his choice, not theirs.

\* \* \* \*

## January 2009

Daphne was, almost seven months pregnant. She was glowing; the pregnancy fit her. She wasn't as big as she thought she would be, she gained just enough weight. The baby was healthy and she was still working at the hospital in Matt's department.

Daphne was over the moon; the deal she made with Justin about the baby was just great for Matt. He didn't want children now, because of his career.

\* \* \* \*

Brian and Justin were in a meeting with another big account of Kinnetik's - the 'Aventis Group' a French firm, which had some of their offices in the US, specifically in New York, Chicago and Boston. They came to Kinnetik, recommended by Remsen Pharmaceutical.

They were talking about the number of layouts and the colors when Justin's phone rang.

"Sorry."

Brian threw him an icy glare. He hated any disturbance when they were in a meeting. That hadn't changed over the years. He was about to explain something to the campaign director when he heard a noise. He looked over and saw Justin's phone on the floor.

Brian saw Justin's posture and frowned, "Would you excuse me please?" he said to the client. A nod from the client, and he headed to the other room. Justin had moved to the desk and leaned against it, staring blankly at nothing.

Brian moved toward him, pressing his hand onto Justin's lower back. As he picked up the phone, he noticed there was still someone on the other end trying to get Justin's attention.

"Justin, Justin ..."

"No, it's Brian, Matt what is it?" asked Brian, still pressing his hand into Justin's lower back.

"I'm at the hospital, Allegheny General. It's Daph. We were driving and we had a little accident, nothing major, but she went into labor, and ... and ..."

Brian was breathless this couldn't be good. Matt sounded upset. Brian breathed in, counted to ten, and said, "We're on our way." He closed the phone, before Matt could add anything else and thought, 'Please no, not her, tell me she's fine'.

Brian looked at Justin, put the phone on the table, and looked in his office toward the client. "Justin, can you wait a minute?"

A simple nod from Justin, and Brian moved into the conference room, spotted Ted and moved directly to him, leading him out the room while speaking to the client, "Gentlemen, would you excuse us."

They moved out of the room so the client couldn't hear. "Ted, you'll need to finish the meeting, Matt called its Daphne ..."

"Is there a problem?"

"I don't know. Matt just said that she went into labor and they are at Allegheny General"

"Ok, Ok, what will you say to the clients?" asked Ted.

"Nothing. You tell them that I had an emergency with my child, and that I'm leaving it up to you to finish. And if they don't agree, tell them we'll need to reschedule the meeting for next week, not before. And before, you say anything, you can do it, you know the music, the case, I have confidence. Do your best Ted."

"Well - huh - thanks," muttered Ted as he turned around and looked from Brian to the clients. After a second, he walked into the conference room.

Brian locked fingers with Justin and walked out of the building.

\* \* \* \*

After thirty minutes of a silent and long ride, where Brian ran every traffic light, they arrived at the Emergency entrance.

\* \* \* \*

**Brian POV**

Matt was waiting for them. He was a mess.

Before he could say anything, a seven-year-old memory resurfaced. Brian remembered the first time he stepped into the ER. It was 7 years ago, after the best night of his life. That night he had planned to tell Justin that he was more important to him than anyone else in his life. He had planned to tell him, tell him that he loved him.

He remembered the moment the paramedics came and they put him into the ambulance. They said Brian couldn't ride with them. For the first time in his life, he told a complete stranger, "I'm his partner, I'll go with him." They had no other choice, and nodded their agreement. He never left Justin's side, until they got here: the ER.

God he hated this place.

He closed his eyes for a brief moment, and took a deep breath.

\* \* \* \*

When he opened his eyes, he saw the nurse smiling at him, an old acquaintance.

"Brian, long time, no see."

"Yeah."

"Justin, how are you?"

"I, I'm fine, thanks," answered Justin, recognizing the night nurse who was on duty the whole time he was in rehab. He looked from Brian to her in confusion, "You know Brian?"

Smiling at him, Casey told him the truth that had been hidden for so long, "Yes, he was here every night when you were in rehab."

Justin shuddered against Brian, and looked up at him, "You never told me."

Shifting uncomfortably, Brian looked into those blue eyes. "Yeah I came every night." Looking up at Casey and Matt he finally said, "Uh, we're here for Daphne, Daphne Chanders."

Casey smiled and led the three men to a waiting room and asked them to sit. She disappeared into room 3 and came back with a doctor.

Assuming Matt was the father, he began to explain Daphne's condition. Matt pointed to Justin and said, "He's the father."

The doctor explained that Daphne was brought into the hospital after the accident. Labor had begun and she was bleeding. It was too early for the baby but it was in respiratory distress, and they had to deliver it as soon as possible.

They had to find a way to stabilize both of them or they might not be able to save either of them. Brian suddenly felt dizzy, and Justin clutched at his hand like a lifeline. Matt sat down on a chair; he understood that they would have to make a choice.

Justin swallowed hard, turned around and finally asked, "What can we do?"

The doctor seemed uncomfortable, looking at the three men, "Tell me which one we should save first, if we have to choose."

"Oh God, no ..." Justin turned his body against Brian unable to face the reality and give an answer. Brian ran his hand along Justin's back giving him his support and searching some comfort for himself in the touch. He looked at the doctor, and then at Matt, inhaled deeply, and with a low voice while looking at Matt, asked, "What are the chances."

The doctor looked from Brian to Matt, and answered, "Well, considering Daphne's health, which is pretty good, and the baby's difficulties since she got here, I would say 40% for the baby and 80% for the mother. I can't give you any better information."

Justin pressed his body even further against Brian, trying to escape the moment. Brian was silent for a few minutes. He looked at Matt, who looked up helpless; even though he was living with Daphne he had nothing to say about the baby.

Then he heard Brian say in a low voice, "Do everything in your power to try to save both of them."

Justin tightened his grip on Brian's back trying to hold back his tears.

The doctor disappeared into the surgery room, as Brian led Justin to the chair along the wall, "I'll be right back," Justin nodded.

Matt took the seat near Justin. He took Justin's hand in his, two men praying for the same woman, but not for the same reason. - one because she was his love; the other, because she would be the mother of his child.

\* \* \* \*

Brian desperately needed a smoke, but he also needed to make a few phone calls. He went outside to do both.

First he called Justin's mother. She was showing a house to some clients. When she heard that they were at the hospital, she became frantic and asked Brian if Justin was all right. Once Brian cleared up it was Daphne that was in danger. She immediately said that she would be there as soon as possible. Brian told her that he would call her back if they had any news.

The second call was to Ted, to tell him that he wouldn't be coming back to the office and that Cynthia should move his appointments for the next few days. Ted told him that he didn't have to worry about Kinnetik, and that he would contact the rest of the family.

Finally Brian called Corinne, because he remembered that Melanie had a tough case to work on, and asked her if they could pick up Gus at school, and maybe stay at the loft.

He lit his cigarette and saw Matt coming over to him, a blank look in his eyes. He looked at his watch, and realized he had been gone for over an hour. He hadn't realized he had been gone for so long. His thoughts were interrupted by Matt's broken voice.

"The surgeon came out a few minutes ago. Daphne's asleep; she'll be out for awhile." Brian nodded. "She's all right," continued Matt, "They took the baby into the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit. Justin followed them."

Brian nodded again. He stubbed the cigarette butt out with his boot. He stopped near Matt, put his hand on his shoulder, and squeezed it. Then he walked back into the hospital.

Before he went to the NICU, he checked on Daphne. She was sleeping, dried tears on her face. He then took the elevator to the NICU floor.

Once there, a nurse stopped him before he got past the first doors. She asked him for his name and his relationship to Justin Taylor. Once all the information was given, he had to change into a sterile gown in a locker room. Then the nurse led him to the sink and told him to wash his hand. Once he was finished, she opened the door to the NICU.

A nurse greeted him, and led him to an incubator, where Justin already stood.

In the incubator was a little bundle, a boy. The tag on the incubator said "*Tyler A.C Taylor*." Brian smiled; they couldn't find a name that everyone liked. Daphne told them she found a way that would satisfy everyone. If it were a boy, she would like to call him, Tyler Alex Chanders Taylor and if it was a girl, Grace Keira Chanders Taylor and Kinney if they told anyone about their commitment.

But they hadn't said anything about the commitment yet, so the last name was only Taylor.

Brian looked at the little boy. He had cafe-au-lait skin and dark blond hair. He was hooked to enough tubes and machines to know that his state was more than critical.

"Hey."

"Hey," answered Justin without looking up, his eyes still on the baby.

"Daphne's fine, she's asleep in the ER or ICU I don't know. Matt only told me that she will be out for the next few hours."

Justin nodded, "He's so small, he ... they don't know if he's going to make it, his lungs haven't developed properly."

Brian nodded - he had figured out that much.

\* \* \* \*

The NICU was dimmed, only the lights above the incubators were on. After two hours, the staff from the NICU brought a chair for Justin and Brian. Brian told them that he didn't need it he needed to move.

When he stepped out, Matt was waiting in front of the door. Brian looked at him, and Matt told him that Daphne was all right, that she was awake, and in a few minutes, she would be up to see the baby.

Brian nodded and walked away. As he went into the waiting room, he could see that almost the whole family was there.

As he stepped toward them, Debbie was just about to jump up and hug him, but Carl pulled her down and Brian nodded.

"Daphne's fine, she's downstairs." He sighed, Ted handed him a cup of coffee. "Thanks," whispered Brian, "and the baby is fighting."

He stood there among his family, not knowing what else to say.

When he looked over Ted's shoulder, he saw a nurse pushing Daphne in a wheelchair. She looked up and smiled sadly at Brian.

"Hey."

"Hey," he whispered back, kissing her head, "I... huh... Justin's in there if you want to..." as he gestured toward the NICU door.

"Thanks." She nodded and the nurse continued to push her wheelchair toward the NICU, Brian watched her go.

He sat in a chair next to Ted, then Michael knelt near him asking, "Are you all right?"

Brian slowly shook his head.

"Maybe you should, take a break, and ...."

Just then, the door open and Matt yelled, "Brian?"

He barely finished saying his name when Brian was standing and walking back into the NICU.

\* \* \* \*

As Brian stepped back into the NICU, he could see activity around the incubator. He spotted Justin and Daphne in a corner clutching their hands together, Matt joined the doctors around the baby. The machines were beeping, the doctors were shouting orders, when suddenly a strong calm voice resonated, "Stop."



They all stopped and looked at Justin; he was standing between the incubator and Daphne. A doctor looked over at him, stunned, "What did you say?"

"Stop, you're hurting him."

"No we're trying to save him."

Justin turned toward Matt, "Daphne told me. I want you to stop, please."

Daphne wheeled her chair near Justin, "Me too."

"We could..." began the doctor.

"We said no, stop."

"Daphne..." began the doctor in charge, but Justin stopped her, "We said no, no need to make him suffer, if he survives, he'll need constant treatment, and maybe even..." Justin's voice faded.

"He may not even be normal," added Daphne.

Matt moved to her, and put his hand on her shoulder; she took comfort in the touch. The doctor turned around and said just one word, "Stop."

The nurses around the baby, began to shut down the machines, the last one was the respirator. Justin moved closer, and Matt helped Daphne to stand up, Brian stood by, watching the whole scene.

The nurses finally cleared the room, Brian moved behind Justin. With a last glance, the doctor shut down the respirator.

The baby's chest rose slowly once, twice and then slowly went down and stopped. The machine began to beep, but was turned off by the doctor. Daphne ran a hand over the baby's cheek; she took his little hand, bent down, and kissed it slowly.

When she turned around, she fell into Matt's arms and began to weep. Justin moved passed her, giving her a squeeze on her hand.

He walked to the incubator, bent down to place a kiss on his son's forehead, "Sleep well my little boy. Sleep well."

He turned around and looked up at Brian; he tried to smile but failed, and finally, walked to the door. Brian cleared his throat, watching Justin walk away, what could he say?

He looked over at the retreating form and then looked back at their son. He closed his eyes, fighting his tears. He ran his hand over the baby's head, stopped, and rubbed his thumb over his forehead. "You would have been a wonderful boy... I'm sure you would have been a real stud." He cleared his throat, bent down, and kissed the boy softly on the forehead.

As he turned around, he saw that Matt and Daphne had left the room. He was alone. A nurse walked in and smiled sadly at him. He didn't return the smile.

"Did you say goodbye?"

Brian nodded.

"I'm sorry."

Brian nodded again, and finally walked out the room. He steeled himself before he stepped into the waiting room, when he heard a commotion in the hall.

"You're sorry, for what?" he heard Justin shout. "It's not you who just lost a son! You're not the one who will have to see the face of his mother tainted with pain. It's me, you fucking cowboy."

"Justin..." he heard Debbie's soothing voice.

"What!"

"It was just a twist of fate, something no one could have imagined."

Justin huffed at Debbie's comment.

"So much for fate."

"I'm really sorry, Sir, I didn't mean to ..."

"Fuck you! Fuck you! You should have been more careful. The roads were slippery enough, you should have been more careful..." Justin's voice trailed off in an effort to stop the sobs from emerging.

"I didn't think the car would..."

"Shut up." Justin roared before he lunged himself toward the man who ran into Matt and Daphne's car, provoking the premature labor and the death of their child.

He was stopped by Ben, who had great difficulty. Brian decided it was time to intervene. He stepped into the hall, walked behind Justin and whispered in his ear, "Stop."

Like magic, Justin stopped struggling against Ben, and raised his hands in surrender. Ben released his grip, and walked back to Michael, leaving Justin in Brian's arms.

Brian looked over at the man who caused Justin's anger. The man walked toward him, but stopped when he saw the icy look Brian was giving him. He only mouthed, "I'm sorry."

Brian felt Justin tense, so he simply turned around so the man was out of his sight.

Justin struggled against Brian, but stopped when he heard Brian's voice, "Justin, please, stop."

Justin stopped struggling and Brian released his grip, but not before he checked to make sure the man was gone.

Once Justin was calm, he turned around and looked at the whole family gathered in the waiting room.

He looked up and saw Matt. "I put her in her room," Matt whispered as he passed by Justin, who nodded.

Justin looked up again and faced the people there, and saw sorrow and pity in their eyes. Michael stood up and walked over to him, "Justin, are you all right?"

Justin nodded.

Awkwardly, Michael tried to show Justin his support, "It's sad, but maybe, maybe it wasn't time. She's young. I'm sure she'll get better soon."

"Hey, you're talking about my friend here," Justin answered coldly.

"Yeah, but like I said, I'm sure she will get better soon."

"You don't know that. You don't know what ..." Justin said softly.

"It will get better, you'll see, maybe it wasn't time, maybe it was for the best, you know," Michael said calmly.

Justin looked at him then at Brian who shook his head sadly. Michael wanted to show support, but he only brought more fuel to Justin's anger.

Justin grabbed Michael by the elbow and turned him around, "Maybe it was for the best? The best for who, Michael? Me? Daphne, Brian, Matt or the baby? Tell me Michael." Justin released Michael and began to pace in front of him, swatting Brian's hand away when he tried to reach for him.

"Do you think that I didn't hear what you said, what all of you said, when Daphne told us she was pregnant the first time? Wait, let me recall. Lindsay said that we were too young to know anything about children, that it wasn't a good idea because of Brian's business... Well, no one asked me if my business would suffer or not. Oh yeah and you said, the baby wasn't a good idea, because Gus already had a sibling, and he didn't need another one. Wait you even made a bet with a reluctant Hunter on how long it would take for Brian to be back in the backroom."

"I'm sorry, I didn't want to..."

"You didn't want to what? Bet on our happiness? Like that time we were at Deb's and Ted began to bet on our relationship, and you bet on us. You didn't stop anyone from betting on us, did you? No, you just increased the bet."

Michael looked shocked, he remembered that night, not his finest moment.

"Do you think we didn't hear you? All of you? What do you think we did when we left? Fuck? We don't do that 24/7; it happens that we actually like to talk."

"I..." began Michael.

"Don't even say it, Michael, because you don't mean it."

"Justin," Brian said, reaching toward him.

"What, do you think I didn't hear them? Do you think I didn't hear you two when he tried to tell you that it wasn't a good idea, that the baby would put a stop to your lifestyle? That..."

Justin stopped when he heard someone walking really fast toward them. It was Jennifer. She didn't need to ask to know what happened. Brian had called her and told her everything.

She walked right to Justin.

When Justin looked up and saw the look of pity on her face, he backed away. When Jennifer tried to reach for him he whispered, "Don't touch me."

"I just wanted to ..."

"No, don't," whispered Justin, pushing past her and walking down the hall to Daphne's room.

Jennifer looked at Justin walking away and sighed deeply. She turned around and hugged Brian awkwardly, and whispered, "I'm sorry."

Brian didn't return the hug, but nodded once they parted. He cleared his throat, and looked over the family.

Mel moved over and hugged Brian too, "I'll be home if you need me, with Gus and Corrine. All right?"

Brian nodded.

She turned around, and walked out.

Debbie walked over and patted his cheek, making sure he knew that he was welcome anytime if he needed her. Brian only nodded; he never opened his mouth, when his 'family' finally left.

The last one to go was Carl. He told Brian that because of the death of the baby, they had to talk to Matt and the other driver, and take it from there.

Horvath was on his way out, when he turned around and walked back to where Brian was still

standing.

Carl put his hand on Brian's shoulder, jolting him back to reality. "I'm sorry son," he whispered extending his hand to shake Brian's.

Brian shook Horvath's hand a little longer than usual, and Carl instinctively pulled him closer into an embrace.

It was the first time that both men were that close. The first time that Carl thought he maybe could help this man, because he knew the pain, he knew what Brian felt.

"I know words won't help you, son, but I'm sorry, really."

Horvath was about to release his embrace when he felt Brian shaking. He didn't say anything, just held him close, bringing him the comfort the man needed at that moment.

After a few minutes, Brian regained hold of his emotions and stood back. He opened his mouth to say something, but Horvath beat him, "Your secret's safe with me, and I won't judge you. If you need me, just call me, all right?"

Brian nodded and Horvath finally went.

Brian rubbed the remaining tears away from his face, breathed deeply and went in search of his missing partner.

\* \* \* \*

Brian found Justin sitting in front of Daphne's room, a tear making its way along his cheek. Without a word, Brian sat near him, wrapped his arms around him, and kissed his forehead. What could he say? Justin shook in his embrace, muttering, "She will hate me, she will hate me."

"No she won't hate you," Brian ran his hand through Justin's hair, "She loved you before, she loved you today, she will love you tomorrow."

He stood up and pulled Justin with him. He opened the door and walked toward Daphne's bed. As soon as she heard the door, she turned her head, looked at the two men, and tried to smile at them.

Matt left the room, saying that he would stay in the hall until they finished talking.

"Hey."

"Hey yourself, sleeping beauty," Brian tried to be casual with her, but failed. His voice was filled with pain, concern, and worry.

"Don't say, 'I'm sorry' to me, Brian. We knew from the beginning that this pregnancy would be complicated. I just hoped I could make it for both of us."

"Daph..." whispered Justin, "I..."

Daphne lifted her left hand, caressing Justin's cheek, "Justin, we knew, we were prepared for this eventuality, we spoke about it." Justin leaned into her touch, "I know, but ..." he frowned.

"You feel responsible?" a slight nod from both men in front of her made her more concerned. "I chose to be pregnant despite all the warnings. You knew that because of the Hepatitis I could have lost the baby anyway. It was always a possibility. I had a chance that the pregnancy would go well. And it wasn't your fault that ... this... well, that driver rammed into us." She sighed. "I don't want you to feel responsible because I chose you," looking toward Justin, "to father my child." She tried to smile at the two men who meant so much to her.

"Come here," she extended her hand pulling Justin against her so he sat on her bed. Carefully she took him into a big hug, then gesturing toward Brian "You too". Brian sat behind Justin, and wrapped his arms around both their shoulders.

\* \* \* \*

Matt backed away as he saw this touching scene. He resumed his place in the hall, and waited for both men to leave his lover.

When Daphne told him from the beginning, that she would mother a child for her best friend, he never thought he would like both men. He never liked the idea, but after Daphne brought him to the family dinners at Deb's, he began to understand the underlying love that passed through everyone, and when he finally met Justin, he liked him immediately.

So after almost a year together, he had no choice other than to assist his partner to fulfill the promise she made to Justin so long ago.

Things were going so well until that fucking driver ran into them. He still couldn't believe what happened. Thank god the man never came clean with his story when he told Justin he was sorry. The weather was pretty cold but the ice on the road wasn't that bad. If he hadn't been in a hurry and on the phone, maybe then the baby would still be where he should be, in Daphne's womb.

He looked up and saw Ben and Emmett coming toward him. They had decided to stay, to drive Brian and Justin home, Matt having said that he wouldn't leave Daphne's room.

## **Chapter 10    Make love to me**

Two hours later, Brian and Justin stepped out from Daphne's room. She had finally cried herself to sleep. Brian decided it was time to go home. They were both exhausted.

As they stepped out, Ben's offer to drive them to the loft was welcomed. Emmett drove Ben's car.

Matt stayed at the hospital, and Ben said that he would come by tomorrow morning.

As Brian opened the door, he saw Jennifer fixing a plate of food for them. As soon as she heard the door, she put the plate in the fridge and headed down to her guestroom.

Brian led Justin into the bedroom and slowly took off his coat and shoes. Without a word, Justin sat on the edge of the bed. Brian went to the bathroom, and came back with two pills for Justin and a glass of water. Brian put the pills on the nightstand, took off his own coat, shoes, pants and shirt, and put on a pair of boxers and a t-shirt. He sat down near Justin, "Come on, I'll help you with your clothes." Justin only nodded. Brian removed Justin's shirt, then his trousers, and his socks, leaving him only in his boxers and tee-shirt. Justin was sitting on the bed rocking slowly back and forth. When Brian handed him the pills he shook his head, no.

Without a word, Brian pulled him against his chest and laid them down on the bed, pulling the duvet around them. He spooned himself behind Justin, running his hand up and down his lover's arms. He could feel the tension in Justin's body, but couldn't do anything about it.

"Did you see his face? He was so peaceful," Justin's voice was just above a whisper. And that made Brian's heart ache, more than anything. Yes he had seen the face of their little angel, before they left the hospital. He saw the baby in the crib, and it had looked like he was sleeping; but he had died hours before.

"He had Daphne's hair and beautiful skin," Brian tried to fight the lump in his throat.

"Do you know he would have been yours too?" continued Justin, Brian's heart ached more. "Daphne told me before we left that she wanted us to call the baby Chanders Taylor Kinney."

Brian tightened his hold on Justin, "I know Sunshine, I know."

Justin inhaled deeply, "Brian I'm so lost."

"I know tell me what I can do."

"Hold me? Tell me that everything will be all right." Justin pleaded.

"I'll hold you, Sunshine, I'll hold you. I won't let you go. But I won't lie to you, everything won't be all right for awhile, but I will say that we will face this together, I won't let you go!" he tightened his hold even more. He slowly turned Justin against him, caressing his cheek with his thumb. Looking deep into the watery eyes he pushed some hair from his forehead. He wanted to scream how unfair all of this was, that Justin didn't have to suffer, that he had suffered enough, but for the moment, it was too difficult to speak. He tried to focus on the only important thing at that moment, Justin.

He leaned in and lightly brushed his lips against Justin's, not really touching, just grazing. Justin moved his hands against Brian's back, pulling Brian's mouth to his own. Justin's soft lips parted, allowing Brian's tongue to plunge deeply into his mouth. They fought for dominance; Justin gave up the battle, just let his hand run down Brian's chest until he reached the hem of his shirt. He slid his hand beneath the cotton material to feel his skin. He could feel Brian's hand on his back pulling his own shirt up. Breaking the kiss to discard both shirts, Brian moved his mouth against Justin's ear, licking the soft spot between his ear and his neck. He moved his mouth to Justin's ear, "I love you."

It's been awhile since he told Justin those three words, but right now he felt the need to say them. Hearing the words, a soft moan escaped Justin's mouth, and his grip on Brian's body became more demanding. They made short work of the clothes they had on, and within seconds, they laid naked against each other. A little moan escaped Brian's lips, as Justin kissed him with open mouthed kisses along his collarbone and made his way down Brian's chest, dominating the moment.

Usually, Brian wouldn't mind, but tonight that wasn't his plan. He didn't want to use sex as an escape, either for him or for Justin. He wanted to prove that despite everything that had happened today, Justin had the right to be loved.

"No, no, Justin," whispered Brian. "'Come here."

As Brian looked up, he saw in Justin's blue eyes only lust and raw desire. That wasn't the way he wanted to make the young man forget.

Brian tried to soothe Justin, with slow touches, but it didn't work. Justin's left hand tightened on Brian's back trying to take control. Brian kissed him one more time, letting his right hand run up and down Justin's chest, wandering along his hips, and returning to his chest to finally end running along Justin's left arm. Never breaking the kiss, he tried to bring Justin from raw desire, to lovemaking.

It wasn't the first time they played this song, to bring his lover from one state to another. But tonight it was different, more difficult. Justin wanted to forget, to drown into an old mechanism, he fought for dominance, for control by deepening the kiss, tightening his grip on Brian's back, trying to unbalance them, to be on top, to be the one in charge.

\* \* \* \*

A few years ago, Brian would have gone to Babylon, and would have drowned his pain and sorrow into a willing ass or mouth, or both, depending on his state of drunkenness or how high he was. The fucks would have been fast, furious and almost violent. But, now, the only thing he wanted was to manage his pain with the man beneath him.

\* \* \* \*

Moving his right hand to find Justin's left, he entwined their fingers, and with the other hand, kept brushing, Justin's cheek. He reiterated the three little words, "I love you." Justin's eyes opened and Brian said it again, "I love you Justin Taylor Kinney."

Brian had said those words only once, in October 2005, the day they signed the papers for their non-conventional union. The six words had an immediate effect, Justin tightened his grip on Brian's hand, his eyes filled with tears, and love, the raw lust, and need having vanished.

Brian cupped Justin's head in his hand and brought his lips back against his. He pushed Justin on the bed, and laid on top of him. He ran his hand against Justin's side, and said something he never said, "No escape, no pain management, and no wild ride." He closed his eyes briefly, and then whispered, "I want us to make love." He caressed his lover waiting for an answer, he knew that he

must have shocked him, but they had played the "I won't say anything" long enough. Justin looked into Brian's eyes, as a single tear found its way down his cheek, and whispered back hoarsely, "Yes, make love to me."

Brian knew that it wasn't right to find escape in sex, but tonight was different. They needed the connection to prove to themselves that they were still alive, that they were still able to love and to be loved in return.

Looking at the young man, Brian leaned in, and brushed his lips slightly, deepening the kiss tenderly. Justin shifted under him, slowly spreading his legs. Brian's right hand wandered from Justin's chest to his hips, and along his left leg, caressing, and pulling on Justin's leg and his waist. He moved back, caressing the whole leg, until he got to the hips. Tracing small circles he looked once more into Justin's eyes to make sure there would be no remorse tomorrow morning. Seeing that he was ok, Brian made his way up Justin's body to finish on his left hand.

He extended his arm, reached for the lube, and placed some on his fingers. With feathery kisses, he slowly, brought his hand between their bodies, and began to run his fingers along Justin's opening. He looked up drowning in the blue eyes looking at him. He gently pushed in one finger, watching how the emotions showed on Justin's face. As Justin began to push back, he added a second finger, and slowly slid them in and out, going deeper with each thrust and stretching Justin's hole.

They never broke eye contact and he knew Justin was ready the moment he felt himself being hugged tighter. He surrendered his mouth to the searing kiss as he felt an amazingly strong leg wrap around his waist. Brian pulled his fingers back and Justin groaned from the loss. He placed the head of his cock at Justin's waiting hole, looking one more time into Justin's eyes. A little nod from Justin and Brian was taken away from reality, transported to the very first night they met. Brian remembered that look - trust, fear, and lust, everything in one, the same look that he had that first night. And that night, he told him, that he loved him. And he knew it was the truth.

Seeing the hesitation in his lover, Justin reached out to caress his cheek. "Brian, do it, fuck me..." Justin begged him. Brian closed his eyes, inhaled deeply and in one slow movement, he slid deep into Justin. A small gasp made him open his eyes. Leaning forward slowly he kissed Justin deeply, waiting for him to adjust. Justin began to rock his hips slowly, and Brian moved with him in rhythm. With each thrust, he pulled out until the head of his cock was almost out, and then he plunged deep into Justin, trying to go deeper each time.

He never thought doing it raw could be so overwhelming even after so long. Brian always thought that being monogamous would be boring, but no, with Justin, it was always something new, something different.

Justin's moans brought Brian back to reality, he pushed deeper, knowing he just hit that little spot that would drive Justin crazy, and would bring him over the edge. They broke the kiss for only a second, to catch their breath, and Brian noticed that Justin's face was a little flushed and covered with sweat. Justin licked his lips, and kissed Brian again. He tightened his grip with his legs around Brian's waist, pulling him closer.

With that move, Brian knew that Justin was close; he slowed their rhythm, trying to make it last longer. He stopped his moves and slid his arms under Justin's body, putting all his weight for a short moment on Justin's chest. Then using his right hand as leverage, he pushed against the mattress and lifted both of their bodies. Justin tightened his grip around his waist and on his shoulder. Still embedded in Justin's body, Brian pulled himself up, to end in a kneeling position. The movement made Justin moaned and tightened his grip, pressing his hard on into Brian's belly. Each touch, each movement was overwhelming, for both men.

"Bri... an"

"Hmm".

"Feels good."

"I know."

Slowly, Justin released the grip of his legs around Brian's waist, putting them down on the bed,

never breaking the connection between them. Brian began to move lightly back and forth, his hands running up and down Justin's spine. Justin's mouth trailed down Brian's jaw, kissing and licking the soft flesh, eliciting some moans from him, his hands running through Brian's hair.

Brian closed his eyes, letting the sensation pass through him. Justin's mouth captured Brian's and he kissed him softly and slowly. The loving kiss became deeper, more passionate, heated and more demanding. Brian plunged his tongue deep into Justin's mouth to claim him as his own, never breaking the contact between them. Justin began to match Brian's slow hip movements. Brian felt Justin's precum on his belly, and knew the friction between their two bodies made it difficult to last much longer.

Brian tightened his hold on Justin, and without a word, Justin replaced his legs around Brian's waist. He entwined his hand with Justin's, and used the other as support. Justin pushed back to match the long and deep strokes from Brian. He began to cum, and he tightened his hold around Brian's cock. With his free hand he gripped Brian's hair and pulled him down for a kiss. He tried to say something, "Bri ..." but Brian pushed his tongue deeper into Justin's mouth matching his own thrust.

Brian knew they were close, his only desire was to reach their climax together. A loud moan passed Justin's lips as he arched his back and shot his load between their bodies. Feeling Justin's grip around his cock, Brian followed with his climax, pushing one more time into Justin and shooting his load deep inside his lover.

Brian collapsed onto Justin, both trying to catch their breath. After a few moments, he decided to pull back and to slip slowly out of his lover. Sensing Brian moving, Justin reached out to pull Brian's lips against his own not wanting to break the moment, "Please stay."

"You want me to stay?" Slight nod.

Brian put his arms around Justin's body, trying not to crush him with his weight, but Justin pulled him closer. Brian began to rock his now soft cock slowly, still deeply buried in Justin's hole, as Justin matched his rocking using his right leg as leverage. With a tenderness he had never experienced before, Brian began to caress his lover's body. And Justin kissed him with open-mouthed kisses trailing along his jaw.

Brian felt his erection coming back and broke the kiss, looking in Justin's eyes to see if he was ok. Justin offered him a beautiful Sunshine smile the most beautiful thing Brian had seen in the last 48 hours. He began to thrust a little harder, until he heard Justin, "Faster, please."

Justin moaned from the overwhelming sensation, his own cock hardening again too. Brian slid his hand between their bodies, reaching for Justin's cock and began to stroke him slowly. Brian knew Justin was exhausted from the day, the emotions, and from the first session of lovemaking but he wanted to push him over the edge again, just so that Justin could sleep without fear and nightmares, just so that Justin could forget for a moment what had happened today.

He tugged a little harder on Justin's cock.

"Br ..."

"Come with me ... Justin, come with me," panted Brian in Justin's ear.

Like a few moments before, they reached their climax together. Brian tried not to collapse on top of Justin. He looked deep in the baby blue eyes, and saw the pain was still there but also exhaustion.

Justin tried to stifle a yawn, looked up at Brian and mumbled, "Thanks" before he drifted off to sleep too exhausted to do or say anything more.

Brian slowly pulled away, headed to the bathroom, and brought a guest towel and a washcloth with him. He cleaned Justin the best he could, and laid the towel under his butt. No need to have cum everywhere tomorrow morning. Then he lay back in the bed and spooned his body against his lover's trying to drift to sleep too.

\* \* \* \*



### **Jennifer POV.**

As soon as Jennifer heard the loft door, she headed downstairs to the guestroom. No need to ask how they felt, they just lost their child. She could only imagine. It reminded her of the night Craig came home, telling her he had given Justin a choice, to come back with him then or to never come home again. And Justin chose to do the right thing at that moment for him, to not come back. That night, Jennifer had prayed for his and Brian's safety, and she also cried herself to sleep, because somehow she had lost one of her children.

She realized her child hadn't died. But she always imagined him in a relationship, going on dates, going to late parties. She assumed he would spend some weekends away from the house, but she never thought her little boy, would leave the house so abruptly. That night she thought she would die. So she could only imagine what her boys, yes her boys were going through.

After her rapid escape, she checked after Molly, who was sleeping curled up in a foetal position. She didn't have to worry about Gus since he was with Mel. Then she took a book from the new office and headed to what she called the 'reading room.' She called it this because it was so peaceful. After half an hour, she headed to her room and saw that she had forgotten her cell in the kitchen. Shit.

She slowly sneaked upstairs into the 'old' loft, heading to the kitchen, when she overheard Brian say, "I love you Justin Taylor Kinney."

Then everything became blurry, the loft, the doors, the cell in her hand, she was in a daze. Over the years, she had learned one or two things about Brian, first he never said anything he didn't mean, and second, when he said something you could believe him. If Brian told Justin something like this he must have married him, no Brian Kinney didn't do marriage. Then what? A commitment, she didn't think so. They had agreed they would have no commitment. What else could it be? Jennifer ran out of ideas, and she quickly ran back to her room so that she wouldn't interrupt them.

She remembered seeing a necklace on Justin with a silver ring on it, but she had never thought about the meaning! OH MY GOD she realized that they had done it! They had finally done it. She wanted to tell Debbie and the gang, but realized that if Brian and Justin hadn't told anyone, then they didn't want anyone to know.

Jennifer couldn't believe it. She realized she had a son-in-law.

In all this mess today, she saw finally that somewhere love could win. Right then she realized that she knew that Brian loved her son. And right then she knew that she could let her baby go. He was in love, and he was loved in return.

### **Chapter 11 The Funeral**

Brian awoke realizing he was alone in bed. Justin was nowhere to be seen. He stepped out of the bed, searching for his lover. Looking everywhere, he came to the conclusion that he was downstairs. It was before six in the morning, and he doubted that Mother Taylor or Molly were up. Grabbing a blanket, he silently, went downstairs.

Once in the lower loft, he went directly to the nursery -the room they had prepared here for the times they stayed at the loft instead of heading to the house.

He knew that today would be difficult. They had to bury their child that afternoon.

He opened the door to the nursery knowing he would find Justin there, like every day in the past week. Justin was lying on the fluffy rug on the floor, curled up into a ball, holding a yellow baby onesie against his chest. Sighing deeply, he stepped into the room and closed the door behind him. He leaned against the door, and thought, that this might be the worst day of his life. No he corrected himself, one of his worst days. Parents should not have to bury their children. It was against nature to say good-bye to a child.

He turned around and moved toward Justin. Kneeling near him, he stretched the blanket over him, laid down behind him, and put his arms around Justin. Instinctively, Justin melted into his

embrace. Brian knew they had two hours left before everyone would begin to barge in here or call.

It had been a week, a week of silence at the loft. Justin hadn't move from the sofa except to go to bed, and Brian hadn't left the loft worried that Justin would do something stupid.

They had two hours. Brian intertwined his fingers with Justin's. He tried to hold back the tears welling behind his eyes. Justin moved slightly. Brian heard the light sniffing. Justin turned around in Brian's embrace and kissed him. His face was wet and his eyes red. He didn't say anything. Brian just held him in his arms and tightened his embrace.

"Just tell me it was a nightmare. Tell me it was a bad dream," Justin's raspy voice pleaded. He hadn't spoken since he woke up the day after they made love the night their child died.

"I can't do that Sunshine," the low tone and the sadness in Brian's voice made it clear to Justin. It wasn't a bad dream, it wasn't a nightmare, and it was a real. And it was a horror.

He clutched Brian more forcefully, until he began to tremble. Justin cried silently for the first time in a week, and Brian held him against his chest. Murmuring low words, to soothe him, "I won't let you go, I promise, I won't let you go Justin. Ever."

Justin choked out, "He died, --he died --." Silence, "This shouldn't have happened this way. --It shouldn't have happened. It should --n't... it's not fair, he didn't do anything. Why, Brian, why?"

"Shh," was the only thing Brian could say. He rocked him back and forth, until he wasn't able to hold his own tears. He didn't make any noise. He just let them fall, silently. This time he wasn't strong enough to hold back his pain. So instead of fighting, he let the pain wash over him.

\* \* \* \*

Justin cried himself back to sleep. Brian decided it was for the best, and stayed with him.

He heard the door open and saw Jennifer standing there. He looked at her and whispered, "Shh, he just fell back to sleep."

Nodding silently, she stepped in and whispered back, "I didn't ... How are you Brian?"

"Fine thanks." Brian's voice was low and cold, but he was running his hand over Justin's head through his hair and Jennifer was amazed by this little gesture, which meant so much at that moment.

She took in the scene before her, nodded, turned around, and headed back to her room. The boys didn't need her at the moment.

\* \* \* \*

It was 3:00 pm, time to leave.

Justin woke up from his nap around lunchtime. He didn't eat, and neither did Brian. Despite all that Brian had planned, no one barged into the loft, no one called, and he was grateful to everyone for that.

During the week, while Jennifer stayed at the loft with Justin, Brian had arranged everything with Father Tom. No church, just a small ceremony that would take place at the cemetery. He even asked Father Tom to do the eulogy, something short and beautiful.

\* \* \* \*

#### **4:00 pm. – The cemetery.**

A tomb, a little family circle, Daphne and Matt, Jennifer, Tucker and Molly, Debbie and Carl, Michael, Ben and Hunter, Emmett and Drew, Ted and Blake. Mel was at the house with the kids but Corinne was there with Mrs. Stevenson.

Mel had brought Gus to the loft around 1:00, before heading to Debbie. He wanted his father. Brian took time to explain to his son that Justin was sad today because something bad had happened. Gus nodded his head, and stayed with Justin the whole time, sitting with him on the sofa and running his hand along his head like Momma did the night before with him.

Daphne was leaning heavily against Matt, crying silently, her right hand clutching Justin's left one. Brian was standing near him. Justin had entwined his fingers with Brian's and moved a little closer.

The service was short and beautiful. The sun was shining, reflecting its rays over the white lilies lying on top of the clear oak coffin.

Father Tom stood silent a few seconds, the eulogy was finished, but he said one last prayer:

***"Blessing For Comfort in Time of Grief***

***May you see God's light on the path ahead***

***when the road you walk is dark.***

***May you always hear, even in your hour of sorrow,***

***the gentle singing of the lark.***

***When times are hard may hardness never turn your heart to stone.***

***May you always remember when the shadows fall you do not walk alone."***

***"Amen"***

Brian looked up, he recognized the prayer, but didn't say anything. Like the tradition stated, Father Tom asked if anyone had something to say. Sadly the little boy hadn't survived long enough for anyone to say anything. Corinne stood in front of the little coffin with a crimson rose bud in her hand.

"I bought this on my way here. I wasn't sure." She looked around and Brian nodded.

"It's a dark red rose." She put the flower over the lilies. "My dad always said that flowers are to say 'I love you' to someone. Long ago, I learned that each color is different, this one is because you're gone." Corinne pulled something from her inner pocket and laid it over the bud she had just deposited, it was a bud from a white rose, "And this one is because we will always remember you."

Brian looked at Corinne and nodded. He felt like he was about to collapse, when he felt Justin shiver against him. If Justin wasn't leaning against him, he may have collapsed in front of everyone. Corinne had told everyone what Daphne, Justin, and he were thinking. Daphne looked toward Corinne and said in a low and tight voice, "You're right, this is exactly what flowers are for, thanks for him."

Corinne nodded and smiled sadly at her.

Father Tom was finished and everyone slowly left the cemetery. Brian, Justin, Daphne, and Matt were the last to go. As Brian began to walk away, Justin stayed behind.

Matt helped Daphne climb into the car. As he closed the door, he looked over to where Justin was still standing.

"Is he all right?"

"Don't know," answered Brian simply, and then he nodded toward the car. "Is she all right?"

Matt looked over at Daphne, "She will be, I will do everything in my power to help her."

Brian nodded, "You're a good man, Matt, she's lucky to have you on her side."

"You're a good man too," smiled Matt.

Brian huffed and shook his head. But Matt grabbed his arm, and stopped him from walking away. "Brian, I've known you for a long time now, and I've learned to see under all the bullshit you show to everyone else. And with Daphne at my side talking about you, you don't stand a chance."

Brian looked at Matt, a smile playing on his mouth. He didn't say anything and walked back to Justin.

As he walked over to Justin, he looked at the young man, still standing there, his sunglasses protecting his eyes.

"Hey," whispered Brian.

Justin turned around, and whispered back, "Is everyone' gone?"

Brian nodded, reached for Justin's hand, and clasped it tightly. He pulled Justin's body against his not giving his partner a chance to resist. He rubbed slow circles down Justin's back, in hope to soothe the grieving young man. "You're all right in here," Brian whispered, placing a kiss against his lover's hair, feeling a slight nod beneath his lips.

"Debbie asked everyone to come to her house."

Justin shook his head, "Don't want to go."

Brian nodded he figured that much, "I know, but we have to go." Justin shook his head, and Brian whispered, "I know you don't want to."

"It's all right," whispered Justin.

\* \* \* \*

Brian parked the car on Debbie's street, and they walked the rest of the way.

As Brian pulled the door open, Gus launched himself into Brian's arms, and extended his arms toward Justin.

Justin smiled sadly at the little boy, gave him a kiss, and retreated into his old room.

Brian moved into the living room where he sat down near Mel, with his son. Debbie was serving some food to everyone, and stopped in front of Brian.

"How're you holding up?" Debbie asked Brian with concern.

He shrugged. Michael, who was in the kitchen, made a move to walk to Brian, but Ben shook his head. "Nothing you could say or do would ease his pain, Michael, let him grieve."

"Ben, you don't understand, he's..." Michael stopped and looked over toward his best friend. "You're right, maybe, it's better, I just let him know we are here for them." Ben nodded his agreement, and kissed him. For once in his life, Michael listened to his husband, and left Brian in peace.

Brian was sitting on the sofa, rubbing his temple. After two hours, he checked on Justin and found him asleep. He asked Debbie if they could spend the night after getting permission from Mel if Gus could stay with them, since the child was already fast asleep on the sofa. Mel agreed without a fuss. Jennifer, Tucker, and Molly left shortly after.

Slowly the rest of the gang left too.

Debbie and Carl cleaned the kitchen, while Brian rested on the sofa watching his son sleep. As Debbie and Carl moved to go upstairs, Brian picked Gus up from the couch and headed up too, towards Justin's old room. Debbie followed him with a little mattress, the old one from Gus's old bed. She laid it on the floor and quickly made the bed for the young boy. Brian stripped his son of his clothes and pulled the covers over him.

As he stood up, Debbie patted his cheek. "You're a good man and a good father Brian. Take care, kiddo."

Brian smiled and quietly replied, "Thanks Mom."

"Will you be all right?"

"Think so," Brian stated, while watching over Justin's sleeping form.

Debbie shook her head, closed the door, and headed to her bedroom. Brian switched on the little night-light, on the desk and stripped his clothes off too. Then he climbed behind Justin in the bed.

He wrapped himself around the young man, closed his eyes, and hoped that sleep would come fast.

## **Chapter 12    Learning to live again.**

They stayed two days at Debbie's, and then headed back to the house. Justin didn't say a word, he didn't eat. He began to withdraw into himself.

Brian stayed with him until they headed back to the house, and then he returned to work.

\* \* \* \*

The white marble tombstone was placed in the ground a couple of days later, it was simple and pure with a lily encrusted on it and marked in gold letters.

**Tyler A.C. Kinney Taylor**

January 17<sup>th</sup> 2009

Beloved Son

\* \* \* \*

## **End January 2009**

Two weeks after the funeral, Daphne came to the office with Matthew. She wanted to go to Britin and thought that maybe they could put some flowers on the grave. Brian agreed with her, around 5:00 they left the office for the cemetery.

Daphne remembered the flowers Corinne put on the grave on the day of the funeral, and bought the same ones to put on the grave today.

Brian followed Matt's car. They parked, and Daphne and Brian walked together to the little grave; Matt stayed in the car.

After long minutes of silence, they went back to their respective cars and headed to Britin.

They went into the kitchen and made some coffee. They sat without speaking and after a long, awkward silence, Daphne finally asked him, "How are you? And don't bullshit me please."

"As good as you are and why does everyone ask such a stupid question."

"Because they love you," stated Matt.

"Yeah, well whatever. How were your blood results?" asked Brian, knowing that she had taken some tests.

"They're not as bad as I thought. Despite everything, and the little infection, I'm good, thanks. I just have to take it easy for a month or so with my love life," she huffed.

"No wild sex in the backroom?" Brian asked genuinely.

"Nope, that's only reserved for you and Justin," replied Matt.

Brian looked at him and then at Daphne, and mumbled, "That would be right if we had a sex life."

Daphne turned her head toward him, "What did you just say?"

"Nothing," he cursed himself for saying that to them. He looked over at Matt and then at Daphne. Matt understood that he wasn't wanted. He stood up and said he would be at his Gran's. Daphne nodded while Brian was still trying to understand how he could have said that. He never discussed Justin and his sex life with anyone. She wondered why he had done so now.

Daphne waited until she heard the kitchen door close and said to Brian. "Com'on Brian, we shared the loft and sometimes I sneaked into your bed for almost 6 months. You told me some things about you and Justin, and I did the same, so don't tell me you didn't say anything!"

Brian didn't reply and looked straight out the windows.

"Brian?" Daphne began, "He feels responsible? That's it isn't it?"

No answer.

"I saw the day of the funeral that it would be difficult, and the few times he came to see me, he wasn't OK. Did he say something? Are you guys speaking?"

No answer.

"Brian?" she waited a moment before she continued, "Where is Justin?"

"Home," answered Brian.

"Where? Here, the loft, a hotel room, at Deb's? Where Brian, where is he?" pushed Daphne.

After a few minutes Brian turned around and sighed deeply, "I don't know where he is Daphne. All right, I don't know."

"What does that mean you don't know?" asked Daphne

"I mean I don't know where he is. I came home yesterday evening and he wasn't there. I tried to call him, I got his voice mail. I looked everywhere; I even checked New York in case he went there. I don't know where he is," Brian said running his hand through his hair.

"God, why didn't you say something? Why didn't you call me when you realized he was missing?"

"Because you have enough on your plate, and he's a grown up, and he needs his time to grieve," Brian replied coldly.

"Yeah you're so right. It's been two weeks since the funeral. He came to see me one time, you called almost everyday. Don't bullshit me Brian," replied Daphne.

"Listen Daphne, he's not you, he's not me, and he doesn't react the same way as everyone else does."

"Yeah, and you really think he will cope with the situation alone? With everything he went through the last 9 years!" shouted Daphne.

Brian said loudly, "I didn't think of anything Daphne! I dropped Gus at school, went to the office, and spent the day bitching about everything and everyone. Then around 4:30 I picked up Gus. We went home, and I realized he was missing the moment I stepped into the bedroom, some of his

drawers were open, and clothes were missing. I couldn't do a lot, I had Gus with me." Brian looked toward Daphne, "I searched the house while Gus was with Mrs. Stevenson, every room, every area of the mansion. I called the loft, the cell, our friends, and even his mother, pretending, he was in town and that I forgot to tell him something. Daph, I lied to her, I've never lied to her. He just vanished between my phone call yesterday afternoon around two and the moment I came home."

Daphne sighed.

"Daphne he will come through this and you know it. He's strong, he survived school, the prom, the rehab... hell he even survived me, so I don't think he would do anything stupid," said Brian.

Daphne looked at him and decided not to say anything. She looked closer at Brian and saw that he looked terrible. She was sure he hadn't sleep at all last night.

She walked around the island in the kitchen, and prepared a little something for Brian. When she was finished, she kissed him and headed to Matt's.

Brian watched her walking down the path toward the guesthouse, and headed toward his bedroom. The moment he opened the door, he saw Justin standing in front of the windows.

"Hey, you're home," whispered Brian as he stepped into the bedroom.

"Yeah."

"You're all right."

"Yeah I'm fine thanks," Justin replied coldly.

Brian moved toward him, and extended his hand toward his shoulder, but Justin moved out of reach, "Don't ... don't touch me."

Brian looked at Justin like he had just slapped him, and asked with concern, "Justin, did something happen?"

Justin shook his head and tried to leave the room, but stopped when Brian grabbed his arm. Justin jerked his arm free, and tried to get past Brian, who closed the door and leaned on it.

"Brian move."

"No."

"I said move."

"No. Tell me what happened, and I will consider letting you out."

Justin shook his head, turned around, and sat on the sofa they had in front of the fireplace.

Brian left the door, making sure to stand between it and Justin.

"Where were you, Justin?" he asked softly. "I – ", he hesitated, "I was worried."

"Figured that much when I heard the messages."

Brian looked shocked, so he heard the messages but never called back.

"Where were you?"

"Out."

Brian closed his eyes. He was getting nowhere with Justin. He opened his eyes, when he heard Justin moving around the room.

He looked puzzled when Justin handed him a bunch of papers.

"Here, I ..." Justin inhaled deeply, like it was almost too much for him to say the words, "I want you to sign this."

Brian looked at the papers, official papers from their attorney.

"What the ..." began Brian as he read over the first paper 'Dissolution of partnership.'

"I'm leaving town tomorrow, I want you to sign those papers before I leave," Justin said, his back toward Brian, looking out the windows.

"The fuck you are," shouted Brian, "You're not going anywhere."

"I already made the reservation," answered Justin.

Brian was astonished by Justin's icy tone, as if he wasn't there, as if someone else was speaking. He walked toward him, and turned him around.

"You really think I will sign this?"

"No."

"Then why are you giving it to me?"

"So I can leave knowing I did right."

"For whom Sunshine - you, Daphne, or me?"

"Everyone," whispered Justin.

"Everyone!" shouted Brian as he began to pace in front of Justin. "You fucking twat, do you really think that I would go along with that, with you leaving me? Because, because ..." Brian stopped spun around and looked at Justin, "Because of what, Sunshine, because fate chose us again? Because if you think that, you really are brain damaged."

Justin turned around, and Brian could see his lover's face, his eyes turned icy blue, without emotion and his lips where closed in a thin line. He wasn't prepared for Justin's outburst.

"I'm not brain damaged, asshole, I'm realistic. I understand that when the stone was sealed a few days ago on my child's grave and when I almost lost my best friend. Because I asked them to kill him, God ... do you know what the feelings are when you have to act like this?"

Brian shook his head, too stunned to answer. He wanted Justin to talk to him, now he had the answers he had been seeking since the funeral.

\* \* \* \*

Since they had come home that day, Justin had been locking himself in his studio, barely eating, and sleeping on the other side of the bed, or even on the futon in the studio. Often, when he did that, Brian crept in there to sleep with him.

\* \* \* \*

"No of course you don't!" cried Justin, "God, I can't even try to explain, it's like I'm being ripped in two. Like someone grabbed my heart and stepped on it! It's like someone has taken my life, Brian, can you imagine that? Do you know how hard this had been? I wonder if you can even imagine your reaction if it was your kid and you had to choose to kill him? God."

Justin became more and more nervous, and began to pace the bedroom.

"You have no idea what it feels like to be there and see his life disappearing. To watch him struggle to breathe even assisted. You have no idea, Brian, you have no idea."

"I do have some idea," came the simple and low answer, which stopped Justin in his tracks.



"I do know, because it's what happened 8 years, 7 months and twelve days ago in a parking garage. You feel helpless, and you wish that it could be you, and not the person you love. And you hate everyone at that moment and yourself more than anything. So yes, I know, Justin, I know what you are going through," finished Brian in a low tone.

"You know you're right about one thing, you hate everyone. I hate me so much right now, that despite all the love you can give me, I have to leave. Brian, right now, I hate me more than anything," spit Justin toward him, and with that last sentence, he walked to the door. "If you need me, call my cell, I'll be at the office tomorrow."

\* \* \* \*

He walked out the bedroom, closing it behind him. He stopped briefly in the corridor to get a hold on his emotions, and walked down the stairs. He didn't notice Daphne standing in the hallway waiting for him to leave the hall.

Once out of sight, Daphne walked to Brian's and Justin's bedroom. She knocked. Brian opened the door, "What do you want? I've had enough arguments for today."

"It's not that, Brian, and you know it," Daphne replied with a saddened voice.

"Yeah whatever, what can I do for you?"

"Don't let him shut you out, Brian, he needs you, and ..." but she was cut off by Brian's answer, "Everyone needs someone."

"Brian, are you listening to me?"

"Yeah I'm listening," nodded Brian.

"Don't let him shut you out, Brian, he needs you, and you need him. It's only together that you can get through this, and you know that, just like I know it," said Daphne softly.

"Tell me how I'm supposed to help him when he's been avoiding me since the funeral? Huh? When he's giving me this?" Brian handed her the papers Justin had left on the coffee table. "We've been going to the office in two separate cars. When we get home, he fixes dinner, we eat, and then he goes to his studio. Sometimes he comes to bed; sometimes, I don't even see him the next morning. How am I supposed to get through to him? Tell me, Daphne."

"Did you ...?"

"Did I what? Use the same technique as after the bashing? Yes, I tried that, nothing worked. It's been two weeks, and it's like a lifetime."

Daphne nodded and was about to leave the room, when she turned around, "When was the last time you told him that you love him?"

Brian looked up, "Huh?"

"The last time you told him that you love him? And don't tell me you don't do love."

Brian sighed deeply, closed his eyes, and answered, "The night we left the hospital."

"Since then?"

Brian shook his head.

"I suggest you tell him that you aren't judging him and that you love him Brian, because I'm sure he thinks that you are judging him."

Brian looked at her, "Counseling?" he whispered.

"Yeah, she wants to see you both, the faster, the better."

Brian grimaced, but nodded nevertheless. Daphne smiled sadly and walked out the door. On her way to the guesthouse, she passed the study and looked at Justin who was doing a great job of getting wasted.

She shook her head, stepped in, and grabbed the bottle.

"Hey."

"Stop, this Taylor, immediately!"

"Give me, give me..." he gestured toward the bottle.

"No, Christ you're a mess."

"I know. Nothing good. Nothing, I'm a failure, give me... the bottle."

"Who said you're a failure? Justin," asked Daphne in concern, just as the door opened and Brian stepped into the study.

"The glorious Craig Taylor," declared Justin.

"Did you go see him?" asked Daphne.

"Yeah, now give me the bottle."

"No!"

"Told you to give me..." Justin tried to stand up, but he couldn't because he was too inebriated. He just plopped back down on the couch.

Daphne looked up at Brian when he opened the door. He was on his way to the kitchen, when he heard Daphne, and thought that maybe it would be the right time to speak to Justin. As he opened the door he took a minute to assess the situation and finally chose to stay. Daphne looked at Brian, as he stepped over the back of the couch and sat behind Justin, putting his arms around him, to prevent him from falling off the couch.

Justin looked back at Brian and shrugged. Brian put his mouth on Justin's ear and asked, "Why did you go to your father?"

"Same happened to him three years ago. Wanted to know how he dealt with it. He only said I deserved it for being gay - that I wasn't even able to do that right," said Justin bitterly, his voice trembling.

Daphne shook her head. Brian closed his eyes. Craig Taylor, they should have known.

"When did you go there?" asked Daphne as she sat near Brian and took Justin's hands in her own, forcing Justin and Brian to turn towards her.

"Day after the funeral I went there and asked how he was able to go on." Justin shook his head.

"What did he say?" asked Daphne.

"Asked the name, I told him ..." Justin inhaled deeply and looked at Daphne. "Said that I dishonored the Taylor name, th—was a shame. Should be gone."

"I don't want you to go," murmured Daphne.

"Daph."

"Yeah."

"Don't want to lose you," whispered Justin linking his fingers with hers, leaning toward her and getting out of Brian's embrace.

"You won't," answered Daphne genuinely.

"I don't want to hurt you anymore."

"You didn't,"

"I did," stated Justin.

"No, you didn't, the cowboy did, and the icy street but not you."

"It's just, that ..." he stopped

"That what?" asked Daphne.

"He's gone, really gone."

"I know, Justin, I know," she nodded sadly, knowing full well what Justin meant with that statement. She moved to kneel on the sofa and reached for Justin who hugged her back and finally broke down. Brian stood up and quietly left the study. Once in the hall, he leaned against the door and tried to get a hold on his own emotions.

When he looked up, Matt was standing in front of him. Matt nodded, and Brian walked toward him. As he tried to bypass Matt, he stopped, turned around, and grabbed Matt in a tight embrace. Matt welcomed him in his arms. After a few moments, where neither of them spoke, Matt led him to the guesthouse's living room.

\* \* \* \*

Mrs. Stevenson looked up from her book, when she heard Matt open the door, and knew right away that something was wrong. Matt shook his head, telling her without words that she shouldn't push the issue, but Mrs. Stevenson didn't take the hint and asked, "Mr. Kinney, are you all right?"

Brian looked up, sharply, sighed, and finally answered, "I, we – I, it was a bad evening."

To ease the tension, Matt came back with a tray holding a coffeepot and some cups.

"Coffee?" asked Matt.

"Yeah thanks," answered Brian.

The sat down on the sofa, Mrs. Stevenson, continued reading Matt and Brian remained silent.

\* \* \* \*

Three hours later, Justin and Daphne were asleep on the study's sofa, and Brian was asleep on Mrs. Stevenson's sofa.

His second cup of coffee finished, Brian had closed his eyes to collect his emotions and had drifted to sleep. Mrs. Stevenson had thrown a quilt over him and was now sitting on the armchair near the sofa, reading.

Matt went back to the mansion, and looked over his love and her best friend. They were cuddled together on the couch, sleeping. He sat on the other couch, with a book, being there just in case either of them needed anything.

\* \* \* \*

From that painful evening, the healing began slowly. Brian never signed the papers and Justin never asked him again.

Brian and Justin immersed themselves in work, and they never talked about the baby anymore. They outwardly appeared to have accepted his death, but they hadn't. Both of them were dealing differently with the loss.

Brian put on his mask of invulnerability and put in long hours at work. Justin spent seven hours a day at Kinnetik and most nights painting.

Mel had Gus more often, and wondered what would happen to Brian and Justin. Neither one of them tricked, but Mrs. Stevenson noticed the booze disappeared more rapidly nowadays.

Daphne went back to work at the hospital with Matt, and every time she had an appointment with her psychiatrist, she asked Justin to come with her. After several weeks of saying, "No," he finally accepted.

When she asked Brian to do the same, he looked at her strangely, and finally accepted going with her without much of a fuss.

They danced to that music for a while - until mid March.

\* \* \* \*

### **Mid March 2009**

Justin's birthday was next week. They had buried Alex two months earlier.

Like Daphne, Matt and the rest of the family noticed that Brian and Justin were living in the same house but the only contact they had was at dinner when they ate with Gus. Then a letter came from the school warning Brian and Justin that Gus's grades had begun to fall. Not surprising with all that Gus had to deal with, Lindsay hadn't called for three weeks, and Melanie was having a hard time again.

Justin walked into the house like every day and put his briefcase in the study. He heard Brian in the library talking with Daphne, Ben, and Michael. He stopped at the door and eavesdropped on the conversation.

"Where do you think I was? And why should I answer you, it's none of your fucking business!" Brian shouted.

"Justin is my business," Daphne stated back.

"Yeah mine too! You think that because he put all these walls around him that I went and fucked somebody at Babylon? You really think I'm back to my old self?" He sighed. "I hung that up the day I asked him to marry me, Daphne and you know that, you were the first to point it out," said Brian in an exhausted voice, looking warily at Ben and Michael.

"I'm sorry Brian, it's just that it was so late last night, and, well, I can't help myself. I was worried, I was alone with Gus till midnight," she moved toward Brian. "Neither you nor Justin were here."

"We could have brought you the files from Babylon Brian, you didn't have to go there yourself," Ben added.

"Yeah, tell us if you need anything," added Michael.

Brian looked up at the three friends standing with him in the study, and moved to the window. "I'm ... I should have finished earlier, come home, and spent some time with Gus, but everything is just, well you know what it is."

"Yeah," Daphne answered with a sigh, "Fucked up?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, now that's clear, why did you ask me to come by?" asked Daphne.

"Please take Gus with you for the weekend don't tell anyone, try to stay at the loft and don't answer the phone unless it's me... if you need anything, call Ben and Michael," Brian said.

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know, but we can't continue this way, it's killing us both from the inside."

Justin headed upstairs. He agreed with Brian, this situation was killing both of them. Nevertheless, he couldn't get over what he said to Brian that night almost two months ago. He never hated him, it was just anger speaking, and now he felt that the word sorry was not enough. That's why it was time to speak to Brian about the decision he had made.

Michael looked at his friend and noticed the pain in his statement, "Brian?"

"What."

"You sure you don't need our help?"

"No, thanks, Michael... it's between Justin and me. But if you see him at Babylon, could you call me?"

Michael nodded, and looked as Brian moved toward the liquor cart, "Great!"

"What?" Ben asked.

"Now I know why he slept in his studio, he emptied most of the stash I had. Christ! I never thought he would turn to booze to solve his problem."

"Look who's talking," stated Michael.

"Yeah, maybe I would have in the past, but I didn't take this way this time, because of Gus," pointed Brian out.

"Do you remember, New York and Ethan?" offered Daphne,

"Vodka?" Ben offered.

"Tequila," Brian corrected, "Tequila, straight, without ice or water, ewww, never understood how he could drink this."

"Haven't you seen anything?" Michael asked.

"No, he avoids me most of the time, during the day. When Gus is here, I try to spend the evenings with him, and I thought that he was better off in his studio, then with me and Gus. That it would be too difficult for him. You know..." Brian gestured to explain what he thought. Everyone nodded.

Brian placed the empty bottle back on the cart and looked at the picture on his desktop. It was a picture Matt had taken of Daphne's earliest pregnancy. They were having a picnic, Brian was propped up against a tree, Justin sitting between his legs, Gus propped up against his left flank, Daphne and Matt in the foreground. A real loving family picture, Brian loved it.

Other place, other emotions, other time. They were happy then. He sighed and thought that maybe they wouldn't have that chance again.

He blinked rapidly to fight the tears that were threatening to fall.

Michael moved toward him, "If we see him, we'll call." Brian nodded as Michael hugged him goodbye.

Daphne left with Michael and Ben. Brian, left alone, headed to the bedroom, it was empty - like every evening. He shed his clothes, took a shower, and changed into something more comfortable. He was in the walk-in closet when he heard Justin enter the room.

He braced himself it was now or never. He walked out of the walk-in closet toward Justin's form walking to the window.

\* \* \* \*

Justin moved toward the windows, when he felt two strong arms embracing him, and began immediately to struggle against Brian, "Brian, no... please let me go"

"No, not this time, Sunshine. You won't slip away. We have to talk."

"Please Brian, let me go," pleaded Justin again.

Against all hope, Brian tightened his embrace and turned Justin around so he could see his eyes, but Justin moved to avoid Brian's eyes.

Even though Justin tried to avoid Brian's gaze, he saw a flicker of pain pass over his face. In fact, the situation reminded him of another one, a long time ago after the bowling game. He was cheating on Brian with Ethan. Same position, a tight embrace, same look at him, full of guilt, and same determination from Brian, but this time it wasn't about cheating.

Brian moved his left hand and pulled Justin even closer to him with his right hand he began to caress Justin's cheek, until his thumb began to trace Justin's lips. This gesture made Justin part his lips, and Brian took the opportunity to grab Justin on his back, and pulled him toward him. He crushed his lips over Justin's.

Justin tried to escape the kiss by tossing his head to the left and the right, until Brian stopped his attack.

"Brian, please stop, ..." said Justin, as he pushed against Brian's chest to put some distance between them.

"I told you we have to talk. You won't open your mouth, so speak with your body; it's been a while since we've done that, but I'm sure you'll remember how to play," said Brian caressing Justin's body.

"No please, stop, I don't want to ... I don't ... I want us," tried to explain Justin,

"You want what?" asked Brian, pulling him closer toward him, inhaling his scent, trailing kisses along his jaw, until he reached that sweet spot on Justin's neck.

He moved his hand and cupped Justin's face, preventing him from tossing his head, and kissed him, first slowly and then he deepened the kiss. Justin's arms were still pushing against Brian's chest, but as the kiss began to be more demanding, they moved around Brian's neck.

Brian pulled Justin against his chest and held him tight, dropped to his knees, with Justin, without breaking the kiss; he pulled up Justin's sweater and tossed it over his head. Justin moved closer to him, and Brian laid him down on the carpet, still kissing him into oblivion.

Brian moved to a kneeling position between Justin's thighs and opened Justin's pants to free his hard cock. Once the trousers opened, he moved up to kiss Justin again and pulled away slightly looking deep into the dark blue eyes.

"You like that?" asked Brian.

"Yes," answered huskily Justin.

"Than why did you shut me out, why did you pull away? Why did you think you could tell me without words that you want us to be apart?"

"I wasn't, I couldn't ... I didn't ... I don't know."

Brian moved his hand along Justin's chest until he reached Justin's cock. Justin gasped from the sensation, and bucked his hips toward Brian's hand.

"Do you really think I couldn't read you?"

"Stop, please ..." came Justin's reply.

"Stop what?" asked Brian as he moved his hand up and down Justin's erect shaft, "Stop that?" he squeezed a little harder, eliciting a moan from Justin, "Or this" as he trailed kisses along Justin's chest, eliciting another moan.

"Or do you want me to stop fighting for you? For what we had, for what we have?" Brian continued to caress Justin's body, making him hotter and more demanding than he already was. He continued his attack, trailing kisses over Justin's body, which arched his back, to pull himself closer to Brian.

"Tell me Justin, tell me what you want," whispered Brian.

"I want, I want," panted Justin.

Brian smiled. They hadn't had sex in so long he could barely remember.

"You want?"

"I want you, just you."

"Just me?"

"Yes, in – Inside me. Inside, inside me. Please."

Brian looked up and smiled, Justin was so hot. He slid his hands into Justin's pants and pushed them down. Justin wiggled out of the slacks, and reached out toward Brian to open his shirt. But Brian swatted his hand away.

"No."

"Please," pleaded Justin,

"Please what?"

"Hurry."

Brian laughed openly, and Justin looked at him lovingly. It had been so long since he had heard that laugh, too long in fact.

Brian resumed his place on his knees and began to strip his shirt slowly, with Justin's help. He opened his slacks and Justin pushed them down. Brian stretched his long body over Justin's smaller frame.

Justin locked his legs around Brian's waist and pulled him closer. Brian looked into Justin's eyes and saw the love, the need, and the lust reflecting his own need in them.

He positioned himself near Justin's entrance, and pushed in slowly. Justin opened his eyes wide, feeling the rawness. His mind was racing, if Brian still fucked him raw that could only mean he hadn't tricked since, since... He couldn't go on, his breath became more ragged, and his eyes filled with tears, all desire gone.

Brian sensed the change in his lover and opened his eyes, to see the face of pure pain in front of him; he stilled his movements and slowly pulled out, since Justin had softened.

"Justin, did I, did I hurt you?" Brian asked in concern.

Justin shook his head.

"Justin?" asked Brian again, but Justin just shook his head unable to answer, the pain too much to bear.

"Talk to me."

"You, you fucked me ... raw," whispered Justin as a statement.

Brian nodded and Justin continued, "You didn't," he sighed trying to regain the composure, "You didn't fuck anyone else?"

Brian shook his head.

"Since that night?"

Brian nodded. Justin rubbed his hands in his lap; Brian stopped him before he damaged his right hand.

"Stop."

Justin looked up, and asked, "Why?"

Brian furrowed his brow, "Why, what?" God he hated those 'conversation moments.' He looked at Justin and knew that he couldn't back out of this one, "Why didn't I trick?" Justin nodded. Brian stood up and pulled Justin with him. He sat him on the bed, padded in the bathroom, and brought back his and Justin's robe; he put Justin's around the young man, and put his on.

He knelt in front of Justin, looking him in the eyes.

"Justin, will you listen to me?" Justin nodded, "I have done a lot of things, things you couldn't imagine, and some I'd prefer you didn't. I have the reputation of being a stud; I cultivated that image for a long time. But there's one thing I'm sure of - you." He reached up to touch his face but Justin turned slightly away.

"Hey, look at me. I know I didn't promise you anything, and I didn't ask you anything when we signed those papers. When I asked you to marry me, it's not because I wanted you or because I couldn't have you, it has nothing to do with me. It's because I love what we had, what we have, what we are, what we do, how we try."

A single tear found his way down Justin's cheek.

"When I say I love you, it's because it means something to me, to you. It's because it's important for you to hear it, and for me to say it. I love your kindness and your strength, what you are and what you do. I love you Justin. And the papers I signed that day are more important to me than any promise I could have said to you, because they were my promise to be yours. Only yours, you were always enough, Justin, I just had to figure it out by myself, and admit that I'm in love with you."

Justin looked at Brian, who never looked more open than now. He reached out and stroked Brian's face.

"You listened to Wilma?" whispered Justin.

Brian nodded, smiled, and stated, "I listened to Wilma. If she could help you, Matt and Daphne, I thought maybe she could help me too."

\* \* \* \*

Wilma Littman, was Daphne's psychiatrist, she helped her to deal with the loss of Alex. She was so good, that Daphne took very little medicine.

Brian agreed to go with Daphne when she asked, because he was concerned. He had to agree that Wilma was something else. Black, dyke and very liberal, she had a real sense of humor that Brian loved, and most of all, she saw directly through his bullshit.

After the first two sessions with Daphne, she asked him to come alone. She didn't ask him questions; she just let him talk, took some notes, and helped him to deal with the loss of the baby and to deal with the walls Justin was putting up.

The last session was this morning. Wilma had told him to spend some time alone with Justin, completely alone, without friends or children, or anything else. To talk to him any way he wanted with actions or with words, because Justin needed to hear that he mattered to Brian, that he was



loved and the decision he made with Daphne that night hadn't changed anything.

So Brian had swallowed his pride and done what he promised Wilma, talk to Justin.

\* \* \* \*

Brian looked up at Justin, "Nothing has changed, what you did that night was the best for Alex." Justin nodded. "My ... my ... what I feel for you hasn't changed," whispered Brian.

Justin smiled and whispered back, "Still hard to say out loud how you feel?"

Brian nodded, "Yeah, well... I thought that maybe I should tell you..."

"No, you don't, I don't need the words all the time, just sometimes," whispered Justin.

"All right," stated Brian calmly. He moved around the bed, sat on it, and motioned Justin to move into his embrace. Justin sat between Brian's legs, leaning into his chest.

Brian wrapped his arms more tightly around Justin. For the first time in two months, Justin didn't flinch or move away. Brian heard him snuffle, "Allergies?" Justin nodded. Brian smiled.

Brian was right when he cut him off earlier in the evening, he was about to tell him that he was leaving. He had made his choice earlier that week. He knew that he was causing problems and he couldn't bear to see the people he loved the most worried for him.

He knew since Alex's death, Gus' grades had dropped at school, Brian had put in more hours than necessary at work, and his mother was hovering over him. It was more than he could handle, so he thought that maybe a few days or weeks away would resolve some of the problems, and recreate a bond between Brian and Gus.

He realized tonight that Brian hadn't changed towards him. He was there when he was needed, and left him alone when he needed some space; Justin was glad for small favors. He was also glad Brian pushed the issue tonight. Brian was right; he chose the best for Alex. He didn't need forgiveness, because he already had it.

\* \* \* \*

Wilma told him during one of their session that she wasn't going to sit there and pretend that she knew what he was going through, or that she could begin to understand what he was feeling because the last thing he needed right now was someone saying that given time, things would get better. Justin remembered he almost broke the windows he was standing in front when he heard those words, because between Brian, Matt, and Daphne, everyone was saying them.

Wilma was right. The last thing he needed at that time, were words like "with time, the hurt will go away." Wilma added that even with those words, things won't get better, and the hurt will never go away. Justin remembered he was shocked when he heard Wilma. However, Wilma went on, telling him he made the right choice, in freeing the little boy from a lot of suffering and he shouldn't feel guilty, but he should try to accept what he'd done.

Justin told her that he loved his son, more than he really thought possible, and Wilma said it was all right to love him and he should go on loving him. That he would miss him, but he'd go on living, even if it hurt.

Justin scoffed at her words and asked her, "How am I supposed to do that."

Wilma made him sit on a sofa, holding his hands. "The 'how' will work itself out. Life will just keep happening. There are people who need your presence, so you will be there for them."

"Like who?" asked Justin.

"The man sharing your life, you're more important to him than you can imagine. His life is dependent on yours." Justin looked sharply at her. She continued, "And there I crossed the line of patient confidentiality," she stated with a huge smile.

Justin broke down in her office and never said anything to Brian. It was a week ago. He thought that leaving for a while would put everything back to "normal" or as normal as their fucked up family could be. He thought about retreating to New York. In a few weeks he would have sent Brian the papers splitting all their accounts and their commitment, and maybe move away a little later. He didn't think at the time it was a bad idea, but now he knew it was a bad idea.

\* \* \* \*

Brian was running his hand over his slim body, bringing him back to reality. Brian's hand slid under the robe he was wearing, touching his skin. Justin turned a little in his arms, sliding his own hand under Brian's robe.

They locked eyes; Brian reached out and pulled Justin against him in a heated kiss. His hands pulled Justin's robe away completely, leaving Justin naked sitting between his legs. He pushed him backwards on the bed while Justin pushed his robe away too.

Justin gasped when their bodies came into contact, hard on rubbing together; Brian smiled, crushing his mouth over Justin's.

Brian had all the intentions to resume his previous state. He began to nibble Justin's neck, eliciting deep moans from his lover. Justin reached out, pulled Brian to his mouth, and kissed him deeply.

When Brian slid into him, he finally felt complete.

They rapidly found their rhythm that brought them to completion. They came together, and afterwards lay in a sweaty mess, limbs entwined on the bed.

Brian was lazily running his hand along Justin's back, listening to Justin's breathing. When he knew Justin was falling asleep, he whispered, "Yeah, you little twat, I love you, and since day one." He stopped, inhaled deeply, and finished, "I don't want to lose you ever, I love you too much for that."

He continued running his hand along Justin's back, he never noticed the hitch in Justin's breathing; the young man had heard everything and was smiling as he drifted to sleep.

## **Chapter 13    It's Time**

They moved slowly along a breaking line during several long weeks. With Wilma's help, they found the force to move on, to deal with the pain, and to deal with their feelings.

In June, Daphne finally passed all her exams and was now officially a doctor. Brian invited everyone to a restaurant to celebrate the occasion. During the dinner, they talked about the possibility of a new pregnancy, but Daphne wasn't ready, and Justin couldn't speak about it. They finally chose to wait and let time heal their scars.

The illness Melanie had been experiencing wasn't as bad as they had thought; just a bad cold that wouldn't go away.

Gus now lived at Britin, and had good grades again. He even finished the school year first in his class. The school principal told Brian that Gus had the ability to jump a grade again. Brian wanted to be sure that Gus's grades wouldn't drop again, so he told the director that Gus should finish the next school term and they would go from there.

In July, Lindsay called more often. She was preparing to come home. Sidney had called her a few weeks earlier, telling her that his ex-wife was sick and that he had to take care of her, but he wouldn't leave the gallery in bad hands. He called her and offered her his place, director of the Bloom Gallery. If she accepted, the gallery would be renamed The Bloom-Peterson Gallery.

The news of Lindsay's probable return began to stress Gus and Mel more than expected. Mel was concerned about what would happen if she wanted Gus back. Every time she talked about it, Brian or Justin tried to sooth her, by telling her that no matter what, they would protect Gus, and not act the way they did with JR. She could only agree.

## October 2009

Their anniversary was coming up, but Brian and Justin had been caught up in their business and their lives, and they didn't want to celebrate this year, too much had happened to them.

Daphne, Matt, Mrs. Stevenson, Gus, Mel, and Corinne planned a little dinner in a fine restaurant for them.

They decided their rings would stay on their fingers that night and that they would answer all the questions.

The dinner was going well. When Corinne asked why they had waited so long to tell everyone. Mel told her, "He was a slut." At the shock on her partner's face, she looked at Brian, "Sorry, old habits."

"No need to be sorry, you're right, I was."

"Want to tell her?"

"Justin?" asked Brian.

"No you go," replied Justin with a smile.

"You know most of the story. I met him the night Gus was born. He lied to his parents, and he stayed with me until the next morning. He stalked me, and I brought him back to the loft very often. It took me five years to understand my feelings. The night Babylon blew up, I knew I had to do something to keep him in my life."

Brian looked over at Justin.

"A few days later, I asked him to marry me, he said no. I bought Britin, asked him again and finally he agreed."

Corinne, leaned on her elbow, "And?"

"And," began Melanie, "My stupid ex-partner, told Brian about the article in Art Forum, and told him that it was Justin's biggest opportunity. She knew what she was doing - that Brian would never sacrifice anyone's opportunity for his own, so the day of the rehearsal dinner, they announced that they had called off the wedding."

"And a few days later, you moved to Canada with her?" asked Corinne.

"Yeah, and Justin moved to New York, a few days after."

"Talking about it that way, you must have felt awful, Brian?" asked Matt.

"Nah... It was just life."

"Yeah you're so right!" smiled Daphne. "He was a wreck."

"Michael came over a few days after Justin left. He said that we had to reopen Babylon that it was who I was."

"Is that why you reopened it?" asked Matt.

"No, I reopened it, because Justin gave me a reason to."

"Which was?" asked Daphne.

"Once Babylon reopened, it was as successful as before, and Justin suggested using half of the profits to do something good for the community." He smiled at Justin who raised an eyebrow, telling him silently to continue.

"Half the profits are used for Babylon, the structure, the employees, everything. The other half is put into a non-profit organization that contributes to four different areas."

He took his glass of wine and looked over at Melanie, "You always said I didn't fight for my community, but I have, and I still do." He took a sip and kept the glass in his hand. "The first part is used for the 'Vic Grassi House' to pay the rent. The second part is used to provide for the families and those injured in the bombing, and even paid for some lawyers when they were needed."

"Dusty's children," murmured Mel.

Brian nodded, "The third part is used to provide counseling at the GLC. And the last part was used to build the medical center and daycare that opened three years ago on Liberty Avenue. It still pays for the maintenance and upkeep."

"That's why you reopened Babylon?" asked Matt.

"Yeah, I didn't want to reopen it just so that queers could dance over some dead bodies' memories... I reopened it, because I could help out."

"You always helped?" asked Corrine.

"Yeah, but no one ever saw it, except me of course," replied Justin, seeing that Brian was uncomfortable.

"You helped Mary to keep Dusty's children," stated Mel.

"No, Babylon's non-profit organization helped her."

"You had the idea."

"No, it was Justin's idea."

"All right everyone, I get it. Stop being modest Brian, it was a combined idea," replied Corinne with a smile, saving Brian discomfort.

"Thanks," mouthed Brian.

"I always knew that he was a softy," Daphne stated with a big grin on her face. Her declaration made everyone laugh openly.

The rest of the dinner went by smoothly and no one said anything about the real occasion. Mel looked over at Brian, and smiled at him when he looked up from something Gus told him. She couldn't believe they were friends, now, after all that happened between them.

\* \* \* \*

The first time she saw Brian Kinney, she had been dating Lindsay for three weeks, and she didn't like him at all. She saw him as a threat to her relationship.

Well in fact, it was more Lindsay's sexual encounters with Brian that bothered her most. She never understood why she slept with him.

Since then, Lindsay had proven to her that she needed a man from time to time.

When they parted before, and they were fighting over JR, she was glad Brian didn't get involved in all the fights they had. Well he did help by paying for Lindsay's lawyer, but he never judged them, he never took sides.

She chose to tell him a while ago. He told her that she was harsh at that time, because she obviously had forgotten that when she cheated on Lindsay in the early day of Gus's birth, Lindsay had forgiven her.

When she explained to him that it was with a woman, Brian nodded and told her, "It was still cheating, just like Lindsay did with Sam."

Mel nodded, but couldn't resist saying that for her it was a one-night thing, without feelings, but with Lindsay it was something else. She had feelings for Sam and she always will have.

Brian explained the feelings Sam awoke in Lindsay - that it was all about art. They had a common passion that drove them together. She shouldn't have felt threatened because Lindsay wouldn't have left her for Sam.

She sighed and after a few moments of silence, she finally added, "She chose to leave us and lead her life the way she wanted. She made her choices; she has to live with them now."

\* \* \* \*

The dinner wasn't a major event for anyone; at the end, they had a piece of cake, Brian's favorite, chocolate chocolate chip.

Brian shared his piece of cake with Justin, and Corinne did the same with Melanie, Gus of course ate his without sharing. They took the rest of the cake home.

\* \* \* \*

After dinner, they all went to Britin, the restaurant being nearer the house than the loft.

Matt, Daphne, and Mrs. Stevenson went to the guesthouse, and Mel and Corinne went to the guestroom. Gus went to his bedroom.

After checking that everyone was comfortably installed and most likely asleep, Brian crept into the master bedroom, where some music was playing.

Justin had put a mix of music in the player. Brian smiled; he had chosen some ballads. He moved into the walk-in closet and saw that Justin had changed into something more comfortable.

As Justin moved into the main room, Brian discarded his own clothes and put on some black sweat pants.

As he walked into the room, Bon Jovi was playing, "*(You Want To) Make A Memory*"

*Hello again, it's you and me*

*Kinda always like it used to be*

*Sippin' wine, killing time*

*Trying to solve life's mysteries.*

*How's your life, it's been a while*

*God it's good to see you smile*

*I see you reaching for your keys*

*Looking for a reason not to leave.*

Justin had lit a fire in the fireplace. He was sitting on the ottoman in front of the fire, Daphne's scrapbook in hand. Over the last few years, he had added some sketches from the prom, from birthdays, and special occasions.

Brian looked over at him and smiled, Justin slowly turned the pages.

*If you don't know if you should stay*

*If you don't say what's on your mind*

*Baby just, breathe there's no where else tonight we should be-*

*You wanna make a memory.*

Brian walked toward him, grabbed the scrapbook, put it down and lifted Justin up. He put his arms around Justin and began to sway to the music.

*I dug up this old photograph*

*Look at all that hair we had*

*It's bittersweet to hear you laugh*

*Your phone is ringing, I don't wanna ask.*

Justin smiled and put his head on Brian's shoulder. They continued to sway, moving together slowly, when Justin heard Brian, "I want you to make a memory from this one too, and from all the times we could dance in the future."

Justin looked up and nodded.

*If you go now, I'll understand*

*If you stay, hey, I got a plan*

*You wanna make a memory*

*You wanna steal a piece of time*

*You could sing a melody to me*

*And I could write a couple lines*

*You wanna make a memory.*

Brian leaned toward him and kissed him deeply, softly, his tongue, grazing Justin's. Justin parted his lips to give Brian better access. They continued to move with the music, still kissing.

*If you don't know if you should stay*

*And you don't say what's on your mind*

*Baby just, breathe there's no where else tonight we should be-*

*You wanna make a memory*

*You wanna steal a piece of time*

*You could sing a melody to me*

*And I could write a couple lines*

*You wanna make a memory*

*You wanna make a memory*

They listened to the song till the end, once the song finished; they continued to sway to the next song.

\* \* \* \*

While they were swaying to the music, they began to talk, softly about their commitment. Especially, how and when they would tell everyone.

"What do you think about calling a family meeting?" asked Justin.

Brian shook his head.

"A letter, to tell everyone?"

"Nope, it's not an event, it's an announcement," stated Brian.

"What then?"

"Friday. Deb. Dinner, everyone will be there, half already knows and the other half will know then."

"Maybe I should tell Mom before next Friday."

"You want me there?"

"I think I'll do it when you get Gus Wednesday; I'll tell her to come by the office, and tell her then."

Brian nodded, he tightened his hold on Justin's waist, and whispered, "I will get Gus from Mel, get you and then we will get home. Does that sound good?"

"Yeah," whispered Justin.

"Tired?"

"Yeah."

"Come on." Brian quickly shut out the music, moved them to the bed, discarded both of their sweatpants, and put the comforter around them. The only light in the room came from the fire still burning in the hearth.

Justin snuggled against Brian, his head on Brian's chest. His breath evened out; Brian kissed his forehead, "Happy Anniversary Justin."

Justin moved a little, kissed Brian's chest, "You too." Justin felt Brian stiffen, but then he felt him relax, Brian tightened his hold a little more and kissed him again.

\* \* \* \*

### **Wednesday October 28<sup>th</sup>, 2009**

As Brian went to Melanie's house, he heard raised voices from her family room.

He looked through the window and saw that Melanie was fighting with Lindsay.

"Christ," he muttered to himself. He took a deep breath and opened the door; he walked into the family room when he heard Lindsay say:

"I can't believe that you are taking his side."

"I'm not taking his side, I'm trying to explain, that you can't barge into my home and take my kids without my approval."

"Gus is my son too,"

"No, he's mine!" came the cold reply from the doorway.

"Hi Brian," whispered Mel.

"Hi Mel, are the kids all right?"

"Yeah, they're upstairs with Corinne." Brian nodded. He turned to Lindsay, "When did you get back? And can someone explain to me why I heard you yelling from the street?"

"I came to take my son."

"Not going to happen. But I still want you to tell me what you are doing here."

"Sydney called a few months ago, he asked me to take over his gallery since his ex-wife is sick and he wanted to take care of her."

Brian nodded, Lindsay continued, "I came back three weeks ago, found a place to live, began working at the gallery, and now I'm here - to take my son back where he belongs with his mother."

"When will you bring him back?"

"She won't," came the soft reply from behind Brian.

Brian turned around, toward his son, as Gus continued, "She came here, barged into the house without waiting to be invited in, and began to yell at Corinne and Momma. Once she saw me, she told me to pack my things, because I was going back to live with her."

Gus rubbed his eyes, and sniffled, at the end of the sentence and Brian sighed. Lindsay stepped toward him, "Sweetie, I told you when I sent you back here that I would come home one day and we would live together again."

Gus moved away from her, and whispered, "Yeah but it was so long ago, and you didn't come home for so long."

As Lindsay made another move toward her son, Gus moved closer to his father.

Brian looked at his son, at Mel, and said, "Gus, go to your room, get your things, we're going home."

Gus looked at his father, and then at his mother, "No,"

"No?" asked Brian.

"No, I want to tell her."

"What do you want to tell me Sweetie?" asked Lindsay.

"I don't want to go with you; I want to stay with Dad, Papa, Momma, and Corinne. I want you to leave us alone. You had no right to say all those things to Momma when you came here."

"Gus, this was grown up stuff. You shouldn't have listened to us. You're too young to get involved in our problems."

"No, I'm nine years old; I understood most of the things you are talking about."

"Sweetie ..." began Lindsay.

"Stop calling me sweetie, I jumped a class and I'm with the boys over ten. I can choose my clothes alone, and I even choose what I want for my breakfast."

"Gus, don't be so cheeky with me."

"I'm not a kid anymore."

"I know that, but I'm concerned. You know ..."

Brian huffed. Lindsay looked over at him, "I'm concerned about him."

"Why did you move us to France? When I told you I didn't want to leave? I asked you and pleaded



with you, you told me it was an opportunity."

"It was an opportunity, Gus, a great one."

"For you, not for me, I was so alone. I asked you to let me live with momma, but you said no. I had to go with you." Gus sniffled, but continued, "I took your cell phone and called home every time I got the chance."

"That's why you knew he wasn't well," whispered Lindsay.

Brian and Melanie nodded.

Gus looked at his mother, "Why didn't you come back for Christmas, or my birthday?"

"Sweetie, I wrote you a letter."

"You wrote a lot of letters, Mom, but you never said why you didn't come home.

"I..." began Lindsay, "I just, you know, I had a lot of work and couldn't really come to... well, you know, I explained it to you."

Gus looked sad and Lindsay stopped, "Sweetie?"

"I don't want to go with you. I want to go home," whispered Gus.

"Then it's decided, let's go home," stated Brian.

"We are?"

"Yeah."

"All right." Gus flashed a smile and ran upstairs.

"Thanks Brian," whispered Lindsay. "Somehow, I knew you would understand that he belongs with me."

Brian looked at Lindsay, obviously, she had mistaken his statement, "He's not going with you, Linds. He's coming with me."

"But you just said he was going home."

"Yeah home, like, home to me."

"You, a home? Is that a joke?"

"No, I have a home, and Gus is coming with me."

"Well then, I'll come and get him tomorrow."

"No, Lindsay, you won't come and get him. Maybe it's time you remembered that you signed a paper when you moved to France. Melanie told you to read it, did you?"

Lindsay shook her head, no, Brian continued, "It was with the papers from your dissolution."

"I signed everything."

"Did you read over them?" asked Melanie.

"No. Why?"

"I told you to read over every piece of paper," replied Melanie.

"I didn't have time, I always had to run. I signed the papers and sent them back like you asked."

"You signed a paper giving Brian all parental rights, and making him the parent in charge. The paper said that all decisions about Gus have to go through him first before anyone else."

"No..."

"I told you to read the papers."

"No..."

"Lindsay, I told you on the phone and in the letter that was with the papers."

"I threw the letter in the trash, never read it. Brian," Lindsay looked toward him, "I want my son."

"No, you can't have him. You left almost two years ago, never looked back. You never took the time to come home for his birthday, Christmas or any other important event in his life, even when I sent you the tickets. You said that we had to take care of him, and we did. I have custody, not Mel, so you'll have to deal with me. You signed the papers, not me. You want Gus, get a lawyer," finished Brian as he heard Gus coming back downstairs, Corinne and JR just behind him.

Lindsay wanted to say something, but Brian held up his hand, "I don't want to hear it, save it." He turned toward Mel and asked, "You all right?"

"Yeah thanks."

Lindsay looked once more at her former lover and the father of her son, and thought, that maybe going to France wasn't a great idea after all. She had to send her son back, lost her wife, her friends, and even part of her rights to Gus. How did that happened? As she passed near Gus, he flinched and took a step back into Corinne's embrace. Lindsay saw the hurt in her son's eyes, and shook her head, what had she done.

She finally left the house, and Brian closed the door behind her. In the family room, Melanie was in Corinne's embrace, crying silently. She looked at Brian and told him, "She came mid afternoon, and asked if we could talk; I thought, why not. When Corinne came back from school with the kids, she went nuts and said that she would take Gus and JR with her and if I didn't want it, she would fight me."

Brian nodded, looked over at Gus, and said, "Gus and I talked about the fact that she would probably come back and try to take him. I decided I wouldn't pay a lawyer to defend my interests, but I will pay a lawyer to defend his interests. It would be his life that we would be talking about and I don't want him in the middle like JR was when you and Lindsay broke up."

"Thanks Brian," whispered Melanie.

"I didn't do anything."

"You're putting Gus's interests before yours."

"I told you, long ago that you had something against him because you're too much alike," said Corinne with a knowing smile.

"Yeah well, you can't change me."

"No, but I can make you better," whispered Corinne.

"All right, girls I'm going home. Gus?"

Gus moved from his spot on the stairs and went to say goodbye to his mother and Corinne.

\* \* \* \*

Like every time Brian went to take Gus from Melanie's, Justin waited at Kinnetik, for his ride home. He closed the file in front of him, looked at the clock, and smiled when he heard the door open. He asked his mother to come by; he had something to tell her.

"Hi Honey,"

"Mom."

"You called and asked me to stop by?" smiled Jennifer.

"Yeah, I ... we... I,"

"Something's wrong at home?" asked Jennifer. "Are you having problems with Brian? Daphne, or maybe Gus, is it something else?"

"Mom, stop."

Jennifer sat down and waited.

"Everything is fine, Daphne's great and there is nothing wrong at home." He inhaled, "I ... shit." He moved the file in front of him and pushed it toward his mother, "I think it would be simpler for you to read it, because it seems I can't tell you."

Jennifer reached for the file, opened it and began to read. She stopped and looked at her son, "When? Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you tell me? Why?"

Justin grabbed the file back and turned the pages to the last one, "There."

Jennifer, leaned against the back of her chair, and looked at her son, tears in her eyes.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because," he looked at his mother, "it was easier this way, no need to answer questions, no need to have a lot to deal with, it was just between us, and it was beautiful."

"I would have loved to be in your confidence," murmured Jennifer.

"And you would have run to Debbie, who would have told the gang, and there would have been a party, and all the hetero crap I hate," came Brian's answer from the door.

"Hey," Justin looked up and smiled at Brian.

"Hey, you told her?"

Justin nodded.

Brian sat on the couch with Gus, who immediately pulled out a book from his backpack and began to read.

"Mom?" asked Justin, "You're not mad? Are you?"

Jennifer shook her head, "No Honey, I'm just a little disappointed, and maybe hurt, that you didn't say anything to me, that you didn't say anything to anyone."

"I knew," piped Gus from his place on the couch.

Jennifer turned around and looked at the teenager, "You told him and not me?"

"I saw it, a long time ago."

"You saw it," whispered Jennifer, and then everything fell in place in her mind, "The necklace."

Brian and Justin looked at her frowning, "I saw it that night, the night you came back from the hospital."

Brian smiled, and Jennifer continued, "I never thought you would commit yourself to my son. I never thought that, that, well that," she stopped. "I knew you were serious when you told me, you

asked him to marry you. I knew that you loved him, well in fact I knew it a long time ago, I just had difficulty accepting it."

Brian nodded. He knew that Jennifer came to terms with her feelings that night at the loft, when he told her that he asked Justin to marry him. He knew it, because he saw it in her eyes.

She turned to Brian, "Still I don't understand why you didn't tell us the truth, why you lied?"

"Like I said, we never lied, we just chose to keep it to ourselves, and some of our friends."

"And they didn't say anything?"

"**We** are telling you Mom," answered Justin.

"Who else knew?"

"Well, let see, Daphne has known since Brian came back from the show. Then Mrs. Stevenson and her grandson, Mel and Corinne, Emmett and Drew, at some point."

"Cynthia, because we wore the rings at the office. Ted and Blake."

"So many people and no one told me? How is that possible?"

"Because they learned that sometimes we want to deal with our lives alone, without interference," answered Justin.

"Do you plan to tell Debbie, or Michael?"

"Yeah, it's on the agenda for next Friday. Then we have to tell Lindsay too, and we're not sure how she'll react once we tell her."

"Mel told me she came back."

"Yeah, and she threw a fit today at Mel's house, because she wanted to take Gus with her, but she forgot all the papers she signed when she was away, and how she transferred her parental authority to me."

"Oh my god, she didn't?"

"She did Grand'ma Jen, she even said that momma had no right to live with Corinne."

"Gus."

"Sorry Dad, you always said that I should tell the truth."

"I said that?"

Gus smiled and looked up at his father, "Yeah you say it all the time."

"Yeah you're right, I say it all the time," and he kissed his son on the top of the head.

Gus resumed reading his book sitting in his father's embrace. Jennifer smiled at the picture.

"Is that what you see everyday?" she asked her son.

"Yep."

"Now I know why you've loved him since that first night." She finally got up from her chair and moved across the room toward her son, "I'm glad you got your wish, sweetie, I'm glad, really glad."

"Thanks Mom," whispered Justin back.

Brian finally got up and nudged his son to stand up. Jennifer walked toward him and hugged him too, after a few seconds he returned the embrace. "I'm happy to be your Mom-in-law." She smiled to him and he smiled back, "You were a Mom-in-law long before I asked Justin to tie the knot."

"I know. Well, I think I have to go now, digest the news, and try to stay silent till you say something to Debbie."

Jennifer left and the boys went to Brian's car, they had an appointment with Wilma in an hour and it was on the other side of the city.

\* \* \* \*

Friday evening came far too early for Brian and Justin. They had decided to do it the simplest way. As Justin stepped out the shower, Brian led him to the bed, sat near him and reached for his necklace. He took it off, took the ring, and put it on Justin's ring finger. "From now on and for as long as we are together," whispered Brian.

"Even if it's forever?" interrupted Justin.

"Even then, this," Brian kissed the ring, "will stay here, all right?" Justin shook his head, and Brian frowned.

Justin mirrored Brian's action and put Brian's ring on his ring finger. Once the ring was secured on Brian's finger, he looked up and smiled, "Yes, I agree."

Brian shook his head, "You won't give me a break?"

"No, I love to tease you."

Brian leaned toward Justin and began to kiss him, pushing him back on the bed. Justin moaned into the kiss, Brian moved lower, to Justin's jaw, and stopped, when he heard Justin say, "You keep on doing that, and we will be very, very late."

"Mmmh, when was the last time we were fashionably late?"

"It's ... stop that... it's been a while."

"We could be, today."

"What excuse will you give Gus?"

"Shit!"

Justin raked his hand through Brian's hair, "Patience, it will be better after dinner when we're at home and Gus is asleep."

"Yeah. It will be, because then, I'll take the time to rim you, and then I'll fuck you all night."

Justin shivered when he heard Brian's husky voice, eliciting a laugh from him. "Maybe I'll fuck you."

"Maybe," replied Brian taking Justin's hand and lifting him from the bed. "Now come on, we have a dinner to go to."

Justin shook his head, "You're unbelievable."

"Yeah I am."

As Justin walked into the walk in closet, Brian told him, "Black jeans, blue top, the one we bought in New York."

"All right," came the reply.

"You can choose my outfit."

"I can?"

"Yeah."

Justin chose a pair of black jeans he loved, a classic, and a deep red carmine shirt, with black shading. Brian was to die for in this outfit and he knew it.

As he stepped out of the closet, Brian stepped out the bathroom. He showed him the outfit he chose and Brian raised a brow.

"My, you're dangerous tonight. You know how hot I look in that, and ..."

"Yeah I know, I also know that you're comfortable in it and that you love it."

Brian nodded.

\* \* \* \*

Forty-five minutes later, they were standing in front of Debbie's house. Nervously they were both playing with their respective rings.

"You all right?" whispered Justin.

Brian shook his head, and smiled, "I will be."

Before they could say anything else, Carl opened the door. They weren't the last Lindsay was still coming.

They hung up their coats and moved into the kitchen. Jennifer followed them closely. They were saying hello to everyone when Lindsay finally arrived. Debbie didn't wait a minute and told them to take their place.

The whole family was there: Drew and Emmett; Ted and Blake; Michael and Ben; Corinne, Mel and JR, who was sitting next to her father; Jennifer and Tucker; Carl and Debbie; Brian, Justin and Gus and finally Lindsay, alone.

Mel placed JR between her and Michael and Gus took his place near Corinne. He asked Justin to sit near him Brian sat near Justin. Jennifer took the seat on Brian's left and the rest of the people sat down.

Debbie was on one end and Carl on the other. The table was stretched from the kitchen to the middle of the living room.

Debbie looked at everyone, and muttered, "About fucking time the whole family is together again."

She finally sat down and said, "Enjoy the meal, it was Vic's favorite when we had the whole gathering at home." She frowned, Carl looked at her, and smiled, she smiled back.

If anyone noticed the rings, no one said a word. Dinner was almost finished when Ben passed a plate to Brian and Lindsay noticed the ring on Brian's hand.

"My God, you did it?" she exclaimed suddenly, and Brian put the plate on the table and looked over at Justin.

"Our time's up blond boy."

"I heard."

"What did they do?" asked Debbie.

"Brian put a ring on Justin's hand," shrieked Lindsay, "You didn't, you can't, it's, it's...."

"What?" asked Brian.

"Why? When? And New York, when will you go back?"

"I won't."

"But your ... And Michael, and..." continued Lindsay.

"Hey, what's with me?" asked Michael from the end of the table, where Ben related to him what Lindsay had just said.

Lindsay looked over at Justin, and said once again, "Justin, you shouldn't be here, you should be in New York, working on your art, becoming famous."

"Linds," began Brian.

"I don't need to go back there," responded Justin while squeezing Brian's hand.

"But what about the shows, your reputation, you just can't ..."

"Linds," tried Brian again.

"It's not good for your career, not being in New York, you should..." She stopped and looked over at Brian, "It's you, isn't it, you who asked him to come back, because you knew that I would probably come back, and take Gus again."

Brian looked over at Lindsay with astonishment, too shocked to say anything.

Michael and Ben had moved over and tried to interrupt Lindsay, but like with Brian, she lashed into them without restraint.

They were now all speaking at once. Justin finally stood up, walked around the table, grabbed Lindsay by the elbow, and turned her around so she faced him. He said one word, "Stop."

Justin's action brought silence over the table. Lindsay looked at Justin and then at Brian.

"It isn't the time or the place to speak about that." And he looked over to where Gus was seated.

"I don't understand why you came back," said Lindsay.

"Damn Lindsay, you can't leave it, can you?" asked Melanie from the other side of the table. "I heard you everyday for almost a year telling him that he should stay in New York that Brian visiting him all the time could disturb him and it was better for him to concentrate on his art. I had trust issues, especially concerning your feelings for Brian, but you, you couldn't stand to see them together, Linds, you played the perfect friend,"

"Hey, what is she talking about?" asked Debbie.

Lindsay had blanched when she heard Melanie's statement. But now her eyes were shooting daggers. If a look could kill, Melanie would be dead by now.

Justin looked around and saw that Corrine, Tucker, Gus, and JR were missing. Jennifer said that they went upstairs and Justin nodded.

Brian looked at the exchange, and at Justin. He finally stood up behind his lover.

"She's talking about the article published in the Art Forum after Justin's first show. The article Justin never told me about, but Lindsay did. She played with the fact that once I knew I would put our wedding on hold because she knew that I wouldn't let Justin sacrifice his life for me."

"That's not true and you know it," said Lindsay.

"Are you so sure?" asked Brian, "I remember clearly that time when I came to Toronto, and you

told me that you went to Justin's opening, and the paintings were great, and he was doing fine. I also remember that less than three months later, Justin had another show and he was a mess. He was doing so great that he couldn't paint, had literally stopped eating, and didn't sleep well. He was so great, that his agent told him that his art was empty and he had to find another inspiration source. He was doing so great, that he was completely depressed. Yeah you're right he was doing great. You wanted me to come up every week, but I chose to come only every other week, because the other weekend I was with Justin."

Lindsay looked uncomfortable.

"You remember what you said? He's young; he'll move on, that I should be strong, that I can't stand in his way to celebrity."

"She what?" asked Justin.

"Calm down Sunshine, it was a long time ago. Since then, we worked everything out, didn't we?"

Justin nodded, passing his hand over his face, showing his ring.

Michael moved from Ben's embrace, toward Justin. He grabbed his hand and turned toward Brian. "About fucking time," he grinned.

Justin and Brian both looked astonished and Michael cleared his throat. "I noticed a change after you came back from your vacation after his second show, I couldn't point it out. With Ben's help and my ... my ... doctor, I finally put two and two together, about two months ago. I told Ben that I think you were in some way committed and Ben confirmed it when he said, in more ways than I could imagine. That's when I remembered all the times you passed your hand over your chest, when Justin was calling, and I should have know long before. I'm glad you finally did it. I never should have doubted you. I..."

"It's all right Mikey."

"No, it's not. Crap."

Ben moved and put his hand on Michael's shoulder.

"I'm sorry if I always tried to hold you back. You were right in your letter Justin, I couldn't let him go, because, I thought we were a whole, like the yin and the yang. And I'm glad that you pointed it out in the letter you sent me when you moved to New York. I never should have said all the nasty things I did at that time. And I wanted to be honest and tell you both how sorry I am for not seeing that everyone grew up."

Brian nodded and Justin smiled his sunshine smile. Michael huffed and turned toward Ben. As he turned back to look at Brian, Debbie slapped him on the head with her dishtowel. "You little asshole," she whispered and took him into a great hug.

"And you two. Well, I think, I think, we have at last a commitment ceremony to do."

"No, Deb."

"No?"

"No, Deb, no party, no dinner, nothing. It was our decision. We wanted it this way, and we don't want a party or anything else that would look like a party."

"But..." began Debbie.

"Debbie, honey, maybe you should, let the boys decide for themselves," began Carl.

"Well Carl, maybe the boys should have told us that they got married."

"We're not married," stated Brian.



"Yes you are. You are wearing a ring."

"We are, we are... what are we?" he asked Justin.

"Partners? Committed? "

"Yeah something, like that."

Brian and Justin looked at each other, smiling, almost forgetting the other people present. It was Lindsay who broke the spell.

"When did you...? ," asked Lindsay gesturing between the two of them.

"October 2005," answered Justin.

"What?" came Debbie's offended question. "Why didn't you tell us before?"

"We are telling you, now."

"Well like I said before, we have to do something now."

"No!" came the common answer from Brian, Justin, Jennifer, Mel and Ben.

Debbie, looked around the table, a little shocked that not only Brian and Justin told her no, but also Jennifer, Mel and Ben.

"What... why ..." began Debbie.

"Like we said before, we chose to do this between us without any interference. And it worked, because it's been over three years now, and we are still, well, huh, we are, well ..."

"We are still fine," finished Justin for Brian.

Brian nodded.

Debbie looked around once more, and stopped her gaze on Mel, "You knew?"

Mel nodded, and stated, "I'm not the only one."

"Who else knew?" asked Debbie her voice full of hurt.

"I knew," stated Ted. I discovered it when Justin came back from New York, and I told Blake." He looked over at Brian, and finished quickly, "We swore to each other that we would keep your secret safe."

Brian nodded.

"Justin told me Wednesday, but I kinda knew it for a while too. I just didn't push the issue to ask them," said Jennifer.

Debbie nodded and looked over at Mel.

"I knew I think since day one. I overheard a conversation between Justin and Daphne, and when I was sick, I saw the little differences between them, something that wasn't there before, more confidence, more sharing. I don't know," she shrugged, "I think I may have imagined it, but somehow I knew and Corinne confirmed, she's really good at that."

"Among other things it seems," finished Lindsay bitterly.

Just then, Corinne and Ben came back downstairs, Corinne wrapped her arms around Mel, "Talking about me?"

"One day you have to tell me how you do it," whispered Melanie.

"What? Guess what you are talking about without even being there?"

Melanie nodded.

"It's a gift." She turned around and looked at Brian, "Gus is asleep, and so is JR."

"Thanks."

Melanie leaned against Corinne and turned her head, as Corinne moved and kissed her.

"Christ can't you two get a room," mumbled Lindsay.

"Lindsay, sweetie," began Melanie, "Would you mind your own fucking business."

Lindsay looked shocked at her ex-lover.

Corinne smiled softly, and stood up to move into the living room.

Finally, Deb said, "I'm happy you boys finally decided to take the plunge, but we will have a little something, because I decided we had to have something. You got that, Mr. Kinney, we will have a celebration, because even if you don't need one, WE need one."

Brian groaned inwardly and looked over at Justin who just shrugged and said, "She's right you know, just because we don't need a party that doesn't mean that our relatives don't need one."

"Not at the house."

Justin nodded, Brian had agreed to the party, but they would have to do it anywhere but at the house.

"The loft, next week?"

"Fine."

Justin turned toward Debbie, "Next week, Saturday, the loft, seven o'clock, no gifts."

Brian looked at Justin with pride, he just used Debbie's tactic when she was trying to make him do something he didn't want to do.

Debbie smiled, "All right, Saturday, next week seven o'clock, no gifts, Carl did you write that down?" Carl smiled and nodded.

Emmett clasped his hands, and Drew moved over to Justin and Brian to congratulate them.

The rest of the guests came too, only Lindsay stayed in her chair, looking rather shocked by all the revelations.

Brian moved over and sat near her, "You're invited too." Lindsay nodded but didn't say a word. Brian continued, "It's his decision, not yours, not mine, his. It's his life. He did fairly well with the last shows. He's not the 'GREAT Prodigy' like Simon what the fuck was his name wrote, but he's doing well. He has two regular galleries who ask for his work, and then he got a solo show."

Lindsay nodded again, and opened her mouth to say something, but finally stayed silent. She turned her head and looked over at Melanie and Corrine.

"She's good for her, Linds, don't fuck that up. Melanie has enough on her plate, don't add some petty jealousy into it."

Lindsay laughed bitterly, "You know how long I tried to put you in the same room and ask you to be civil to each other? I can't believe that you are taking her side."

Brian let out a deep sigh, "I didn't take her side, or yours, for that matter, I ... we..." he stopped looked at his hands, and began again. "When she was sick, she came to me, and told just me."

When you sent Gus back from France, she couldn't take care of him. We put our differences aside for Gus's sake, not ours, his. It wasn't simple. It isn't simple. But we are trying."

"I'm sure she told you why we broke up."

"Never came up. And I don't want to hear it. Both of you chose to leave for Toronto and both of you made the decision to go your own way. I'd known you weren't good together for a long time. But once you came back each on your own, things were better." Lindsay nodded, Brian continued, "It was shitty of you to play with Justin and my feelings, I'm not sure I can ever forgive you."

"I thought you had."

"I thought so too, but it was a mistake. I, I care about him, a lot, and along with Gus, he's the most important person in my life. Do you think you can respect that?"

"I can."

Brian cleared his throat, "Gus doesn't want to live with you, I spoke with him for many hours. He asked if he could stay with Justin and me, for as long as he wants."

Lindsay's eyes filled with tears, "He's my son, Brian, I want him back."

"And he doesn't want to leave with you," stated Brian calmly.

"But he belongs to me."

"Even if you still had your parental rights you transferred the custody to me."

"I really want him back."

"I will try and speak with him again, but if he doesn't want to, I won't force him. All right?"

"All right."

Lindsay stood up and went upstairs. After half an hour she came back and walked to Debbie in the kitchen, she said her goodbyes, took her coat and left.

The evening was almost over, Brian sighed with relief, they had finally told everyone, they didn't have to hide anymore.

Jennifer hugged him before she left, "You did great Brian, you did great."

Brian smiled.

The only ones still there were Brian, Justin, Mel and Corinne. Mel and Brian walked up to retrieve their respective child. Brian had to struggle with a very sleepy, grumpy Gus. He had become too heavy and too tall for Brian to carry him to the car, so he had to wake him up.

Gus said his goodbyes too, and they piled in the car, they had planned to stay at the loft for the weekend, but finally as Brian began to drive, he took the road to Britin. He had to talk to his son and he wanted to do that in a place where they were in peace, and the loft wasn't really the right place.

## **Chapter 14 Custody Affairs**

**~ March 2011 ~**

Brian walked out of the courtroom with his son's hand in his own. Gus looked at his father, "Thanks Dad, thanks for everything."

"I didn't do anything," replied Brian.

"You didn't put me in the middle like the moms did with JR when she was a baby."

Brian let out a long sigh. The last year had been hell on all his terms.

He finally had the official papers in his hand stating that he was the sole and only guardian of Gus.

Gus could come and live with him; Melanie had visiting rights, whenever she or Gus wanted. Lindsay on the other hand, had nothing. She'd started the whole court battle a few months after she came back.

She had tried to get Gus back since the beginning, but Gus was more than reluctant to go and see her.

After a few weeks, she'd hired a lawyer. She couldn't afford the one she had used back when she tried for custody of JR, but she got a good lawyer nevertheless.

\* \* \* \*

Brian and Justin wanted to put all the chances on Gus, and hired a lawyer not to represent them, but for Gus.

At the custody hearing, Lindsay, stunned by Brian's boldness, asked the judge to remove the lawyer. Brian asked the judge to consider the fact that he hadn't asked for custody, because he already had it, but that his son had asked to stay with him and not his mother.

The judge asked Gus where he wanted to live and without hesitation Gus answered, "With Dad and Papa."

The fight was long and hard. At first, Gus was placed with Lindsay,, but she screwed up, forgetting her son more than once.

The judge changed her decision the day Gus called her office, asking when his Mom would come and get him from his practice, because it was late, and she wasn't answering her phone.

The next day, the judge summoned all the adults to decide on Gus's living arrangements. He would live with Brian, Lindsay could see him every day but he had to return to his father at 7:00 PM sharp.

\* \* \* \*

Once the judge made her decision, Brian and Justin changed all their habits. Justin took the boy to school every morning. Brian picked him up in the afternoon, took him to Lindsay's, where they stayed almost two hours, and then they rode back to the mansion. Sometimes Justin was there working on a painting, for a new show or on some account, but mostly he came home late.

Friday dinners at Deb's were heavy with tension and blame. Visits at Lindsay's were strained due to Lindsay's attitude toward Brian and Justin's decision to live together, to commit to each other, and to Justin's wish to have a baby.

Justin knew the visit had gone bad, when Brian would have 'pain-management' sex with him - hard, fast, and impersonal. Afterwards, Brian went to the study, drank and looked at the painting over the fireplace, finally, falling asleep on the couch. The next morning, he would find himself covered with a blanket.

Their sex 'love-life' was almost nonexistent. They were too exhausted, too tense, or just not at the same place together.

With all the changes in their lives, Justin had jumped into Kinnetik, becoming more and more involved with the accounts other than just the artistic part.

If Brian came home early from work, Justin often stayed late, bringing work home.

\* \* \* \*

During the last year, Brian had promoted Ted and Cynthia. They were now Junior Ad Executives. Ted was still in charge of the books, but he had an accountant to help him. Alan had worked for

Kinnetik since the beginning. He never had the passion that moved Brian, but the work he did was always, clear, neat, and on time. When Ted was sick, last winter, and Brian needed some numbers, Alan jumped in and provided the requested files to Brian.

Once Ted came back, they decided to move Alan to the Accounting Department and promote Ted.

\* \* \* \*

Because most of their clients knew Justin from his artwork from previous campaigns,, Brian asked him to take over more and more of the accounts. Justin put in long hours on them to provide the same standards as Brian. Brian, on the other hand, never let his standards drop, even if he cut-down on his hours and time in the office.

\* \* \* \*

Lindsay tried to put Brian and Justin through hell, by digging up everything she could find to compromise Brian and Justin's custody case.

She almost won. One night Brian called from Babylon, telling Justin that he wasn't coming home. Justin stayed awake, until Ted called him and told him that Brian was at the loft, alone, drunk, and that he would stay with him. Brian awoke the next morning to the smell of coffee; he was hung-over, but fine. When he looked over at the kitchen and saw Ted, he huffed, and silently thanked god it was Ted and not a random trick.

Over the weeks, Lindsay proved that she wouldn't give up easily. One evening, Brian and Justin came home to find police officers waiting for them in front of the house. Both Brian and Justin had to wait outside while the police officers went through all their belongings, finding nothing. They had long ago stopped doing drugs.

They had begun to lessen their use after Brian's cancer, and once Justin was in New York, Brian only did the occasional joint. Since Gus was a constant in their lives, they cleaned both the loft and the house of all dangerous substances.

If they wanted to get high, they knew where to find good and 'recommended' stuff, and they always did it without Gus around.

Once the cops had gone, Brian stayed in the training room for over three hours and Justin locked himself in his studio, both of them trying to understand how Lindsay could have betrayed them that way.

From that moment, they avoided Lindsay. When they went to Debbie's, for the sake of the kids, they tried to be civil to her.

Once everyone testified at Gus's custody battle, Lindsay saw that she didn't have any friends left. Even if they backed up all her allegations, all of them, Michael included, stood on Brian and Justin's side.

She finally realized that she was alone against everyone else.

\* \* \* \*

After ten months of battling, it was finally determined that Gus would stay with Brian. Time seemed to stand still and fly at the same time for everyone, and Brian was glad it was finally over.

Despite everything that was happening around him, Gus tried to stay ahead of his class. He worked twice as hard as the others to get good grades and prove that he could be the best.

At almost 12 he had skipped two grades already.

As they walked out of the courthouse, Gus looked over at the end of the hall where he could see his mother and her lawyer.

"Dad?"

"Mmmmh."

"Can you wait a moment? I have..." and he gestured toward Lindsay.

"You sure?" asked Brian.

"Yeah."

Brian nodded and watched his son walk toward his mother. He took his cell and called speed dial 2.

"Hey."

"Hey, we just got out, we won," Brian stated calmly.

"Home, seven, I won't be late."

"All right."

The connection went dead. Justin was in Philadelphia landing the Alec Wade Oil account, their biggest account yet - worth 90 million dollars.. Brian had worked hard on the boards, and was supposed to attend the final meeting. When the time for the final hearing came, he couldn't move the meeting and sent Justin to sign the contract.

Brian knew he was in the meeting, but Justin was anxious to know and kept his cell on, just in case.

He couldn't think about anything now. He couldn't even be happy, because, it wasn't something he was proud of. He was just glad the whole mess was over, and that his son could resume a normal life.

He already knew that Lindsay planned to go back to France, or Milan, for a big show, he couldn't remember. Lindsay dropped the news last week during a tedious dinner at Deb's, while she was talking with Ben. Only because Brian had overheard their conversation and she was left with no choice but to confess her plans.

Now that everything was over, he was drained. He couldn't even think clearly. He looked up and saw his son shaking his head. He sighed feeling another drama was ahead. He put his hands in his pockets and walked over to Lindsay.

He stopped behind her just as she said, "Do you really think he will change? He will never change, once your father and Justin have had enough of you, you'll end up back with me."

"But..." whispered Gus.

Brian grabbed Lindsay's arm and twirled her around, "Haven't you done enough in the last few months? Didn't you already drag us through the mud?"

"I only said the truth." replied Lindsay coldly.

"An old truth. Linds, an old one... you never gave us a chance to explain, you just attacked."

"Yeah well, you won! What more do you want?"

Brian looked up at the mother of his child and shook his head, "I want to know where Wendy went; I want to know that you are still somewhere in that body."

Lindsay huffed, it was a sound midway between a sob and a laugh. "I left her somewhere along the road, she was stopping me in my career."

Brian nodded, he extended his hand toward Gus, "Come on, I think we're done here."

Gus nodded, grabbed Brian's hand, and looked over at his mother, "I'm sorry Mom, I wish it had turned out differently, I would have love..."

"Don't Gus, I don't want to hear it," Lindsay said in a pained voice.

"But..."

"It's all right Sonnyboy. Come on," whispered Brian. He looked up at Lindsay, "Will you come by before you leave?"

Lindsay shook her head. "You're still his mother."

"You heard the judge. You're his guardian now, you have the rights, the custody, everything." Lindsay sighed. "I never should have pushed you that way."

"No, you shouldn't have," answered Brian quietly. "Listen, I need to..." he gestured to the exit.

Lindsay nodded, "Bye Brian."

After a curt nod of his head, Brian followed his son who was waiting at the door. When he reached the door, he looked back at Lindsay. She'd wanted her son, now she was left with nothing. After the fiasco last week with, the judge, the same judge who had worked on Hunter's case all those years ago, concluded that even if Lindsay was Gus's mother, she had failed to do her job.

\* \* \* \*

Justin stepped into the luggage area and grabbed his suitcase with his left hand, since his right was wrapped in a splint.

He had the account and that was worth everything he had gone through on the trip. During the week he was in Philly, he had to create and design a new campaign for another part of the firm, during the process, he lost control of his right hand, but it was worth it. He brought back a 12 million dollar account for Kinnetik. And he'd signed that 'extra' without telling Brian or anyone else.

The flight home had been pure hell and he was relieved when he saw the chauffeur from Kinnetik waiting for him.

As he climbed into the car, he was glad the chauffeur knew where to go and the separation glass was already up.

He sat in the car, his head resting on the headrest and sighed deeply. The flight had left Philly after a thirty-minute delay. While waiting, Justin had grabbed something from the snack display in the waiting area, which triggered an allergic reaction. He quickly took his medicine with water.

Once on the plane, he saw the passenger next to him had plugged in his laptop and was looking at some hetero or lesbian porn, he couldn't tell and didn't want to investigate too closely.

While waiting for the plane to take off, he'd asked for a whisky.

Once the flight was in the air, it had only gotten worse, not enough food, too much alcohol, and some disturbances made him race to the toilet. Mid-flight, he'd asked the attendant if he could move to the empty seat nearest to the toilet.

Once seated, Justin even managed to have a panic attack, for which he took his pills.

Now sitting in the car, he was able to breathe more easily and was happy to be going home.

\* \* \* \*

Justin walked into the house, as Brian came from the study and moved to pull him into a tight embrace. Justin moved to avoid him.

"Hey," murmured Justin.

"Hey," replied Brian, "Did you get the account?"

"I better have," he reached into his backpack and showed Brian the second account, that's when Brian noticed the splint.

"Christ, what happened to you?"

"Nothing," answered Justin as he pulled his hand back before Brian could grab it. Justin heard Brian going through the papers he had just given to him and walked up the stairs. He stopped at Gus's bedroom and knocked on it. Gus opened the door and launched himself into Justin's arms, "You're home!"

Justin stiffened a bit, but then relaxed, thinking, "It's only Gus, don't worry." He looked at the young boy and noticed how tired and sad he looked, "You all right Gus?"

"Yeah, it's just, you know..."

Justin nodded. He could only imagine what Gus had gone through -almost a year-long fight between Lindsay and Brian, and now a decision telling him that he would live with his father and not his Mom. Gus had wanted to choose. He wanted to spend time with his Mom when he wanted to, not when it was dictated, and now, now, he couldn't choose anymore. Somehow, Justin knew that Brian would talk the judge into changing the decision on visits with Lindsay. If she hadn't played the guilt trip to get custody of Gus, she possibly would have won. She lost all possibility of that when the school-teachers and all the people that weren't close to Brian and Justin gave their testimony.

"Finally I'm glad to stay here; I really didn't want to move again. I'm happy to stay here. In fact I've never been better."

Justin smiled and went into the main bedroom, when he heard Brian coming upstairs.

Brian walked to his son, kissed him on the forehead, telling him not to stay up too late because he had class tomorrow. Gus nodded, and told him that Justin looked exhausted. Brian nodded, telling him he had seen that and that he would take care of it.

Gus smiled, knowing that he wouldn't see his father until tomorrow morning, or even tomorrow evening, depending on if he stayed in bed tomorrow or not. Gus was smart enough to know how Brian and Justin worked. For the moment it didn't matter, he knew that Mrs. Stevenson would take care of him and that if necessary she would drive him to school.

\* \* \* \*

Brian closed their bedroom door, and walked into the bathroom where he could hear the shower running. It wasn't Justin's habit to avoid him and take a shower alone, the last time he did ... Brian shook his head to clear his mind, "Don't think about it, Kinney, don't think about it."

He entered the bathroom and saw Justin in the shower with his back to the door, his right hand was under the flow of water, and he was massaging it. His hand was visibly cramped. Brian sighed, discarded his clothes, and joined his partner.

Justin tensed a little when he felt the rush of cold air, letting him know that Brian had stepped into the shower.

Brian stepped behind Justin and wrapped his arms around him, taking Justin's right hand in his and massaging it.

Justin still tense, sighed in relief, and whispered, "Thanks."

Brian kissed him on the nape of his neck and felt Justin tense even more. He inhaled deeply and murmured, "Care to tell me what happened?"

"I just pushed myself too hard. I had to do the whole second deal alone, and, well, I hurt my hand."

"I figured that much, I wasn't talking about your hand. I'm talking about how tense you are. How you tense every time I try to touch you, did something happen during the flight home?"



Justin shook his head, "Nothing."

"Try something else," whispered Brian, depositing a kiss on his neck and shutting off the water.

He stepped out the shower, grabbed a fluffy big towel, and wrapped it around Justin. On his way out, he grabbed a towel for himself and began to dry himself. He led Justin to the bed and sat with him. Once dry, Brian took his towel and dried Justin's hair.

Justin just tightened his own towel a little more around him, trying to release some of the tension in his body. As Brian felt Justin begin to relax he reached out to him, the young man stiffened again, and began to withdraw.

"Stop, please, don't..."

"Justin?"

"I can't..." and Justin walked from the bed into the walk-in closet. Brian lay back on the bed and ran a hand over his face. The last time Justin reacted this way was the night he brought him back from Jennifer, after he came back from the hospital.

Brian stood up and followed Justin into the walk-in closet, where he grabbed some pajama bottoms and put them on before stepping into Justin's personal space.

Brian knelt in front of Justin and put his hands on his knees, "Tell me what happened?" Justin shook his head, "If you don't tell me I can't help you."

"It's just, that, you know, just that, and, the flight, and well..."

Brian moved on the bench, wrapped his hands around Justin, and helped him breath, "Do you need your medicine?"

"No, I can't. I already took some."

Brian frowned, but continued to breathe with Justin. Once the young man settled into a normal breathing pattern, Brian tightened his hold, staying still. After a few minutes, Justin began to run his hand over Brian's which were crossed over Justin's tummy.

"The flight was delayed without any explanation. I was seated in First Class, but this time I had a real dork next to me."

Brian nodded, Justin continued, "That fucking twat was watching porn on his DVD player. Lesbian or hetero porn." Justin shuddered in disgust.

"While waiting in the boarding area, I had a snack that. I had an allergic reaction to and had to take some medicine. Then while waiting for the plane to take off, I had the great idea of having a whisky." Justin felt Brian tense, "I know it wasn't the best idea. Anyway, I was sick during the flight and finally moved to the last seat in First-Class which was nearer to the toilets."

Brian entwined his fingers with Justin's, still saying nothing.

"After a few trips to the toilet, I managed to have a panic attack and had to ask the flight attendant to give me the pills that were in the duffel bag."

"Which pills?" asked Brian.

"Both," answered Justin.

Brian sighed, and began to move, pushing Justin up with him. He grabbed Justin's hand and began to lead him toward the bed. He stopped when he sensed Justin stiffen. He turned around, "Don't worry your virtue is safe tonight, now come on Sunshine, you look like hell, and I need sleep too."

Justin nodded and followed Brian to the bed. Justin slid under the covers clothed in his pajama bottoms. Brian made his way around the bedroom, turning the lights off, and straightening the

discarded clothes. Once everything was done, he followed Justin into bed.

Once under the covers, he felt Justin move closer, but not close enough to touch. . Brian reached out, pulling the smaller body closer, and wrapped his arms around the slightly stiff body. He pushed on Justin's shoulder until he turned around. Then, Brian pressed his body against Justin's back.

"I'm glad you're home," he whispered as he kissed Justin on the nape of his neck.

Justin turned his head and reached out with his right hand to awkwardly caress Brian's cheek. Brian moved and placed his mouth over Justin's; the kiss was tender, slow and loving. Justin moaned into the kiss, but stiffened when Brian let his hand travel down his body, even if he was hard. He felt Brian's hardness on his lower back, but couldn't give into the desire he felt, he was too nervous for that.

Brian kissed him one last time and settled behind him, leading Justin to sleep.

\* \* \* \*

Around four in the morning, Brian awoke to Justin's cry. Justin awoke almost immediately bolting out of the bed, and ran to the door only to be stopped by Brian who put himself between the door and Justin's body. Both of them were breathing heavily.

Brian heard a light tap on the door he was leaning on, "Dad are you all right?"

Brian cleared his throat, "Yeah Sonnyboy, go back to sleep, I'll see you in the morning."

"Is Justin all right?"

Justin nodded, and Brian whispered, "He can't see you, Justin."

Justin cleared his throat, "I'm... I'm ... it will be all right, Gus, thanks for the concern."

"All right, then, goodnight."

"Night," answered Brian. He waited until he heard Gus's door close and turned his attention to the trembling body in his arms.

"Justin? Shh it's all right, come," he tugged Justin with him toward the bed.

He pulled the covers up from the bed and sat with Justin in the middle of it. He was sitting opposite Justin, holding his hands.

"Want to tell me?"

Justin shook his head, "It was just a stupid nightmare."

"Haven't had one of those in a long time."

"Wasn't the same as then."

Brian frowned, "It wasn't the same?"

"No," Justin tightened his hold on Brian's fingers.

"When did they start to come back?"

\* \* \* \*

Justin shook his head; he knew too well, the whole custody affair had triggered the nightmares. They began two weeks after Daphne and Matt moved to Chicago f to study, it was almost three months ago.

When Daphne moved to Chicago, Brian and Justin lost their fragile 'family' equilibrium. With Lindsay asking for custody, Daphne out of town, Tucker moving in with Jennifer, and Molly asking to go to St. James, Justin was past stressed. Their new living arrangements for Gus, the constant new requests from Kinnetik and his work for several galleries, meant Justin couldn't sleep.

He duped Brian well, taking half a sleeping pill every night, which allowed him to sleep at least five hours. In fact Brian did the same almost every night too.

Since Gus arrived in their lives, they cleaned the house of all suspect substances, including the non-prescribed sleeping pills, in case social services came by to see if Gus's living conditions were all right.

\* \* \* \*

"A few weeks, uh, make that months ago," Justin sighed, "They began a few weeks after Matt and Daphne moved to Chicago. I thought they would stop, but with everything going on, they got worse."

"I didn't notice anything," said Brian.

"Yeah well I used the same technique as you, I took half a pill," Justin laughed bitterly.

Brian smiled and nodded, "Yeah sleeping pills give you a least four hours peace. Christ we're a big mess both of us." He stopped and rubbed Justin's hands, "What happened tonight?"

Justin passed his hand over his eyes, "I couldn't take a pill with the anti-anxiety and the allergy medicine. I hate when everything goes down the crapper."

Brian moved and lay back on the bed, pulling Justin with him, "Well, don't worry, it will get better."

"Why are you so sure?"

"Matt and Daphne are coming home at the end of this month."

"How do you know that?"

"I called to tell them about the judge's decision. Matt told me that Daphne excelled in her classes, got her diploma with honors, and that she had a surprise for us."

"What kind,"

"He didn't say."

"She excelled huh?" asked Justin rubbing a circle on Brian's tummy.

"Yeah, she excelled," answered Brian putting his hands in Justin's hair.

"Mmmmh," whispered Justin, "This is nice."

Brian pulled Justin up his body and kissed him, he grazed his lips, his tongue drawing Justin's bottom one. They kissed slowly. After a few minutes, Brian turned Justin around and spooned him from behind, caressing his stomach, both drifting into much needed sleep.

\* \* \* \*

### ~ Beginning April 2011 ~

Daphne and Matt's return was delayed for a few days, something about checking out of the apartment offered by the university, Brian couldn't remember.

Since he called Matt to give them the news of Gus's custody, Justin was driving him nuts with questions he couldn't answer.

Matt said they had a surprise but it was a big mystery. Only a few more hours to wait and then they would know. Matt had called yesterday, on Brian's cell and told him that they were coming in around 3:00pm, so Brian thought that he could pick them up and spare them a taxi ride.

The flight was right on time. Brian spotted Matt and Daphne almost immediately. Matt was carrying almost all the luggage, but Daphne was tugging a big suitcase. Brian walked over to take the suitcase. She let go of it and launched herself into Brian's arms.

"I missed you," she said in his ear.

"You too," answered Brian, while reaching to Matt and shaking his hand. Matt who had put the luggage together was now wrapping himself over Daphne and hugging Brian too.

They parted, and Brian looked closer at Daphne. Something was off, or new, he couldn't define.

"You came to take us home?" asked Daphne.

"Yeah I thought I could spare you the trouble of a taxi ride."

"Thanks. That's nice of you," whispered Daphne. She laughed when she heard Brian mutter, "I don't do nice."

Daphne and Matt got into Brian's black SUV, and they drove to the loft. On the ride home, he called Justin, and told him they were due at the loft in less than forty-five minutes.

When they arrived home, Justin was already there, waiting for them. Gus was in his room with Mel and JR.

Brian and Matt carried the luggage to the first floor. Daphne climbed to the second and launched herself into Justin's arms, who fell back landing on the sofa, laughing.

"Hey Justin,"

"Oh my god, you're home, for good."

"Yeah, I'm home for good."

"Good, because I really, missed you," said Justin.

"Me too."

They were on the sofa, Daphne curled into Justin's embrace, when Brian and Matt came up.

"Daph?" asked Matt.

"Here," and she waved her arm.

Brian and Matt moved over to the sofa and looked at Justin and Daphne. Daphne smiled and sat up pulling Justin with her.

"I have great news."

Justin and Brian raised their eyebrows.

She took Brian's hand and put it over Justin's and then finally opened her coat, and put Justin's other hand over her belly.

Justin frowned.

"You remember the last sample you gave me?"

Justin nodded, and whispered, "The one we used for Tyler?"

"Yeah the one we used for Tyler."

"I remember."

"We didn't use it completely, you remember?"

Justin nodded.

"We took the rest with us, just in case ... you know, and well, I, huh, I, ..."

"You're going to be daddy Justin," finished Matt.

"W- what?"

"Matt's right, you're going to be a dad, Justin," said Daphne.

Justin pulled his hand away, as if Daphne's belly had just burned him and gripped Brian's hand harder; he began to hyperventilate.

"I thought, I thought, that, that we would talk about it before you did, you know," mumbled Justin.

"I thought that it was time, I'm all right, Justin, nothing will happen this time. The baby is due in July or August, no icy roads, nothing like that."

Brian looked over at Justin, and saw his features. He was on the verge of a panic attack, and he had to do something before Justin exploded.

"I, I don't know what to say, I ..."

"Aren't you tired from the traveling?" asked Brian.

Matt smiled at Brian's maneuver to stop the conversation, and move to something else.

"In fact I'm exhausted," answered Daphne.

"Good, because while you were jumping your friend, Brian and I put away all the clothes, we even put away the suitcases. The only thing we have to do now is rest."

Daphne nodded, and leaned over to Justin to peck him on his cheek, "Night."

"Night, Daphne."

As Daphne and Matt left for their floor, Justin moved into their bedroom. He sat on the bed, and after a few seconds, he lay down. Brian closed the loft door, and called Mel to ask her if she could keep Gus for the night, Mel told him it wasn't a problem, Gus was more than happy to stay with her.

He sat down near Justin and rubbed his hand over Justin's stomach.

"You all right?"

"I'm not sure," he stopped and closed his eyes, "Well I know that physically I'm alright, it's in my head, that I'm not sure."

Brian closed his eyes too, and continued to rub Justin's stomach, waiting for Justin to continue.

"I thought that, well that maybe I would have a say in the pregnancy. I felt left out, you know like ... I don't know, like I have no say in the decision."

"We never have," whispered Brian, "When Lindsay decided it was time, she called me and told me that I had to bring what they wanted."

"I'm sorry," whispered Justin.

"What for? I have a beautiful son, I love him, and maybe you are right when you say that he has the best part of me. I'm still not sure."

"Don't be silly, you're a wonderful Dad."

"And you will be too, I'm sure of that," replied Brian.

"Yeah, maybe, but I really wanted to be there. I thought that was our decision, not just hers. After, after ... Tyler, we would decide together," finished Justin in a voice just above a whisper.

Brian sighed; he could only imagine what Justin was feeling. When he looked over at his lover, he saw he was already asleep.

## **Chapter 15    Trying again**

Brian woke up to an empty bed. He stood up, did his usual routine, bathroom, shower, kitchen, and coffee. After his first cup, he went to wake his son, who he discovered was already up having breakfast with Daphne and Matt.

"Have you seen Justin this morning?" asked Brian while kissing his son's head.

A chorus of "No" gave him his answer. He took his cup of coffee and sat down at the kitchen bar to read over the newspaper.

Daphne suggested that maybe Justin was already at work. Brian shrugged and nodded his head. Half an hour later, after dropping his son at school, Brian walked into Kinnetik. He made his way to Justin's office, only to find it empty.

He reached into his pocket, grabbed his cell and dialed Justin's number. His call went straight to the voicemail, so he left a message.

\* \* \* \*

It wasn't until Mary knocked on his door to tell him that M. Clive Midland, from The Aventis American subdivision, was there to meet with Justin, that Brian realized Justin hadn't made it into the office yet.

Brian frowned, "Are the boards ready?"

Mary nodded.

"Ok, bring them to the meeting room, and ask Ted to come in."

Mary left, led the client to the boardroom, and went in search of Ted.

Two hours, a new contract and a headache later, Brian called Justin's cell again.

"The object of having a cell phone is to turn it on, where the fuck are you? You missed Midland's presentation. We got the account, by the way." He paused, "Please call me back."

\* \* \* \*

At 5:00 pm, after dropping Gus at Mel's for the evening, Brian hadn't heard any news. He called Carl around lunch and asked him if he could spread the word that Justin Taylor was missing. Maybe something happened, and the cell wasn't handy. Carl called every hour, no news.

\* \* \* \*

He had been missing since this morning. They tried to find him everywhere, called every single person who might have contact with him. Brian tried every phone number in New York, but with no luck.

Justin's voicemail box was full, so the extended family started searching.

Ted and Blake were searching the northern area, Emmett and Matt, the southern. Debbie and Jennifer went to the suburbs; Michael and Hunter were on the campus, and the hospital. Ben stayed at the loft as Brian headed to Britin to see if Justin might have gone there. After driving out and searching through every room only to find the house empty, he headed back to the loft.

Mel came to the loft and stayed with Daphne, Ben and the kids.

They were nearly desperate until Brian received a call from Cynthia telling him that the gardener from the cemetery had called to tell him there were fresh flowers on his son's grave today and that he hadn't put them there.

Brian frowned and looked out the windows. He spun around, grabbed his car keys and ran toward the door, screaming over his shoulder, "Watch the kids." And he was gone.

\* \* \* \*

After a twenty-minute ride, Brian finally entered the Homewood cemetery. He drove carefully to the end of the children's alley and found Justin sitting on their son's grave, head on his knees.

He parked the car along the road, took the coat and the blanket he had thrown on the backseat and headed to Justin, thinking he should have known where Justin had gone.

As he stepped closer to Justin, he saw that he was tracing the little letters engraved in the stone.

He sat down near Justin and wrapped the coat and the blanket around his shoulders.

"Hey," whispered Brian.

Justin sighed.

"She should have asked me."

"Yeah, she should have."

"I'm happy it worked this time," whispered Justin.

"I'm happy too," replied Brian. "You missed Midland's presentation."

"I went to the office before I came here, finished the boards and the papers for the meeting, I knew you could deal with it."

"I dealt all right," answered Brian back.

Justin smiled.

"I woke up, and I thought we betrayed him, and ... I had to come here and spend time with him." Justin looked over at Brian and saw his disheveled appearance, and whispered, "I shouldn't have left that way; I should have left a note."

"Yeah, a note would have been good," Brian smiled.

Justin chuckled, "I'm sorry. I didn't want to ..." he gestured with his hand.

"It's all right Sunshine, I was just kinda worried," murmured Brian as he kissed Justin's head, "Just a little."

Justin grabbed his cell, turned it on, and looked at all the missed calls. His eyes grew wide when he saw 29 missed calls. He looked at the time display, "Fuck!"

He looked over at Brian once more, and at his watch, "Why didn't you tell me it was that late?"

Brian looked amused at Justin as he continued, "I thought it was only lunch time. I never thought it was past dinner."

Brian stood up and extended his hand, "Com'on Sunshine, time to get home."

"I..."

"I know, no need to repeat yourself, just don't do it again."

Justin nodded. He stood up, slowly, rubbing his leg to work the kinks out of them. After a moment, Brian draped his arm around his shoulders and led him slowly to the car. Once seated, he took Justin's cell and dialed a number, handing the phone back to Justin, "You should tell your mom you're all right."

Justin took the phone and followed Brian's advice.

\* \* \* \*

Once back at the loft, Brian was grateful that only Daphne, Ben and Mel, were there. Ben told everyone to back off, and Brian could only say thank you.

As they came through the door, Justin went immediately to the bathroom. The day had been long, rather cold, and Brian was worried Justin had caught a cold. Daphne went after Justin but as she reached him, he closed the bathroom door.

"Justin!"

But the door stayed close. She came back to the kitchen, and looked at Brian who was making some tea for Justin and coffee for himself.

"Where did you find him?" asked Daphne.

Brian looked up, his gaze following Ben, who was gathering his things, "Ben, tell Deb we're coming to dinner tomorrow. All right?"

Ben nodded, and left, leaving Brian to deal with Daphne and Justin.

"Brian?"

Brian looked over and sighed, "I ... I found him..."

"I was at the Homewood cemetery at our son's grave," came Justin's reply from the top of the stairs.

"Justin, why?" asked Daphne.

"I woke up this morning thinking that we failed him. I had to go and see his grave, tell him that we didn't betray him. I ... I didn't mean to stay away that long."

"Oh Justin, we didn't, I never thought, I should have..." began Daphne before dissolving into silent tears.

Justin moved toward her and wrapped his arms around her, "I know we didn't fail him, but I felt bad and I needed to be close to him."

Daphne nodded, her head snuggled in Justin's neck. "I should have called you," she whispered, "and told you that I was going to try again."

"Yes, You should have," stated Justin as he let her go and walked to Brian in the kitchen. Brian didn't say a word, just handed Justin a cup of green-mint tea.

"Thanks."



Brian nodded.

Justin began to sip his tea while Daphne sat on the other side of the kitchen counter. Justin took in Daphne's features, and saw that she hadn't gained as much weight as she had with Tyler's pregnancy; she was still pretty slim, and the top she was wearing was large enough to hide her growing belly.

Justin cleared his throat, "How long?"

Daphne smiled, "I'm beginning the 5<sup>th</sup> month."

Justin nodded, and Daphne continued, "The results of the tests I took in Chicago are all good, there's nothing to worry about."

Brian moved from his spot near the coffee machine, and moved behind Justin, wrapping his arms around Justin's shoulders, pulling him toward his chest in a protective movement.

Daphne smiled at the gesture; she rubbed her hand over her belly, whispering, "Okay, I'll move." She stood up and walked to the windows, she turned around, explaining, "The baby, moves a lot in the evening."

Justin nodded and walked out of Brian's embrace. He went over to Daphne. Brian took his coffee and moved downstairs, leaving the two friends together.

"You angry?"

Justin shrugged, and shook his head, "No, not really."

"Disappointed?"

"I thought, I really hoped you would have called me. We talked about the fact that you wanted to try again, but I thought Brian and I were part of the decision."

"I know," she whispered, "I wasn't trying to exclude you, it just, it felt right, just right." She walked to the couch and sat down, putting her feet on the coffee table.

"Hey, would you take your feet off my table," Brian said from the kitchen.

"Hey, you're here."

"Yeah, I needed something from my briefcase," answered Brian.

"You can stay here, you know. I won't bite," said Daphne looking over at Brian.

"Justin?"

"You can stay."

Brian nodded and took a seat on the other side of the sofa, looking at Daphne and then at Justin.

"I have an appointment next week for an ultrasound; do you want to come with me?" asked Daphne, looking from Justin to Brian.

"Won't Matt be disappointed?" asked Brian.

"It's our baby, yours, Justin's, and mine. Matt knows the deal; he agreed the first day I talked about our promise. He said that our time would come later. If not, we hope to have a little place in this little baby's life."

"Of course you will, you're his mother," said Justin.

"Yeah, but you will raise him."

"And you and Matt will be a part in his or her life," stated Brian.

Brian looked at Daphne who just nodded. He saw her rubbing her belly, "Moving again?"

"Yeah, want to feel it?" she asked looking from Brian to Justin.

Justin nodded, "You sure?"

"Yeah, come here."

Justin moved and knelt near Daphne; he reached out and stopped his movement. Daphne grabbed his hand, and pulled it to her belly. She gestured to Brian, who moved and sat near her. She grabbed his hand too and laid it over Justin's.

Justin looked up at Brian and just at that moment, the baby moved and both men felt it. Instinctively they locked their fingers. Daphne patted both hands, "Thanks," she whispered.

When she looked at Brian, he had a look of pure joy and peace on his face, like the first time they felt Tyler move so long ago. But this time, Daphne took a deep breath and asked the question she hadn't asked then, "You didn't do this when Lindsay was pregnant?"

"Daph..." whispered Justin.

"Brian?" asked Daphne, still keeping her hand over both men hands. Brian shook his head, he cleared his throat, "No, I never got this chance, I didn't ... you know, I wasn't meant to be involved."

"Yeah I know, Justin told me."

"Hey, he seems to be quiet," whispered Justin.

"Yep, down for the night," laughed Daphne. "You will come with me? To the ultrasound? Maybe then we'll see what sex the baby is."

"I don't want to know," whispered Justin. "I just want to know the baby will be all right, safe and everything."

"Daphne nodded, okay, surprise for the big day?"

"Yeah."

"You too Brian?"

Brian only nodded. Still shocked from the emotions he felt when the baby had moved under his fingers, fingers that were linked with the most important person in his life.

Justin had moved from the floor to the sofa. As he sat down, Daphne stood up, "I think Matt's waiting for me, and I'm kinda tired."

"Sorry I freaked you out," whispered Justin.

"You didn't."

"Yeah you are so right," whispered Brian.

Daphne left the room, laughing.

Justin moved from his sitting position to a lying position, his head on Brian's lap.

"Did you feel the baby?"

"Yeah. I remember the first time I felt Tyler move, it was just ... you know, just..."

"Overwhelming?"

Brian nodded, "Like now, I thought that maybe I wouldn't be so well, you know ..."

"Yeah," whispered Justin back. "I reacted like an asshole. I should have known she would try again when she was ready. I just thought we would somehow decide together."

"Maybe it's better, because if she had talked to you, you would have found every excuse to delay the pregnancy. You would have reacted like you did today, but worse. You would have been in real drama queen mode. Now, the only thing you have to do is support her and be there for the baby."

Justin nodded, and Brian continued, "Do you want to know if it's a girl or a boy?"

"You?"

"I asked first."

"I want a baby in good health, coming when it's due, without complications for the baby or Daphne. I don't want to go through hell again. I want some peace and happiness for our family." Justin sighed, "I know it's full of sappiness, but I really want us to have a break after the year we've had."

Brian nodded, "You're right - you're really full of shit,"

Justin smacked him in the stomach, "Ow!!!"

Justin snickered, "You earned that one."

Brian leaned down, and kissed him slowly, "Maybe."

Justin smiled, and said, "You're right. It was time to try again."

## **Chapter 16    Queer, Mother and Father.**

### **July 2011**

It was the middle of the night; Daphne was sitting in the living room where a light breeze was blowing through the opened windows. She was sitting on the sofa, sipping some ice tea, and looking at some scrapbooks. She was having trouble sleeping tonight.

Looking through the pages, she came across a picture taken when she was pregnant with Tyler, and remembered how, with that pregnancy, she had been scared something would happen to her or the baby. During that month, she'd made it a point to only leave her apartment when necessary. If she left, which was rare, she tried to get a ride from Brian. She smiled remembering how Brian adapted his planning to hers, as he did for Gus.

She shook her head. At that time, she'd put a lot of pressure on Brian and Justin and was glad they accepted it without too much explanation.

Since last month, she'd rarely left the loft. She only left to walk down the street to the grocery store, always under Justin, Corrine or Emmett's care, never alone. Matt's schedule was hectic - working from lunch until midnight.

The baby was due in the next few days. She rubbed her stomach, to calm the baby who was currently kicking.

Daphne turned the page and came across another family picture taken after a particularly difficult day.

\* \* \* \*

Last month on a Saturday night - she found Gus wandering the loft, while Brian and Justin were

having some time to themselves at Babylon.

Gus was standing at the windows, banking the mezzanine, looking down the street; it was so Brian like that it was disturbing.

She walked up and stood near him. They didn't talk for a while. When Daphne shivered a little from the breeze, Gus retrieved the blanket from the sofa and wrapped it around Daphne's shoulder.

"Thanks."

"You're welcome," whispered Gus.

"Do you want to tell me what's going on in your little head?" Daphne asked, rubbing her hand over Gus's back.

Gus shook his head and continued to look out the window.

Daphne ruffled Gus's hair and walked to the sofa, where she sat down. She sighed, grabbed a book, and looked at Gus's features. She sighed again, closed her eyes, and began to speak. "After Justin left for New York, the first time, I went to see him. When I saw how badly he was holding it together, I came to see your Dad." Gus's posture changed; Daphne knew he was listening to her, so she continued. "I came one evening, with take out food, and as your Dad went to take a shower, I fell asleep on his bed." She laughed at the memory. "He slept on the sofa, and let me sleep in. From that day on, I spent all my spare time with him."

"Hey I remember that," whispered Gus. "I saw you when he called the moms through the web cam."

"Yeah, I was there. My building had been sold to a holding company, which decided to tear it down. And your Dad was offered the opportunity to buy this floor, and Mrs. Stevenson, the previous owner, moved to Britin."

"Nonna, lived here?" Since Gus had been living with Brian, he'd dropped the Mrs. Stevenson for a better name, Nonna.

"Yep, she lived here, and after her children moved away, she decided to move on with her life. But your Dad, knowing her, asked her if she was interested in moving to Britin and taking care of the place. After she said yes, I moved in here."

"I love Nonna."

"I know. That's why I'm telling you this." Daphne stopped and looked at Gus, "Don't you want to sit with me?"

Gus moved from the window and sat near Daphne.

"Comfy?" asked Daphne. Gus nodded and she continued her story. "When I was at school with Justin, we made ourselves a promise that no matter what happened, if he wanted a child I would be the mother." Gus nodded. "Justin never thought he would still be with your dad, or your dad would have you back in his life. So when I thought it was maybe time to speak about it, I first asked your father about the idea."

"What did he say?"

"He told me that it was my and Justin's decision; that he had no say in it, and that if the decision would make Justin happy, then he was happy."

"That sounds like him," chuckled Gus.

"Yeah." Daphne stopped and looked at Gus closely, "He won't love you any less, you know. The baby Justin and I will have won't change the fact that we love you."

Gus nodded, and his eyes filled with tears.

"But it will be his and Dad's baby."

"Like you're his and your Dad's son," answered Daphne.

"It's not the same," whispered Gus. "I wouldn't be living here if Mom hadn't broken every single promise she made to me. I would be with her, and Dad wouldn't have to choose."

"I never had to choose, Gus," Brian's voice came from behind them.

Gus sighed, and turned around quickly, but not before Brian saw the terror in his son's eyes. Brian frowned, walked to his son, but Gus made a move to stand up. Brian cut his movement. "No running Gus." Gus sat back as Brian knelt in front of the sofa. "I thought we had an agreement, Gus...no hiding, no holding back."

Gus looked everywhere except at his father. Brian reached out and touched his son's knee. "Gus?"

"I know," whispered the young boy.

Daphne noted that Brian had already taken a shower and changed his clothes. They must have come home a while ago, as she looked over the back of the sofa, she saw Justin walking up the stairs. Yep, they had taken a shower.

"Did you have fun?" asked Daphne.

"All the fun we could have at Babylon," replied Justin. "Everything's all right, isn't it?"

Daphne grimaced and looked over at Gus, while Gus nodded.

"Tell me champ, you made me a promise long ago, do you remember?" asked Brian.

Gus nodded, still avoiding looking at anyone. Daphne decided to help him, and reached for his hand; Gus grabbed it as if it was a lifeline. "Gus?"

They saw Gus struggle to keep his tears at bay and failing miserably. When the first one ran down his cheek, Brian became concerned and sat near his son, who launched into his arms.

"Hey, Sonny boy, don't you want to tell me what's happening?"

"Where will I live?" whispered Gus.

Brian frowned. "What?"

"Where will I live once the baby's here?" asked Gus again through his soundless sobs. Brian looked helplessly at Justin too shocked to answer. Daphne's hand flew to her mouth, stifling a gasp.

Justin moved and sat near Brian; he reached out and caressed Gus's hair. "You will live here, Gus, with us."

Gus whimpered, "But you won't have time. You won't love me anymore."

Justin frowned, searching his mind; when was the last time Gus had seen Lindsay? Scratching his ear, Justin asked, "When did you and Mommy talk about that?"

Brian looked surprised by Justin's question, but even more so when Gus answered. "Yesterday, Mama couldn't come pick-me-up; she left a note on Daphne's fridge. Then Wednesday, Mom stopped by to bring me some stuff." Justin looked over at Daphne, who nodded. "She must have seen the note on the fridge and the note Daphne left for Matt about her ob-gyn appointment, because well, when I came out, she was waiting for me."

"You saw your mother yesterday?" asked Brian.

"Yeah"

"Why didn't you tell us before we left?"

"You planned that evening for the last two weeks; I didn't want to spoil it." Gus rubbed his tears away. Justin grabbed his hands, and made him look his way.

"What did she say, Gus?"

Gus tried to avoid answering, but Justin just kept looking at him, and finally he answered the question.

"She told me it had already begun, less time for me, because Daphne was pregnant. She also said that once the baby was born, you wouldn't have much time for me anymore. She said she was patient, she would wait until you forget me at school, then I would be back in her custody."

Gus shook his head, "I don't want to go back with her. I want to stay here, but I understand with the new baby, you won't have enough time for me. So ..." he shrugged.

Justin closed his eyes, damn Lindsay, and her mouth. Brian pinched the bridge of his nose, while Daphne sighed.

"Who brought you back from school then?"

"Matt and Daphne."

"Were you late," Brian asked Daphne who shook her head.

"I left earlier," whispered Gus.

"Why?"

Gus blushed, "Well, so I could see the training, you know, the play, well the ... girls in the play, well you know."

All three adults smiled at Gus's explanation. They knew all right. They didn't know in whom Gus was interested, but they all knew how they'd skipped classes or how they'd left the study hour earlier to catch the training from the jocks and cheerleaders.

Brian nodded, and Gus continued less uneasy, "She followed me onto the field and asked me if I was lonely at the moment. I told her no, and she said, it would come, and then she said the rest." He sighed. "When the bell went off, I jogged to the exit and Matt was there with Daphne."

Daphne frowned and finally spoke to Gus, "Hey Buddy, what do you think about us picking you up next week at two, so you can come with me to the ob-gyn?"

"Will I see the baby?"

"Yep."

"Listen to his heart?"

"Yep. I will ask Julie if you can help her out to hear his heart and maybe help out with the exam."

"The whole exam?"

"Maybe not everything but a good part of it, what do you say?" Daphne chuckled.

"Yeah!!"

Daphne smiled. Brian, who had stayed quiet until now, looked at his son. "Gus, you won't go back to your mom unless you really want to."

Gus nodded, and Brian continued, "I don't want you to feel pushed away. If you feel that way, come and talk to us. All right?"

Even though Gus nodded, Justin could feel that the young boy didn't entirely trust Brian's words. He reached over and took Gus's hand in his own.

"Gus?" Gus looked over; his eyes were still shiny with tears. "Do you think I will love you less when the baby is here?"

Gus shook his head, but Justin could see that his eyes were telling another story.

"Gus, tell me," whispered Justin.

"I can't," came the muffled answer. Justin looked over at Brian and Daphne, losing, for the first time, his ability to alleviate the young boy's fears.

Daphne stood up and sat on the coffee table in front of Brian, Justin, and Gus.

"I'm sorry, guys, I should have called you, when Matt and I chose to go on with the pregnancy. I never should have done it without talking to you."

Justin frowned and answered before Brian could intervene. "Daph, you explained to us that you had to heal not only your body, but also your mind. I wish we could have talked about it, but you didn't. You knew that I would support your decision." He stopped and looked over at Gus. "And you buddy, I won't you love any less than I do now."

Gus looked at him, stood up, and cried while running down the stairs. "But I will never be your son!"

"Gus!" called all three adults after him.

"I'm going to do more than kill her, when I get my hands on her," said Brian standing in front of the windows.

"Brian," whispered Daphne, reaching for his arms and turning him so he was now looking over at Justin's form.

Justin was standing on the guardrail from the mezzanine, livid and shaking.

"Shit!"

Brian moved to Justin, only to be pushed away. "Justin?"

"Don't, don't, I don't want your pity."

"Justin, I don't ..."

"I don't want to hear it." Justin sighed deeply. "I'm going up and ... try to cool down a bit."

Brian nodded as Justin had already made his way upstairs. He turned around and looked helplessly at Daphne.

"I'm..."

"I know, no need to say anything Brian." She patted Brian on the arm and walked down the stairs. "I should have called and told you everything. It wasn't a good idea!"

"Daph," Brian called from the mezzanine. "You didn't do anything wrong."

She nodded and went to her bedroom.

She remembered how Brian had looked and what he had told her the next morning.

Brian stood a few seconds at the top of the stairs and walked to his son's room. He knocked and Gus called out a faint, "Com'in."

Brian walked into his son's room. Gus was sitting in one of the corners holding his old teddy bear against his chest. Brian smiled; it had been awhile since he saw Gus with a teddy bear in his arms.

Brian closed the door behind him and moved to sit on the windowsill. He didn't look at his son.

"I'm sorry Dad."

Brian inhaled. "I know, but it's not me you have to tell." He looked over and saw Gus nodding. Brian pinched the bridge of his nose, trying to push his headache away.

"I shouldn't have said what I did to Justin," whispered Gus.

"No you shouldn't." Brian moved and turned to his son. "Did your Mom tell you how Justin came into my life?"

"She said he named me, but never told me how he came to be at the hospital," whispered Gus.

Brian nodded. "I was at Babylon to dance, and well..."

"Do grown-up stuff?" finished Gus.

Brian nodded. "I came out of the club and saw him standing under the lamppost on the other side of the street. I walked to him, and well, I took him home with me.

"Your mama called my cell, and I took him with me to the hospital."

"Why did you bring him with you? Mama always said you were fucking everything that moved."

Brian winced at his son's bluntness. "Gus!"

"Sorry, I shouldn't talk about things I don't know."

"Yeah well, your mother wasn't wrong. Why him, huh?"

Gus nodded. Brian rubbed his neck. "Usually, when I went with someone, I looked them in the eyes, and often, they lowered their gaze, but Justin wasn't like that. He held my gaze, and well, ..."

"He made your heart flutter?"

"Yeah something like that," stated Brian with a small laugh.

"That's what Mom said. She always said that when I found the right one for me, I will feel it in my heart, because it will flutter."

"Yeah, your Mom was always a romantic," stated Brian. He inhaled and continued, "Gus do you know where you would live if something happened to me?"

"What could happen, Dad?"

"I don't know, sometimes life isn't fair. Do you remember when Daphne was pregnant with Tyler?"

"And the drunk driver hit Matt's car?"

"Yeah," whispered Brian.

"I remember everyone was sad; I remember how you and Daddy were sad; how Daphne and Matt were sad. I was sad too."

"I know. Well, if something like that happened to me, do you know where you would live? Who would have custody?"

Gus shook his head. "No, I don't know. I think that I would go back with Mom?"



Brian shook his head too. "No, Gus, I talked with Momma, and made sure that if anything happened, you would stay with Justin. Because he's been there since day one, he never turned his back to you, he ... hell, he even made sure you were his top priority. Gus, sometimes he's more of a father than I can be," said Brian while rubbing his hand over his face.

"I know," whispered Gus.

"Then you know what you have to do."

Gus nodded. He stood up and walked out to go upstairs. Brian took a much-needed deep breath, and finally stood up, following his son upstairs. He was at the bottom of the stairs, when he heard someone running down the stairs, he looked up and saw Gus.

"Hey."

"I couldn't tell him, Dad, I couldn't," whispered Gus.

"Why?" asked Brian.

"He, I, I can't find him."

Brian frowned and took the stairs two at a time. Once in his loft, Brian looked everywhere and came to the same conclusion, Justin was gone. He grabbed his cell and dialed Justin's number. Predictably, it went straight to voicemail, and he left a message.

He looked over the loft one more time and saw the note propped against the cushion on their bed. He walked over and picked up the note, realizing for the first time, that his hands were shaking.

*Brian,*

*I went out for a walk. I need to clear my head. Don't worry about me.*

*Love – Sunshine.*

Brian sighed and looked over at his son. "Don't worry, he just needed a breather. Now, go back to bed; it's late."

Gus nodded, walked over to his father, and kissed him goodnight. On his way out of the bedroom, he whispered, "I'm sorry."

Brian nodded, and kissed his son back.

Gus headed downstairs to his bedroom, while Brian followed him and headed into the living room.

\* \* \* \*

Matt came home around three in the morning. He slipped in the bed, trying not to wake Daphne, but since her 6<sup>th</sup> month, she was a light sleeper. She turned around and looked at Matt. He told her that Brian was on their sofa, his son sleeping in his lap. Daphne nodded sadly and told him what had happened the night before.

\* \* \* \*

Daphne closed her eyes a moment, remembering how hard this evening had been. She stood up and walked into the kitchen to make herself some tea. As the water boiled, she remembered the next morning after Justin left the loft.

\* \* \* \*

She woke up around six, and walked slowly into the living room. She saw Brian lying behind his son on the sofa. She took the throw off the back of the sofa and covered them both with it.

She looked at the sofa, while the water was boiling. She noticed Gus was the first to stir, and took a good five minutes to untangle himself from his father's hold without waking Brian.

While Daphne was waiting for them to wake up, she had called Emmett, and asked him if he wanted to go with her to the grocery store. Emmett had agreed without a fuss, and around nine, he came by with Drew.

While Emmett was helping Daphne with the grocery list, Gus pulled Drew aside and asked to be driven to Britin.

When they left the loft, Brian was still on the couch, sleeping or feigning sleep. Daphne had left a note, telling him that she went for the groceries with Emmett, and Gus was with Drew.

\* \* \* \*

As soon as Gus and Drew arrived at Britin, Drew went to the kitchen, and Gus walked up to Justin's studio.

He knocked on the door, waited for Justin to open it, and saw the stunned look on Justin's face when he saw Gus standing there.

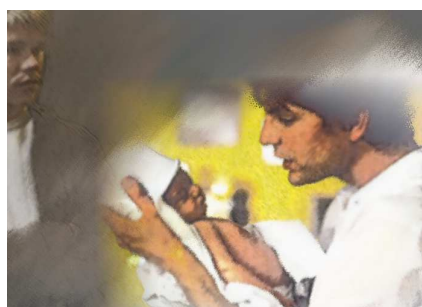
"Your Dad with you?" whispered Justin.

Gus shook his head. "When I left the loft, he was asleep on the sofa. Emmett went shopping with Daphne, and Drew drove me here."

Justin nodded, opened the door, and let Gus enter his studio.

As Gus stepped into the studio, the first thing he saw was the canvas in the middle of the room. It was a reproduction of his first moment with Brian, which Michael had captured in a picture he'd taken that night.

In the background of the painting, stood a subdued Justin, looking over both of them, and Gus couldn't mistake the sad look on Justin's face now and in the picture.



Gus heard Justin close the door, turned around and looked into Justin's pained eyes. "I never should have said what I did." Justin nodded. "I ... I ... I'm sorry, Daddy."

Justin looked up, opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He reached out and grabbed Gus by the shoulders, pulling the boy against his chest and wrapping his arms around the small frame.

Gus continued to repeat, "I'm sorry Daddy; I never should have said that."

Once Justin got control of his emotions, he whispered, "Shh it's all right. Don't worry about it anymore. By coming here, you just proved to me that you didn't mean it."

"I... I... "

"Shh"

They stayed in each other's embrace for a long moment, until Gus stopped sobbing. Once Justin was sure Gus had calmed down, he maneuvered them downstairs into the kitchen, where Drew and Mrs. Stevenson were drinking coffee.

\* \* \* \*

Daphne closed her eyes and smiled, Gus had told her everything once he got back. She shifted on the sofa; the first contraction had just begun. She knew she had at least a few more hours before she had to wake Matt.

She inhaled deeply and rubbed her hand over her belly just like Brian did most the time.

\* \* \* \*

When she got home with her groceries, Brian was awake with a coffee cup in his hand. He was still sitting on the sofa.

"Hey,"

"Hey," answered Daphne. "Do you feel any better?"

"No," Brian answered with a small smile. "But I will."

Daphne nodded. She took a cup of tea and sat near Brian on the sofa. They didn't say anything, and just waited for Justin to come back. As they sat there, Brian moved his hand to Daphne's belly. He stopped his movement a few inches before he made contact, but like always, Daphne grabbed his hand and put it on her belly.

She remembered the first time she'd put his hand on her belly, and Brian told her that Lindsay never let him touch her belly; he somehow missed it.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come to Lamaze for the last 3 times," whispered Brian.

"Don't worry, you will come with me the next three times." Daphne smiled. Brian nodded.

Daphne shifted on the sofa and leaned against Brian a little more. She began to laugh. Brian looked over at her and lifted his eyebrow.

"I was just thinking about one of the first times Justin officially introduced us."

"Oh."

"Yep, you were in your birthday suit. Do you remember?"

"Justin was giving you the tour?"

"Yeah, and what a tour." She laughed silently, and finally said, "I want you to be there for the baby."

"I will."

"No, not like that. I want you and Justin to be there for the birth."

"I... I'm not sure. Matt should be there."

"I'm sure. Matt lives with me, but it's yours and Justin's baby. Matt will be there of course, but I really want you there as well."

Brian nodded and sighed.

"I'm sure they're all right," whispered Daphne.

"I know."

Daphne shook her head. Brian was putting up a brave front, but she knew at his touch on her belly, that he was hurt. His hand was drawing circles, slow and soft circles, more to sooth than to feel.

They stayed that way until Daphne noted that Brian had stopped moving. As she looked over her shoulder, she saw that Brian was asleep again. She moved slowly and freed herself from his hold. It was near lunchtime. Just before one, the loft door open; Justin and Gus were back.

Brian awoke and looked over at the newcomers; the worried look on his face disappeared as soon as he saw Justin and Gus step into the loft.

Justin walked to him, and Brian grabbed his hand. "You all right?" he whispered into Justin's hair.

Justin nodded. "Yeah, I'm all right. Gus and I talked about what happened, and well, the rest is between me and our son."

"Our son?" asked Brian.

"Yeah our son."

Brian reached out, grabbed Justin behind his head, and brought their lips together. The kiss was sweet, tender, deep, and full of love.

Gus looked over at the couch and smiled. Daphne passed by and ruffled his hair.

\* \* \* \*

Since that day, Gus became the most attentive brother she ever saw. Talking to the baby, when they were in the mezzanine, reading to him, talking about the baby like it was already a person and there with them.

Gus enjoyed the responsibility Daphne had given him. He told her once how he lost that little part, when Lindsay forced him to go to France. He couldn't be a good brother to JR.

It had gotten better with time, but because Gus was spending most of his time with Brian and Justin, he didn't know his sister that well. Melanie tried to make up for the lost time, but JR was a difficult little girl, and Gus left at the wrong time.

\* \* \* \*

Daphne shifted again on the sofa. She looked at the clock, noticing it was almost six in the morning, and the contractions were over two hour apart. She smiled because this was the big day. She stood up, walked to the kitchen, put her teacup away, and cleaned the kitchen. She prepared the coffee and waited for Matt to wake up.

Around seven, Matt stepped out of the bedroom and walked into the kitchen. Looking over at the living room, he saw Daphne curled up on the couch and walked over.

"Hey."

"Hey."

"Are you all right?"

"Think we have a little over an hour before we have to go to the hospital," whispered Daphne.

Matt looked at her, stunned. "Since when did you ..." he gestured toward her.

"Around one this morning," smiled Daphne.

"Why didn't you wake me?"

"No need, I had everything under control. They are still spaced far enough apart; you have time to have breakfast and to drive us carefully to the hospital, and once on the road, I will call Justin and Brian. I don't want them to panic."

"You have everything planned."

Daphne grinned and took a deep breath.

"Contraction?"

Daphne nodded, still doing the breathing exercises from Lamaze. "It's better now."

"You want to go now?"

"We could go, if you're ready, just let me call Julie and then we can leave."

Matt nodded and went to the bedroom to bring back Daphne's bag. When he came back to the living room, Daphne was already at the door.

They took the lift and as they walked to the car, Daphne took out her cell and dialed Brian's number, thinking it would be safer than calling Justin, who would just queen out.

\* \* \* \*

Brian and Justin were on their way to the office. Brian felt his cell phone vibrate in his pocket, he took it and looked at the caller ID as he changed lanes.

"Hey, how's my woman?"

"Fine and you?"

"Never been better," he answered smiling and looking over at Justin, remembering their morning wake up. He felt the surge of desire coursing through his body. Justin grabbed his hand and squeezed it.

"Do you think you could change your plans this morning?" asked Daphne.

"I don't have anything urgent, let me check with Justin." He turned his cell away from his ear and asked Justin, "Daphne asked if we could change our plans this morning, do you have anything major?"

"Nope, just a few boards to review for next week's meetings," answered Justin.

Brian took his cell back. "We'll be there in 10."

"Brian, don't panic, but instead of coming to the loft, do you think you could go to Allegheny? I'm already on my way."

"YOU What?" Brian cried into the phone as he parked the car in a nearby available parking place. Justin looked over at Brian, trying to catch his attention.

"Brian, listen to me. Are you listening?"

Brian breathed deeply. "Yeah, I'm listening."

"Don't queen out. You'll take your car, and instead of going to the loft, come to the hospital."

"Okay."

"Later."

"Later." Brian closed his phone, and Justin grabbed his arm. "Do you think I will get an answer, now that you've hung up?" he asked.

"I ... you ... we are expected, so, we shouldn't keep the lady waiting," said Brian.

Justin frowned as Brian maneuvered the car back into traffic. Justin began to be less and less at ease when he saw the sign for the hospital.

"Brian?"

But like always, when Brian had to deal with something important, Justin didn't get an answer.

As Brian parked the car, Justin looked over at him with a prominent frown on his face. Brian got out, went to the passenger side, opened the door, and unbuckled Justin's seat belt.

"Brian?"

"Daphne called, she's here. You're going to be a dad."

"Wha ... what?"

"The call before, it was Daphne. She was already on her way here."

"It can't. I'm not, I'm not ready," Justin began to ramble.

"Oh yes you can. You were ready a long time ago."

"I can't ... Brian, I can't ... it's..."

Brian took hold of Justin's hand. "Justin, listen to me. Are you listening?"

"I'm listening."

"Remember what I told you a long time ago?"

Justin shook his head, and Brian smiled. "I told you that when I say I love you, it's because it means something to me and to you. It's because it's important for you to hear it, and for me to say it. I love your kindness and your strength; what you are and what you do. Do you remember?"

"Yeah."

"You were ready then, and you are ready now. You're a great dad for Gus, and you will a great dad to your child."

"I'm scared."

"You don't have to be. I was too."

"You were high," answered Justin with a smile.

"Why do you think I was high? I was scared shitless to see my son," replied Brian with a grin.

"Why?"

"I thought that Gus would cry if I held him, or that he would know I wasn't good for him. But he didn't cry; he sighed and settled down, and I loved him right away."

"I remember the look on your face," whispered Justin.

"You painted it often enough."

"You knew you loved Gus, but you needed to see it."

"I saw it all right. Now, are you ready?"

"No, but I guess I don't have a choice."

Brian shook his head and grabbed Justin by the hand. They made their way into the hospital and went to the obstetrics floor. As they walked to the nurse's station, Matt walked toward them.

"I'm glad you're here," he said as they shook hands.

"Is she driving you nuts?"

"No, she just keeps asking me every 30 seconds if you were here, that's all."

"Well we're here now..." stated Brian.

"Well then, com'on guys."

Matt led them through some doors and into a locker room. He took some surgical gowns and handed them to both men. "Here, she wants you there."

Brian and Justin nodded, taking the items from Matt's hands.

They hung their suit jackets in the locker and put the gowns on over their shirts. They followed Matt into the room just as Julie put the sheet back over Daphne's legs.

"Hey, you made it," smiled Daphne.

"Yeah, we had a little stop over in the garage, drama queen there." Brian gestured toward Justin. "He almost had a nervous breakdown."

"Not true," cried Justin.

"True enough."

"Pfff," replied Justin.

Matt laughed at their conversation, just like Daphne, until her face scrunched up in a painful grimace. Justin instinctively placed himself at her side, and began to breathe with her.

"Thanks," whispered Daphne to him.

"You're welcome."

Julie looked at the monitor and told them, "Well looks like we are going to move you into the delivery room. Who's going with you?"

Daphne looked up. "All my men are going with me."

"You sure?" asked Julie.

"Yeah, Justin and Brian are the baby's fathers, and Matt needs to take some pictures," smiled Daphne. "Pictures are important."

Julie smiled and nodded. She'd learned early on how Daphne's little family worked and who was who in her life. She knew that Justin was the father of her baby, Brian was Justin's partner, and Matt was her significant other.

As far as Julie could tell, Daphne was due in the next hour or so, and she'd already given her the epidural. As she wheeled her patient into the delivery room, she thought Daphne was lucky to have so many people care about her and her child.

Daphne had linked her fingers with Justin's and he was her focal point. They'd learned that at Lamaze. Brian followed gingerly, thinking how much he would have loved to have been there for Gus's birth, but then he wouldn't have Justin in his life. He smiled because it was the best thing that happened in his life, and he didn't have any regrets about that time.

Once Daphne settled in the delivery room, everything sped up. Julie positioned herself at the end

of the bed, placed Daphne's feet into the stirrups, and checked her dilation. Her water hadn't broken yet, but it shouldn't take long, now.

Julie left, leaving them alone for a moment.

"I'm glad you're ... urgh..." she gripped Justin's hand.

"Daph?" asked Justin with concern, looking at their hands, wishing Daphne would squeeze his right hand a little less.

"That, was a bitch of a contraction. Where was I? Yeah, I'm glad you're both here." She breathed in deeply, and gripped Justin's hand again, while practicing the breathing exercises.

"Huh, I thought Julie gave me the epidural."

"She did," replied Matt, looking at the chart. Then he looked at her and said, "I think I'll call her; your water broke."

"Okay."

As Matt went in search of Julie, Daphne reached out and grabbed Brian's hand. He was standing at the head of her bed.

"You won't leave me? Huh?"

"No, I promised you. I will be here."

"Good, good, aaahh..." Justin grabbed her hand again, and Daphne took it like it was her safe place.

"Don't push Daphne. I need to check on you," said Julie after stepping into the room.

" 'kay," came the muffled answer.

Julie took another sheet and put it over the one soiled from the water. Once the sheet was secured, she asked Matt to help her pull the soiled one away.

Daphne had gripped both Justin's and Brian's hands in hers. Both men were standing on either side of the bed.

"Okay gentlemen, it's time to help the mother to bring that baby into the world. You're completely dilated; Daphne, I need you to follow my instructions, all right?"

Daphne nodded. "On the next contraction, you will push, until I say stop."

Brian looked over at Justin, and linked the fingers of their free hands over Daphne's head. They were all looking at the monitor.

"Push Daphne," Julie said. Daphne began to push until Julie told her to stop.

Daphne laid back on the bed. Matt was standing near Julie, looking over the monitors, making sure everything was all right... mother and baby would be fine.

Justin let go of Brian's hand and reached for the towel lying near the pillow to dab the sweat on Daphne's forehead.

Brian slowly removed his hand from Daphne's grip and smoothed her hair.

Daphne looked over at him, and smiled. Brian resumed his place just as Julie told them, "Well I think this one wants to come out rather quickly. I already see the top of his head. So during the next contraction, Daphne, you will have to push, okay?"

Daphne nodded. She felt the contraction coming, gripped Justin's and Brian's hands, and began to



push, following the words of encouragement from both of them.

"All right Daphne, take a breath, and let the next contraction pass. The following one will be the right one."

Daphne nodded, and looked over at the clock. It was around ten in the morning, and she'd been in here for over an hour.

Like Julie suggested, she let the next contraction pass, and then began to regroup for the next one. She took a deep breath, and began to push again, encouraged by Julie and Matt, who saw the baby's head coming. She pushed, pushed and pushed, until Julie said, "Here it is."

Matt let go of the camera he was holding, grabbed a tissue, and helped Julie clean the baby a little, before they put it on Daphne's belly to take care of the cord.

The baby wailed and Julie smiled. "Seems like she really wanted to be born today."

They all smiled. Matt held the little bundle on Daphne's belly as Julie clamped the cord and held the surgical scissors over the baby.

"Who's going to cut it?"

"Justin," whispered Daphne.

Justin reached for the scissors and held it with trembling hands. Brian moved behind him and put his hand over Justin's, and together, they cut the cord.

Daphne smiled at Matt, who just took a picture of that moment. Once the cord was cut, Julie took the baby, put it into a nurse's care and checked on Daphne.

Less than five minutes later, Daphne delivered the placenta and the nurse came back with a cleaned baby.

Matt helped the nurses settle Daphne back in her bed. Then the nurse handed her the baby. Julie was just behind with the chart for the baby.

Daphne smiled and looked at the baby. Julie moved to the bed. "It's a beautiful baby, and she's very healthy."

Justin looked up. "She? As in a girl?"

"Yes," nodded Julie.

"We have a girl?" Justin turned around and looked at Brian. "We have a girl!"

Brian smiled and looked at his lover. "You did great."

"Say hello to your daughter," whispered Daphne to both men.

"We have a girl," stated Justin again while reaching out and stopping a few inches from his baby.

"Do you want to hold her?" asked Daphne.

"I ... I ... I'm not sure. I don't ... I," stuttered Justin.

"Here." Daphne handed the baby slowly and carefully to Justin. Brian felt Justin tremble in front of him, and instinctively brought his arms under Justin's to help him, just in case his right hand decided to give out at that moment.

The moment Justin got his daughter in his arms and Brian was behind him, Matt took a picture. That's the moment that the baby decided to yawn and make a sucking motion with her lips.

Justin smiled, and looked at Daphne. Julie began to move the bed, and stopped looking at the new

parents. "Ten minutes, then we have to move you and your daughter into your room, all right?"

They all nodded.

"Oh, it would be great to write down the name of your daughter on the chart once you have one," Julie said, while walking out the room.

Brian moved Justin so he could sit on the bed and slipped behind him as Matt sat near Daphne.

"Did you have a name in mind?" asked Matt.

"No, I was too busy being pregnant," whispered Daphne.

"Justin?" asked Matt, but Justin shook his head too.

Brian rolled his lips into his mouth, a gesture that didn't go unnoticed by Matt. "And you Brian, do you have anything in mind?"

Brian looked down at the baby in Justin's arms and whispered, "Shayna?"

"Hey that was on the first list we made," stated Daphne.

Brian nodded.

Justin stood up, handed his daughter to Brian grabbed the chart and the pen. He looked at Brian, and wrote something on the chart. He finished just as Julie came back.

"So folks, time to move you into your room. Brian, can I have the baby? I will bring her back in an hour or so."

Brian handed the baby to Julie who put her into the nursery crib. She took the chart and smiled. "Lovely name, but I need her last name too."

Daphne reached out, scribbled something, and handed the chart back to Julie. Julie began to wheel Daphne out and the nurse wheeled the crib to the nursery.

Matt and Brian followed Daphne's bed, and Justin followed the crib. Brian made sure Daphne was settled into her room, and then left to join Justin; Matt stayed with her.

\* \* \* \*

A few hours later, around five, Brian, Justin and the rest of the family left Daphne's room for a much-needed rest.

Everyone had left, Justin and Brian were still in the neonatal unit, and Justin was giving Shayna her first bottle with Daphne's milk. The day had been exhausting for Daphne, and she was asleep for the night.

Matt took some more pictures of both of them. Somehow, Brian knew that most of the pictures would end up in a scrapbook. Shayna was beautiful, mat skin, short afro type curly hair, not blond, not black, a shade of almond, and deep blue eyes. Brian looked at Justin. He had his eyes riveted on his daughter's features. It was in that moment that Brian regretted not being able to draw; he pulled out his phone and silently took a picture.

Justin looked up and smiled just as Brian took another picture. "I think she's out ..." whispered Justin.

Brian nodded and stood up, pocketing his phone, and walked near Justin. Justin looked up and asked, "Do you want to put her down for the night? Put her in her crib?"

"I... " began Brian, who stopped and nodded.

Justin handed Shayna slowly over to Brian. He looked at his lover and saw the look of pure joy on

the new father's face. Like Brian, he pulled out his cell and took a picture.

\* \* \* \*

The road home to Britin was silent. Gus bolted to them the moment he saw the car in the driveway, not listening to Mrs. Stevenson.

"Gus!!"

"How is the baby? Did I have a brother or a sister? Tell me! Grams didn't want to tell me anything and Nonna either."

"Gus, please let them at least step out the car," chided Mrs. Stevenson.

Brian smiled at his son's eagerness.

"Tell me, tell me ... you just called and told me the baby was here, but you didn't say anything else. It wasn't fun."

"Inside, let us just move inside," said Brian.

They all moved inside the house, where Mrs. Stevenson had prepared some late supper for both men.

They dropped their things in the entrance, and followed their son into the kitchen.

"Stop teasing, Dad, please tell me."

Justin walked out of the kitchen and retrieved his laptop, brought it back and plugged in his cell. A few seconds later, Gus saw the picture Justin had taken with his cell phone.

"Her name is Shayna," whispered Brian, "It means..."

"Beautiful in Yiddish, I wrote it down when you asked me to choose a name, the first time Daphne got pregnant," finished Gus.

Brian nodded. Gus looked at the picture, and then at his father. "You chose the name I gave you? Why?"

"Because it fit her; she's beautiful. Look at her skin, and, well, she's really beautiful." Gus nodded. His Dad was right; his sister was beautiful.

Justin printed the picture out on the printer in Brian's study and, as he moved to retrieve it, Brian plugged his own cell into the laptop and did the same with the pictures he'd taken of Justin.

Justin came back a few seconds later with the three pictures.

Mrs. Stevenson took the pictures from Justin and made it her job to frame them in the frames she'd purchased that afternoon.

Finally, the men sat down at the kitchen table and reached for their only meal of the day.

They ate in silence, while Gus and Mrs. Stevenson put the pictures in the frames.

\* \* \* \*

"Do you think I should call my dad, and tell him he's a grandfather?"

"Christ, Sunshine you have a thing for killing the mood."

It was near midnight; Brian and Justin had gone up to their bedroom around ten. They lay in each other's arms, completely sated. They were both covered with a light sheen of sweat, but they didn't care as they caressed each other.

Justin smiled, and looked up from Brian's chest. "What do you think?"

"I don't know, Sunshine. But I know it bothers you."

Justin shrugged. "Somehow, he's still my father."

Brian kissed the top of his head, sighed deeply, and whispered, "I know."

He would never understand why Justin was so affected each time he saw his father. He pinched the bridge of his nose, remembering just how his father always affected him.

He moved his hand and linked it with Justin's on his chest. "I love you."

Like always, Justin's breath hitched, when he heard Brian whisper those words, and had some trouble listening to the rest of Brian's words. "You did great Sunshine. Your daughter is beautiful."

"Thanks," whispered Justin. "I love you, too." Justin kissed Brian's chest as Brian pulled him closer, kissing his head.

They settled down and were soon fell asleep.

## **Chapter 17 Epilogue**

Daphne and Matt had many people stopping by their house in the weeks after Shayna's birth. Brian and Justin had moved into the loft for the time being, and Shayna spent almost as much time with them as she did with Daphne and Matt. Brian and Justin thought it would be easier for everyone if they lived at the loft, so the separation would get easier.

Mel came by the first week and brought Daphne all the legal papers, making Brian and Justin the sole guardians of Shayna. The papers covered everything in case something should happen to any of them.

The only person who hadn't stopped by the loft to see the baby was Lindsay. Jennifer was over the moon and so was Debbie; her Sunshine had a baby. Corinne was talking to Mel about having another child, but Mel told her it would be difficult. Blake, who was listening from the other side of the room, told them that he would like to have children too, but hadn't found the right Mom. Ted smiled and knew that he would probably be a father sooner than expected.

Brian made fun of Daphne, telling her that she started a whole new trend... making babies.

Life was nice for all of them.

\* \* \* \*

## **Nine years later. - Gus's graduation party at Britin.**

May 2020, Gus stepped into the garden, where his fathers agreed to host a party for his graduation...most of his family was there. He was graduating two years earlier than most of his friends and doubling up on classes, so he could finish four years worth of work in only two.

Debbie and Carl were still together; they had moved from Debbie's old house three years earlier, after Rage went national and Michael made loads of money.

Tucker had married Jennifer three years ago, and they were still living at Jennifer's condo. Molly was dating some handsome young man.

Hunter had married Callie, and they were expecting their first baby. They'd gone for an anonymous donor and artificial insemination. After Debbie and Carl moved out, they took over the house, and made some changes to fit their style.

Melanie was still with Corinne; they had one more member of their family, Mark, Corinne and Blake's three-year-old son. As with Michael, Blake kept his parental rights.

Drew and Emmett were still together. They had some problems but they were still together. They were living at Drew's house but Emmett often slept in the guestroom at Hunter's.

Michael and Ben were still living in the suburbs; they had a young boy living with them, Chris. Hunter had brought him home one night. The young boy had hit on Hunter in front of their house. Hunter thought that since he'd been given another chance, that he could give one to Chris. The boy was living between Ben, Michael, and Hunter's home.

\* \* \* \*

Mrs. Stevenson was still living with Brian and Justin, even if she spent more time at Daphne's, taking care of her babies. Unexpectedly, Daphne gave birth to twins on her third pregnancy... a boy and a girl, Wyatt and Alyssa. Two beautiful babies delivered at term. Daphne got pregnant on her wedding night. She had married Matt a few days after Shayna's second birthday.

On Daphne's wedding day, after everyone left, Brian and Justin, cornered father Tom who had performed the ceremony and asked him to bless their union. Without a fuss, Father Tom accepted, knowing that those two men were bound together long before they exchanged vows and rings.

Daphne's wedding song was 'Save the Last Dance for Me' and if Justin had needed over seven years to remember the prom, they just needed one song to get back all the emotion. Daphne danced with Matt, and Brian danced with Justin as if it was that very first night.

When people saw the look on Brian's face, they didn't have to think twice about saying the word 'love'.

One person was always missing from every important event, despite living in Pittsburgh, and that was Lindsay. She chose, after losing custody of Gus, to stay in the city. She now owned the Sidney Bloom Gallery, which she renamed the Peterson Gallery.

\* \* \* \*

She had a standing invitation at both Debbie's and Brian's house, but never used it. She declined Daphne's wedding invitation; she even declined Shayna's christening. She'd cut off completely from the family.

Over the years, Brian learned that she was living in a new house, and had a regular visitor, Sam Auerbach. Not once, since that day after Shayna's birth, had he seen Lindsay going out with another woman. That day, she came by the hospital, praised the new mother, cooed over the baby, and spoke to everyone. As she left, she kissed Corinne on the cheek and Mel on the mouth, telling her how many regrets she had in her life.

Somehow, Lindsay wasn't part of the family anymore.

When Gus had soccer, Lindsay was on the sideline watching him play and taking some pictures. However, most of the time, she left before Gus had finished in the locker room. She sent cards and gifts for the important moments in his life, but never tried to see him.

After two years, Gus asked his father to see her, and the meeting had been awkward. Gus didn't say a word for two days, then asked his father if he could go see her again. Since then, Gus tried to spend at least one afternoon, every two weeks, with his mother.

\* \* \* \*

Tonight, Brian and Justin had organized a party at Britin for everyone in Gus's honor. He had invited most of his friends and all his parents. Emmett had organized the party, a big barbecue, with a variety of salads, fruits, and fresh foods.

Lindsay had been invited, and she was expected to arrive at any moment. Brian knew the second she had arrived, because Gus had a big grin on his face. She didn't attend alone; Sam was at her side. Sam greeted Melanie, Justin, Brian, and Corinne. Over the years, they'd gotten to know him... more or less.

He owned a big gallery in Philadelphia, and had hosted Justin's shows twice both had been huge

successes. Justin sold everything the first night, and the commission he got from the shows covered most of the renovations on Britin.

They kept half the stables and turned the rest into a guesthouse for Matt and Daphne, creating a path from the new guesthouse to Mrs. Stevenson's house. They also renovated the apartment over the garage; they intended to give it to Gus for his graduation, and because he was now just over 19.

\* \* \* \*

Over the years, Brian and Justin realized that Gus graduating early hadn't anything to do with the pretty girls, even if Maeven was his best friend, it was because of Lucas. Over the years, Lucas seemed to get closer to Gus, but one evening, loud voices and a shiner on Gus's eye, proved to the young man that his friend wasn't interested in him; at least, not in the way that Gus wanted him to be.

After being apart for over six month, Lucas came to Britin with a bag of pastries and excuses. They were friends again.

Over the last year, Gus had spoken a lot about Shane, finally bringing him to Britin. Brian caught the two boys in the pool, kissing. He didn't interrupt them and smiled. Shane was three years older than Gus, despite the fact that they were both juniors, majoring in the same field. Gus was two years ahead of kids his age, and Shane had dropped out of school for a year, after his parent's death.

Over the last year, the boys had gotten closer, and Shane often spent the night in a guestroom at Britin. Until last month, when Brian went to his son's room, to wake him up, and saw both boys sleeping in the same bed; the covers were tangled around their limbs, with condoms and condom wrappers in the trashcan.

Brian went from anger to acceptance in less than five minutes. When he came to the kitchen, he told Justin, who only nodded. He'd known for a while that the boys wanted to sleep together; he just wasn't sure when they'd get around to it. Well, it seems they had last night.

They prepared breakfast together, and waited for everyone to wake up.

Shayna was the first up, both men heard her footsteps running to Gus's room.

"No, no, no, that's not a good idea." Justin bolted out the kitchen and up the stairs. Too late, Shayna was already in the room, sneaking in Gus's bed.

"Oh!"

"Shany, no!" Justin said as he reached the top of the stairs. "Shit."

Justin knocked on the door, before stepping in. Gus sleepily answered, "Com'in." Justin stepped into the room and saw his daughter sitting on the middle of the bed looking down at her brother and his lover.

Shayna patted Gus's cheek and dropped a kiss on it. "Why are you naked?" she asked Gus who didn't stir at all at his sister's intrusion.

"Oh Shany," whispered Justin from the doorway. Shayna turned around, looked at her father, and returned to her task, waking the boys up. She patted Shane's cheek too, and the young man opened an eye, looking startled when he saw Shayna sitting between him and his lover.

"Sorry, she loves waking her brother," said Brian from behind Justin.

"Shany, it's too early to wake up," grumbled Gus, turning around and reaching over to Shane.

"Shany, come down for breakfast," said Justin.

"Shit," swore Gus, now wide-awake.

"You said a bad word," said Shayna. "You didn't answer, why are you naked?" asked Shayna again.

"Shayna Taylor-Kinney!" came Justin's warning.

Shayna turned around hearing her father's warning. "I'm coming."

She made a move to scramble from the bed, but stopped and looked at Shane. "I love you, you're pretty."

She moved from the bed and ran to her fathers. "Sorry, I just wanted to wake him up."

"I know, go to the kitchen, I'll be right with you." Shayna nodded and walked down to the kitchen.

Justin walked into the room and looked at Gus; Brian was still at the doorway. "You should learn to lock the door, Gus," said Justin.

"I forgot," came Gus's sheepish answer. "Won't happen again, Dad."

"I know," replied Justin. He turned around and walked to the door. "Breakfast is ready, and I'll make pancakes, if anyone says yes."

"Yes," mumbled Brian as Justin passed him. Justin smiled and walked downstairs.

Brian stepped into the boy's room and closed the door. Instinctively Shane reached for the sheet to cover himself a little more than he already was.

"I don't want Shany to walk in on you two in action. It never happened with Justin and I, and I don't want it to happen with you. All right Sonny boy?"

"Yeah Dad."

"Yes, Mister Kinney."

Brian looked at Shane and raised his eyebrow. "Since when am I Mr. Kinney to you?"

"Huh..."

"Okay, forget the Mr. Kinney; that was my father. Brian, will be enough."

Shane nodded. Brian walked to the door. "I'm glad you took your time - you didn't, well that you knew each other before..." and Brian gestured to the bed.

Gus smiled. "Yeah I'm glad too."

Brian nodded and finally left the room. Once alone, Shane looked at Gus. "Is the wake up always that way?"

Gus nodded. "For the last seven years, since Shany learned how to walk, she wakes me up every morning."

"Well it's nice," whispered Shane, as he moved to wrap his arms around Gus. "I could get used to it."

"You could?"

"Yeah, but then I think we have to make sure to tell her to knock before bolting into the room."

"Yeah. Now come on. Dad is making pancakes," said Gus.

Shane nodded and followed Gus into the bathroom.

Thirty minutes later, they stepped into the kitchen just as Shane asked, "I don't know how keep it straight, calling both of them Dad; it's pretty confusing."

"You think?" asked Gus.

"Yeah."

"Here," said Justin as he pushed a plate filled with pancakes over to both men.

"Thanks Dad."

Shane smiled and shook his head; he would never understand how Gus managed to call both his fathers 'Dad'. Shane sat near Shayna. "Do you mind, miss?"

"Nope, nobody call me miss."

"No one?"

Shayna shook her head. "Nope. They usually call me Shany, sweetie, Sunny, or Sunshine, like my Dad."

"If you want, I will call you miss."

"I like that. I really like that," she said as Shane reached for a new cup of coffee.

Brian looked over at Justin and smiled. He reached for the coffee pot and refilled his cup too.

\* \* \* \*

That evening, Brian came home early to find Justin, Gus, and Shane in the kitchen cooking dinner. Shayna was in her room doing her homework.

He went to the bedroom, took a quick shower, and changed into something comfortable. On his way down, he stopped at his daughter's room, looked over her homework and they both went downstairs.

Dinner was excellent, especially when Justin and Gus were doing the cooking. .

Justin looked at Brian, who shook his head and mouthed, "After." Justin nodded and dinner went smoothly.

Shane, Gus, and Shayna left both Dads in the kitchen, cleaning the rest of the dishes. Once that was done, Justin went to the garage, and Brian went to the media room, where 'the kids' had congregated.

"Gus?"

"Yeah?"

"Can you come with me? I have something for you," said Brian.

"Sure."

Gus moved from the sofa, with Shayna on his heels. Brian smiled. "You can come too Shane."

"I can?" Brian nodded.

Gus frowned when he saw where his father led them. "Dad?" Brian took the stairs to the first floor, and then followed the hall until he reached Justin's studio. On the left, was a new door. Brian opened it, and the light went on. Justin was standing in a brand-new apartment.

"Surprise, Sonny boy," whispered Brian.

Gus look stunned.

Justin smiled broadly. "I think we really surprised him."



"I... I..."

"We finished it last week; it's your graduation and 19<sup>th</sup> birthday gift. We didn't know what to give you, so..."

"It's, It's ... "

Gus was wandering around the little apartment, appreciating the hardwood floors, the crimson and black décor, and the dark gray furniture.

Gus opened a door, discovering the bedroom. Between the bedroom and the kitchen was a bathroom, which had both a bath and a shower.

The apartment was exquisite; a mix of Brian's and Justin's tastes.

"We moved your things in here today, or rather, Justin did," Brian pointed out.

"You did?" whispered Gus.

Justin nodded. "I also took the liberty of moving Shane's things too. I hope you don't mind."

Shane shook his head.

"I hope you will be ok here," said Brian. "The wall between the house and the apartment, and even the door are all soundproofed. So we won't be disturbed with your music or anything else."

Gus turned crimson. "Dad!"

"Dad, can I live here too?" asked a little voice from the bedroom doorway.

"No, Shany. It's Gus's and Shane's new apartment. You will stay with us in the main house."

"But..." the young girl frowned. Then, she walked to Gus and grabbed his hand. "Don't leave."

Gus moved to the couch, sat down and looked at his sister. "I won't leave; I'm just in another room...that's all."

"But now I won't be able to come and wake you anymore, if you close the door."

Gus looked at Justin and Brian, but Shane saved the situation. "You know, I'm sure Gus will still come and eat breakfast, lunch and dinner with you, in the main kitchen."

"Will you live here with him?"

"I don't know, we haven't talked about it yet." Shane looked up at Gus, "Do you want me here with you?"

Gus nodded. Shane looked at Shayna. "I guess I will be living here with him."

"Yay!" cried Shayna. All four men laughed. Shane continued, "How do you wake your fathers?"

"I knock."

"Then you have to do the same when waking Gus, now."

"But I never knocked to get in Gus's room."

Gus smiled, holding her hands and said, "But now, I'm not alone anymore."

"Okay."

Shane looked at Justin. "She's easy."

"If only she was that easy every time and everyday. It would make my life easier," chuckled Justin. Brian moved behind his lover and wrapped his arms around Justin's waist.

"Shany?" asked Brian.

"Yes, Dad."

"I think, it's time for you to go to bed."

"Kay."

Shayna, moved to the door, changed her mind, and walked back to Gus. "Love you."

"Love you too, Sunny."

They kissed, but before she left, she stopped in front of Shane. "I love you too."

Shane knelt and kissed her too. She wrapped her little arms around his neck and kissed the boy on the cheek. "I will share Gus with you, but you have to be nice and love him a lot, because if you don't, I will punch you in the nose. You won't hurt him?"

"No I won't," whispered Shane, with misty eyes.

"Okay," Shany nodded her curly hair, brushing Shane's cheek. "Love you."

"Love you too," whispered Shane.

Shany ran to her Dad, and before they left the room, Shane stopped them. "I... I wanted to say thank you. You've welcomed me into your home since day one, and..."

Brian waved his hand. "It's all right, and you don't have to say anything."

"I have, because, because, I love Gus, and I love being here and well ..." his breath hitched, and Gus wrapped his arms around his waist.

Shane leaned his body against Gus's, and Gus whispered, "It's all right." Shane nodded.

Brian, Justin and Shayna finally left the apartment, closing the door behind them.

They put Shayna in bed; then, Brian and Justin moved to their own bedroom.

\* \* \* \*

Justin was drawing small circles on Brian's taut stomach, as Brian breathed deeply. "That was fucking hot."

"Thanks," whispered Justin.

Brian chuckled.

"Where did you learn that?"

"You know, I happen to know this stud."

"Ex-stud."

"There was a stud on Liberty Avenue. He picked me up that first night, and brought me back to his loft. He fucked me until six in the morning."

"He did?" asked Brian.

"Yeah, he did. Christ, I remember I still felt him inside me the next day."

"I remember you were really gifted."

"You remember?"

"Yeah. You were one of the few I let spend the night," said Brian.

"Why didn't you tell me then?" asked Justin.

"I had a reputation." Brian shrugged, running his hand over Justin's back.

"Pfff. And what kind of reputation was that, fucking everything that moved?"

Brian didn't say anything and Justin continued, "How many had the luck to spend the night?"

"And come back?" whispered Brian.

"And come back," added Justin.

"Honestly?"

Justin nodded.

Brian inhaled deeply. "Only you. You were the one who came back every time I pushed you away. You were the only one who called me on my bullshit. I liked that from the start. You didn't take anything for granted; you just thought that you had to fight for me."

Justin nodded and smiled.

"I ... You ... Christ." Brian cursed. "Okay I will begin again. I loved the feeling you gave me, when you'd fight me. I liked the way you expressed your opinion, and you're still doing it. I'm glad I picked you up that night. I felt, wait what did Gus ask me once?" Brian furrowed his brow. "Oh yeah, he asked me if my heart fluttered, and I told him yeah it was something like that. In fact, you took my breath away, looking right at me. You didn't turn your gaze when I looked back, and I loved that!"

"You didn't either."

"Yeah, but I knew I would have you. What I didn't know was that 19 years later, you would still be here."

"Do you regret it?" whispered Justin.

"No, I don't regret it at all."

They felt silent for a moment before Justin moved and propped himself on his elbow. Brian lifted his eyebrow, in a silent question.

"You did it," whispered Justin while caressing Brian's cheek with his free hand. "You became the best homosexual you could possibly be. You succeed in everything you do."

Brian took his lips into his mouth, and looked away. "No," whispered Justin back. "Never be ashamed of your success, that's what you taught me. You told me to embrace my destiny, and you should do the same. You are the best homosexual you could possibly be, and I am proud of you."

"I am proud of you too," whispered Brian. "Because you taught me so much more than you really know."

"I did?"

"Yeah, it's something Gus said to me during the party, and I have to agree that he's right."

"What's that?" asked Justin.

"He said that no matter what the consequences, finality or life choices, love would always win. He also said that we had proved to him time and again, over the last 8 years, how right those words were." Brian stopped, looked at Justin and pulled him into a kiss. He stopped and looked at Justin again. "I'm 47 years old, Justin, and for the first time in my life, I'm really and truly happy."

Justin nodded, and Brian continued, "I have the life I dreamed of having when I was 17. I have the family I feared to have, and you know what, I'm not scared like I thought I would be. I never thought I would..." Brian gestured to the room.

Justin nodded.

Brian inhaled and looked down at Justin. "I'm happy," he whispered, nodded and kissed Justin's forehead.

"Thank you, for sticking up for me, for always coming back even after I shoved you away, and for giving me so much."

"No thanks to you, for letting me in and allowing me to stay," answered Justin.

"You were pretty insistent. I could hardly fight, and honestly, I didn't want to," replied Brian.

Justin sighed deeply. "I'm glad you gave me the key to your heart."

"I gave it to you that first night."

Justin looked up and smiled, and Brian continued, "It just took me longer than you to understand."

Brian took Justin against him and kissed him again, moving over to Justin's ear. "I love you," Brian whispered.

"I love you too," whispered Justin.

Brian wrapped his arms around Justin's body, and shifted both of them so that Justin was on his back with Brian on top. Justin opened his leg to give some room to Brian, and pulled him into a tight hug.

Brian lifted his head, and looked down at Justin. "Do you remember the last time I looked down at you this way?" Justin nodded, and added, "It's only time."

Brian smiled. Justin shifted when he felt Brian's hard-on poking him, placing Brian's erection at his entrance. Brian looked down, and pushed in slowly. Justin arched his back off the bed, throwing his head back, and opening his mouth in a silent gasp. When Brian was fully buried inside, he paused. Justin looked at him, and Brian wrapped his mouth over Justin's and kissed him. Brian began to move, slowly at first, and then a little faster. Every time one or the other was near climax, he stilled his movements. Justin smiled up, and reached for Brian's hair, running his hand through it.

"I love you so much," he whispered.

"I know," replied Brian.

"Promise me that no matter what, no matter what the consequences, finality or life choices, you will come back to me, no matter how long it takes."

"I promise," whispered Brian. "No more pushing, and no more running away."

Justin nodded.

Brian began to move again, and Justin met each thrust.

"I'm gonna..."

"Yeah," answered Brian.

Justin reached out, grabbed Brian's head, and pulled him toward him, crushing their mouths together, as they both came, echoing their moans into their kiss.

Brian began to move, but Justin grabbed him on his shoulders. "Don't go."

"I won't."

Justin nodded.

Brian reached for Justin's hair, and put his head in the hollow of Justin's neck. He turned his head, putting his mouth on Justin's ear, and whispered, "I won't."

Justin wrapped his arms tighter around Brian, feeling complete for the first time in the last 19 years. He heard Brian's regular breathing, knowing the man had drifted off to sleep. He closed his eyes and let sleep take him. Brian and Gus's words were running through his head. "No matter what the consequences, finality or life choices, love will always win."

FINI

## Author's Notes

### Part 1

After an aggression like the one Justin suffered, the symptoms lessened with the time, but never disappeared. You only need to be really tired or in a lot of stress to see them resurfaced. The common measure is to let it go, unless the panic attacks are too strong, then you get some medicine.

In [Chapter 16](#) - What happened is a real possibility when you take Klonopin. [Here the text I used for my research](#)

The technique Brian uses is really common and helped a lot, trust me...

### Part 1 - Chapter 21

In [Chapter 21](#), what happened to Melanie is not something I put up for drama. A lot of women develop a fibroid tumor after endometriosis, only 25% develop cancer. I choose that issue, because Melanie is a strong and tough person, and I noticed that shit like that happened the most to the strong ones.

Melanie's disease influences her mood. Not because she's weak, no, because she's strong, because she can't manage everything, this is something she has no control over, that's why it's so difficult for her to accept. That's also why she can't control her anger, when she thinks about Brian and the cancer, and how he dealt with.

### Part 2 - Chapter 2

Daphne's miscarriage. Melanie said in season 4 that her mother lost a baby before the first trimester was over. When you make some research, you found easily that most of the miscarriage happened in the first trimester.

First trimester

Most miscarriages (more than three-quarters) occur during the first trimester.

Chromosomal abnormalities are found in more than half of embryos miscarried in the first 13 weeks. A pregnancy with a genetic problem has a 95% chance of ending in miscarriage. Most chromosomal problems happen by chance, have nothing to do with the parents, and are unlikely to recur. Genetic problems are more likely to occur with older parents; this may account for the higher miscarriage rates observed in older women.

Another cause of early miscarriage may be progesterone deficiency. Women diagnosed with low progesterone levels in the second half of their menstrual cycle (luteal phase) may be prescribed progesterone supplements, to be taken for the first trimester of pregnancy. - [Here my source](#)

### Part 2 - Chapter 3

Melanie had two options, like Brian. Let the cancer spread, or take a chance on life. She decided to take the opportunity for surgery.

In real life, you can have surgery without after treatment, but with regular check ups, or like I choose for Melanie, you can have radiation and some chemo treatment. (Light or heavy treatment, depend the case).

## Part 2 - Chapter 4

I didn't write Brian in a OOC version, I think I made him grow up, and with his past history of cancer, he couldn't undermine someone who's down, even Mel. I really think that Cancer can change people.

## Part 2 - Chapter 5

You can't get lost of your past, one day or another he resurfaced... I thought that somehow in the show, the Hobbs/Justin arc from season 4 wasn't totally closed. I chose this chapter to close it, or at least to clarify the feeling I got each time I saw Hobbs and Justin's interaction...

I don't think I have to clarify my action with Michael. I think that I have still problems to see where in the show he grew up concerning Brian. I think he is more mature than at the beginning, but when he is with Brian, I don't think he is that grown up, I really think he still had those hidden feelings... You know, the ones you can't really bury, because they are part of you.

He react often like a jealous brother toward Justin.

## Part 2 - Chapter 6

What happened to Justin is something usual when you are overstressed, overtired and under a lot of medication... It's common measure when migraines are that strong to try a mix of painkiller, usually you mix the one you take often alone. You think that mixing them would work, but sometimes, it don't.

## Part 2 - Chapter 7.

- Apranax: is a real medicament - maybe you know it under Naproxen ... [Here some reference](#)
- What happened to Justin is something usual when you are overstressed, overtired and under a lot of medication... It's common measure when migraines are that strong to try a mix of painkiller, usually you mix the one you take often alone. You think that mixing them would work, but sometimes, it don't.
- When Justin banged his head on the wall, it's more to stop the pain, than to have someone around him...
- The pills number Justin took is just the limit from an real overdose,

## Part 2 - Chapter 8

I wanted to write Michael - on the bad side, because, well I have a lot of issues with him, the first one is I still think he is after Brian, the second, that he had really a jealousy problem with Justin.

When I wrote this chapter it was a real ANTI-Michael Chapter, but my wonderful beta, told me that maybe I should change it, make it less aggressive, and turn it into something better.... and I did, I think.

I also wanted to prove that Justin and Gus were good for Brian. He opened his heart, he can talk more freely... he express his feelings, in the good direction, not like in season 5 when Justin left, and he stumbled into Michael's home high and drunk to despise all the thing Michael fight for... He was hurting, right, but he didn't talk to the right person, and most of all he didn't use the right

words.

- Justin's dizziness: Spasmophilia... [Source](#) - [Source](#)
- I choose something common to relate the PTSD Justin's suffering, if the raw effects aren't here anymore, spasmophilia is a consequence.
- A spasmophilia crisis is often generated from, lack of sleep combined with mild or heavy stress, lots on the mind. Often also not enough fruits or fresh vegetables. (Don't laugh, I'm serious).
- Rapid treatment : magnesium shot, [\(Source\)](#) it lessen the stress level in the muscles and the body ask for sleep.

## Part 2 - Chapter 9

The chapter will deal with death ... No major characters so don't worry, or maybe you should, I don't know.

When I wrote this chapter is was to speak about a particularity from the Hepatitis B, you know that little disease once you are vaccinate against you shouldn't have.

***Well, let's tell you a story, a real one ...***

A woman was vaccinate against the Hepatitis B, felt great, nothing to say. One day, she gave her blood to help the blood center, came a letter,

*Dear Miss,*

*We can't take your blood, you have an hepatitis B*

WTF... thought the young woman, I'm vaccinate... Take appointment to the doctor, and the doctor confirm ...

- You were vaccinate, but you got the disease..

- Good, then everything is alright?

- Yes and No... let me explain, you have the virus in you and the antigen and the antibody in you... You can live without problem, except when you got pregnant.

- Why?

- To risky, we haven't found a solution, because when you get into labor, we have to choose between the baby and you...

WTF .....

This chapter is about this.... but I changed it into something more common, more ... Well you will see, because I couldn't imagine Daphne or Justin guilt...

I'm sorry if I will shock some of you, but I had to write it....

Sam



## Author's Notes: A visual aide

Do you remember the description?

### Chapter 16

They agreed that Brian would pay a quarter of the rent, and Brian's name would be on the lease. They just needed to find something that would fit Brian's standards and Justin's income.

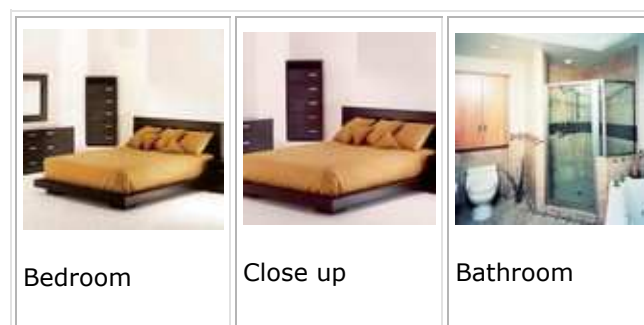
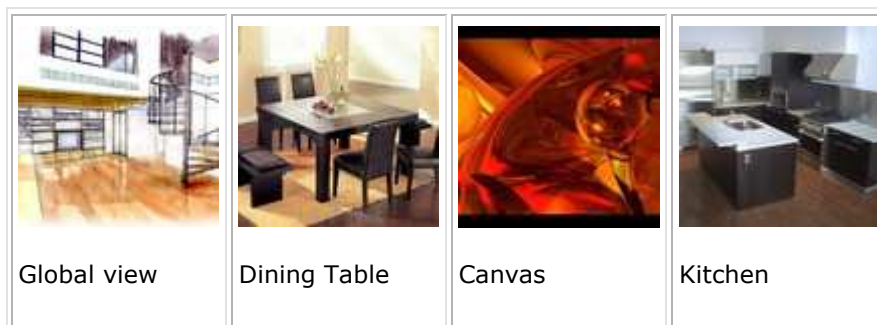
After visiting a few places, they found something not too bad in Chelsea. It was a loft, not as big as Brian's, but it had an open attic. In fact, it was half as big, as Brian's loft. It had a living area, a kitchen, a bedroom, and a bathroom. But it had great light, and it was not far away from a hospital (this was a priority in Brian's choice).

The bedroom and bathroom were in the attic. The bathroom wasn't as big as the one in Brian's loft, but the shower was huge and that sealed the deal.

The main living area was split in two with a wall; behind the wall was the kitchen. They decided to put the eating and the living area there too. They kept the other part as Justin's studio.

They picked up Justin's car and Brian was astonished to see that Justin had bought a Nissan X-Trail Columbia – Limited version – in a Red Rubis Metallic color with Gray Nappa leather seats. Justin told Brian that he put a down payment on the car with the money he had saved. Brian knew the car cost a small fortune, almost \$52,000. Justin said he was financing it over 5 years.

### NY LOFT





**Justin's Car**

To have a full view of the pictures, click on the thumbnail...

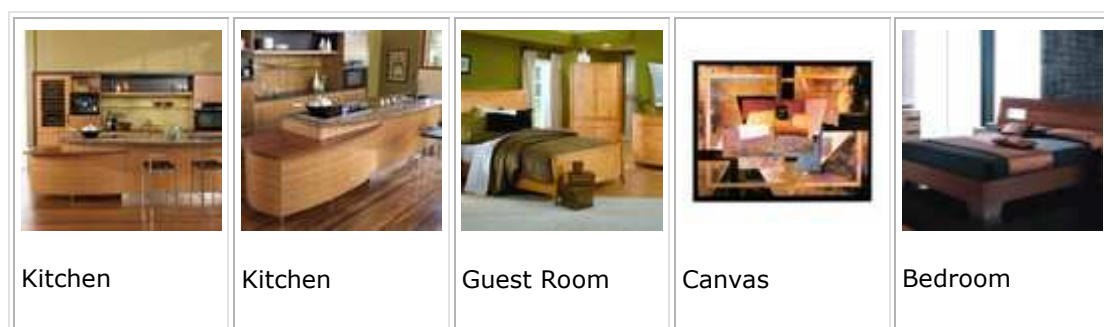
## Chapter 19

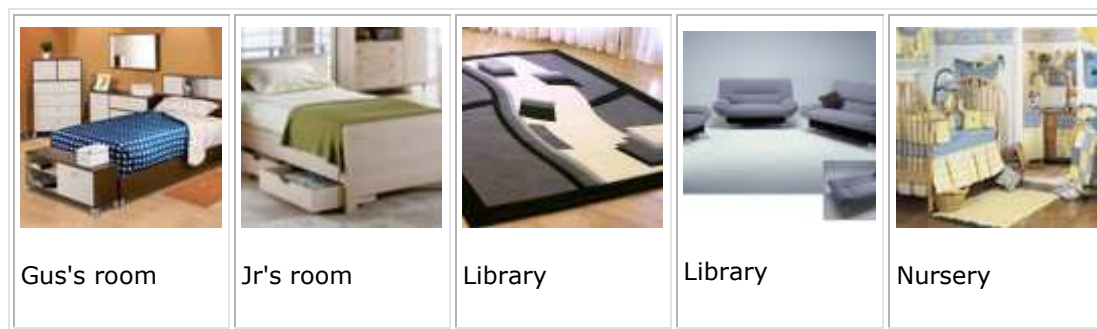
The third floor apartment was in very good shape and Brian didn't need to make a lot of modifications. It had almost the same living area as Brian's loft. The main area was on the left of the door, first the living and dining room and on the left wall, the kitchen. The bathroom was in the same place as Brian's, but instead of a huge shower, it had all the essentials, a tub, a shower, a toilet, and a sink. The bedroom was pretty standard. On the right of the door was a study; then a bedroom, which was connected to the first one, then a big room, like a playroom for kids.

The Stevensons had managed to keep the great lighting, by keeping the upper windows in view. On the ceiling of the room along the right side, they had put in a mezzanine, which housed the library. It was perfect, no unused space.

Daphne and Brian decided to create a connection between the third floor and the loft. They opted for a spiral staircase.

### PITTSBURGH DAPHNE'S LOFT





To have a full view of the pictures, click on the thumbnail...

## Chapter 24

Justin came back on December 23rd, like planned, Brian was at the airport. The flight had a two-hour delay and Justin landed at 5 pm instead 3. Justin was a mess when Brian saw him, he was exhausted, and Brian could see fear in his eyes.

Brian extended his arms for a welcome hug. Justin smiled but the smile never reached his eyes. Once he was in front of Brian, he snuggled into the man's welcoming embrace not embarrassed by the looks of several people in the terminal.

"Hey, are you ok?" asked Brian.

"Bad flight," was Justin's only answer.

Brian leaned toward him and Justin kissed him softly but Brian pulled him closer, wrapping his arms around him. He deepened the kiss, pushing his tongue against Justin's soft lips. Justin parted his lips and allowed him to enter. They sensed more than heard the terminal falling into silence. They parted and looked around, they were the center of attention, Justin blushed, and Brian pulled him towards him.

"Any luggage?"

"Yes"

"Com'on," Brian said grabbing Justin to retrieve the luggage. .

They headed toward the recuperation luggage area and then out toward Brian's car. He was there with a brand-new

black Mercedes ML 350 SUV with beautiful seats in Ash Alcantara inserts and with Aluminium composite trim.

"You bought a new car?" Justin asked astonished, while Brian put the luggage in the trunk.

"Yeah, I bought a new car." Justin smiled wildly. "What?" asked Brian.

"Nothing, I'm just imagining all the good times we could have; it's good you bought a new car."

"Why?" asked Brian, putting the car in gear.

"So we can go buy a Christmas tree," Justin answered smiling at him.

"Too late, Sunshine, and I have plans for tonight," replied Brian.



Brian's Car

## Chapter 24

"He was at Britin, their house. Brian smiled and pushed him toward the door of the study, where they had made love the first time in front of the fireplace. Justin noticed immediately that all the furniture they both wanted and that he had listed on his sketchpad was there.

The dark red lounge chair, the desk, the sofa, and the rug, everything he had wished for this room was in there, even the soft drapes on the windows."

### **Study**



To have a full view of the pictures, click on the thumbnail...

Brian pushed him up the stairs, and once on the top, Justin noticed that what was earlier a balcony with only a view of the parlor was now an open balcony with a view of the foyer also. The old library with its open space was now a room by itself. At the end of the hall, Brian had added back the 2 doors to the master bedroom that the prior owner had taken down. Brian moved him backwards all the way, never breaking the kiss. As they stepped into the master bedroom, he turned Justin around so he could see the room.

It was a beautiful bedroom, just as Justin had imagined it; all in black and ivory colors, modified like he had planned it in his head. The far wall across from the doorway was covered in windows, letting in the morning sun. On the right was a fireplace – a fire place that wasn't there the first time he saw the house.

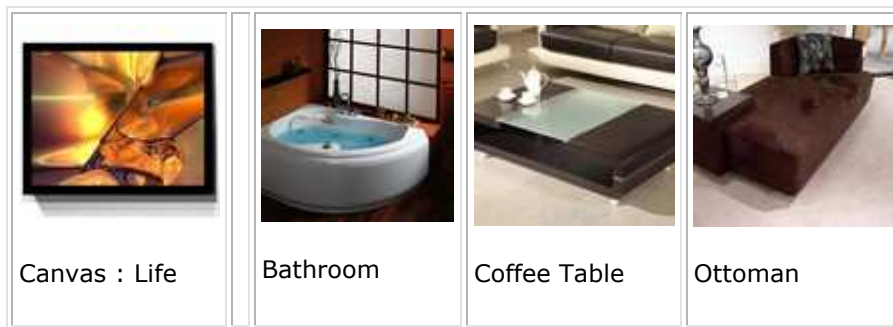
The king-size bed was black, with ivory and dark red bed linens. It was facing the fireplace, and the windows were draped with ivory shades.

Over the mantel above the fireplace hang a masterpiece called 'My Life' that Justin had sold at his first show.

On each side of the bed were rolling doors - the one on the left gave access to the walk-in dressing room, the other one to the bathroom. Between the window and the fireplace, Brian had installed an ottoman sofa and a coffee table.

Justin was about to say something as Brian turned him around again and smashed his mouth over his, and tugged on his shirt, stripping him naked. Before Justin could say anything, he was lying naked on the bed, and Brian was sliding into him.

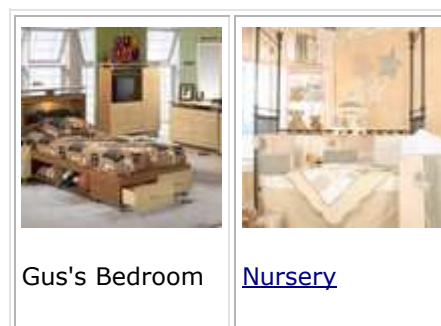
#### Master bedroom



To have a full view of the pictures, click on the thumbnail...

Gus's room was finished, it was like he had imagined it; it was in a shade of blue-green colors. Brian had even finished the nursery too, in a yellow-orange pastel color that would fit any baby. He smiled. That was something he hadn't even discussed with Brian, it was a wish, just a wish, and Brian had already set up the room.

Two other rooms were decorated too, one in white and mocha shades and the other in white and purple shades.



To have a full view of the pictures, click on the thumbnail...






That's how I pictured the rest of Britin

#### Kitchen



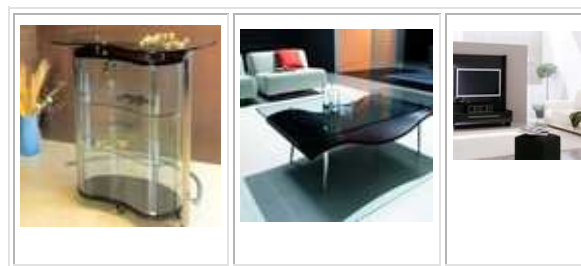
To have a full view of the pictures, click on the thumbnail...

### Bedrooms

				
Jr's Bedroom	Guestroom	Guest-suite Mother Taylor	Guest-Suite Bathroom	Daphne's room

To have a full view of the pictures, click on the thumbnail...

### Family room



To have a full view of the pictures, click on the thumbnail...

### Dining room



To have a full view of the pictures, click on the thumbnail...

### The Pool




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This is how I picture Corinne and Mel ... I know she lost her hair, but well they grow since then...

