

Omelet

by Rhiannonhero

How many fates turn around in the overtime? ~ Tori Amos

Justin tossed some mushrooms and cheese into the omelet he was making to split with Daphne. She sat on a stool at the bar, lighting up the joint he'd rolled for her earlier. He glanced toward the bedroom; Brian was still asleep.

He hoped that breakfast--well, late-late brunch--would mollify Daphne. She was pissed that he'd stood her up at the movies last night. Brian had been in an especially malleable mood, and it was rare that Justin thought he might actually get the opportunity to top, so he'd left Daph waiting in the cold while he made an attempt at Brian's ass. The key word being 'attempt'.

Justin shifted to his other foot, pulled a little at the back of his pajama bottoms and fought a smile at the dull ache from his butt. Losing his bid at dominance in the bedroom hadn't been a complete loss.

Daphne passed the joint his way and he took a deep drag, pretending to ash in the omelet before handing it back. Daphne gestured toward the bedroom, her voice soft as she asked, "Does he always sleep this late?"

"He didn't used to. I think he's getting old." Justin wrinkled his nose to emphasize the horror of it.

"Don't let him hear you say that."

"It's the truth."

Daph put on her best Colonel Jessup voice. "The truth? He can't handle the truth!"

"You are such a dork."

"Speaking of dorks, you'll never believe who I ran into last night."

Justin flipped the omelet onto a plate and grabbed a knife to divide it. "George Bush?"

Daphne shook her head and passed Justin the joint. "This is good stuff."

"Brian's stash." Justin smoked thoughtfully. "Adam Sandler?"

"He's cool, you freak."

"He's ugly."

"Well, you don't have to fuck him. Try again."

"Brian Boitano?"

Daphne cracked up and reached for the joint to finish it off. Justin grabbed a few glasses from the cupboard and orange juice from the fridge.

A loud groan preceded the thump of feet hitting the floor in the bedroom. He heard the sound of Brian pissing, the flush of the toilet and the rush of water in the sink.

Brian thumped down the few steps and trudged over to the kitchen. He ignored Daphne and Justin entirely, staring into the depths of the refrigerator until Justin reached around him and handed him the guava juice. Brian looked at the container in his hand like he had no clue where it had come from. Justin took it back, poured the juice into a glass. Brian accepted it wordlessly and walked blindly over to the couch.

"Morning, Brian!" Daphne called across the room.

Brian lifted a hand and let it fall.

"He's not a morning person," Justin whispered.

"It's two in the afternoon."

"I wore him out." Justin waggled his eyebrows. "He's losing his stamina."

Brian's voice carried even though he spoke quietly, "Don't push it."

Justin rolled his eyes and stood across from Daphne as they started to eat. "Oh! I know! That girl--what was her name? The one from St. James--" He snapped his fingers, trying to recall. "Mary Magdalena or something?"

"Mary Martzapina, idiot."

"Right."

"No. You'll never guess."

Justin knew she was waiting for him to ask, so he took another big bite of omelet and just looked at her.

"Ethan," she said dramatically.

Justin glanced toward the couch, but there was no motion or reaction from that quarter. "Yeah?"

"Yeah."

"Did he say anything to you?" He felt a blush start when his voice cracked the way it always did when he was trying to sound nonchalant.

"Did he ever! God, it was like he wouldn't shut up!" Daphne mocked, "How's Justin? Back with Brian? Miss him. Love him. Need him. Yadda yadda pity party cakes. It was pathetic."

Justin rolled his eyes. "Pfft."

"My thoughts exactly." Daph was on a roll and she continued with much enthusiasm, "I really don't know what you ever saw in him. He talked to me for a whole hour before I realized you weren't going to show. It was like he thought I was interested in what he had to say or something."

"Well, weren't you? I mean, it's not like you had to talk to him. You could've told him to fuck off."

Daphne took a bite and shifted her eyes guiltily. "Okay, fine. I was interested. He's your ex and he treated you like shit--"

"No he didn't."

She lowered her fork and stared at him, wide-eyed. "Justin, he cheated on you!"

"Once." He glanced toward the couch again. He had no idea if Brian had fallen asleep or was listening to every word.

"That you know of!"

Justin sighed and turned his attention back to Daphne and his food. "He really wasn't that bad. You were always too hard on him."

Daphne flipped her hair over her shoulder and said, "Yeah, well, when the homosexual love-of-my-life shows up on my doorstep wet from the rain and tear-stained, I tend to get a little over-protective."

"I was not tear-stained. It was my--"

"Allergies. Yes, I know."

"I was allergic to his cat!"

"Right. Whatever. My point is, yes, I hold a grudge."

Justin smiled. He loved when Daphne went into mother-hen mode--well, until it became utterly annoying. "But, Daph, you didn't like him from day one."

"Woman's intuition. I knew he was a slimy shit."

"He really isn't a bad guy. Anyway, it's not like he broke my heart."

"I'm serious, though. I don't know what you saw in him. It's not even like the sex was that good."

Justin nearly choked. He coughed up a bit of egg before squeaking, "What?"

"Don't deny it. You told me all this bullshit about--" her voice went faux-dreamy "--making love under the stars and candle-lit sex with chocolate syrup--"

Justin face burned and he looked again to the couch, but Brian was still blocked from view.

Daphne continued, "But never, not once did you say, 'Daph, I came so hard I saw new solar systems explode into existence.'"

Justin gasped. "Daphne!"

"You never said, 'He fucked me until I could still feel him the next morning'." Daphne waved her fork. "So, obviously the sex wasn't that good."

Justin darted his eyes between the couch and Daphne's dilated eyes. That joint had been a bad idea. "The sex was perfectly fine."

"My point exactly."

Justin jerked his head toward the couch and mouthed, "Shut up."

Daphne smiled. Justin did not like the glint in her eyes. "Hey Brian! You don't mind if we talk about how sucky sex was with Ethan, do you?"

Brian's voice drifted lazily across the room. "By all means, knock yourselves out."

"So, tell me exactly what sucked about sex with Ethan, Justin. You never did scoop, you know."

"The sex didn't suck. Just drop it." Justin lowered his voice to a whisper. "I'm going to poison your food the next time I cook for you. Be afraid."

"Well, for the record, you have never described sex with Brian with the words 'it didn't suck'. So, therefore, sex with Ethan was not all that good."

"Actually, Daph, I suck at Olympic levels," Brian called out.

"It's true. His sucking is an international national treasure." Justin nodded.

"Why, thanks, Sunshine. Good to know I'm appreciated."

"Again, I repeat, you've yet to use the words 'didn't suck'." Daphne jabbed the air with her fork to emphasize her point.

"Fine. Okay, let's just drop it." Justin glared at Daphne and hoped she'd honor his request.

No such luck.

"So, anyway, Ethan said he'd just returned from a tour and has moved into a loft just a few streets over."

Justin felt the blood drain from his face. "He bought a loft where?"

"On Tremont and Fourth." Daphne frowned. "Why? It's not like I told him where Brian lives or anything."

"He knows where Brian lives."

"It's not like he's a stalker."

"I know, but I'm really not interested in seeing my ex around. I mean, he'll be shopping at Baker's Market! He'll be getting his hair cut at Maurice's! Next thing you know he'll be drinking at Woody's and--"

Brian broke in. "Stop queening out. You're giving me a headache."

Justin shut up, but he still felt sick. He didn't want to see Ethan. Sure, he'd never loved him, but he'd cared about him, had thought he'd loved him. And, it still hurt to think about how it all ended. It hurt to think about how it all began. That whole episode of his life had been a lot of hurt, and he didn't like to be reminded of it.

Brian drank his guava juice carefully, lifting his head for a sip and then placing the glass on the floor next to the couch.

He could just imagine the various expressions of horror and humiliation that had passed over Justin's face in the last ten minutes. Brian had to give Daphne props. She knew how to twist the knife in Justin like no one else. He supposed that was why she was Justin's best friend.

It had been an interesting few minutes from Brian's point of view. He'd never really known what had caused the demise of Justin and Ethan's relationship. He supposed that almost anyone would have given him the scoop, but there was no way in hell he'd ever ask. He had his pride, after all.

But, yes, if Justin had left for monogamy and twu wuv, then he'd definitely split the moment he was disillusioned. That was so like Justin. He'd left Brian when he became disillusioned, too.

Brian had to admit that Justin's return made more sense now. His faith in monogamy and happily-ever-after shot to hell, he returned to his comfort zone. At least Justin knew what he could expect from Brian and that wasn't going to change. Although, Brian didn't know if he could say that the new, dimmer Justin was better. He sort of missed the bright light.

Still, Brian thought their relationship (God, he hated that word) was better now that he wasn't under the heavy weight of Justin's expectations. And Justin seemed content--with an undercurrent of resignation. Brian tried not to dwell on that too much. He was happy to have Justin back in his life; he didn't want to taint it by trying to figure out at what point contentment and resignation became a shield to keep the hurt out--and Brian too.

Jesus, it was too fucking early to be thinking these kinds of things. He glanced at the clock. Okay, not that early.

Daphne was still trying to soothe Justin over the whole Ethan thing.

"Listen, it's not like you're for sure going to see him. Besides, he'll be leaving on tour again soon."

"Really?" Justin sounded eager. "Did he say when?"

"I don't know, by that time I was trying to decide who I wanted to skin alive more--you or him."

"Fuck. I want him out of my life. I want him gone."

Daphne made a small growling noise. "Well, too fucking bad. That's not how life works. Suck it up and stop being a baby."

Brian thought he might be in love with Daphne.

"Justin, don't turn your back on me! You're the one who's supposed to be kissing my ass, remember?"

"Fine."

"Fine."

Brian was tempted to sit up to watch the stare down, but he already knew that Justin would win. Daphne was too easy on the big, fat, cry-baby and Justin was a stubborn little shit.

Daphne's defeated groan echoed in the loft. "I'm sorry, okay? And, yes, you're forgiven. Brunch was great."

"Okay," Justin replied, but Brian could still hear the sulk, just what he needed on his Saturday morning--Justin the drama princess in full pout mode. When they finally made J.T. dolls Brian was going to insist that they advertise the extra pouting action.

Brian bit back a laugh when he heard Daphne say, "Oh! And when are you going to teach me the gay-boy blow job secrets like you promised?"

Justin replied, "When you buy the dildo, like you promised."

"You can practice on me, Daphne," Brian said.

"Okay, Brian. When can I start?"

Brian sat up, getting ready to wave her over to begin, but Daphne was already putting on her coat. She wrapped her scarf around her neck, kissed Justin's cheek, and asked, "You gonna be home tonight?"

"I don't know."

"Okay, well, I might have company so...you know."

Justin smirked. "Guess you should've bought that dildo before now, then."

Daphne punched his arm and Justin winced. "See you, Brian," she called over her shoulder, avoiding any retaliation from Justin on her way out.

"See you."

Justin slammed the door and leaned against it for a long minute before shaking himself like a wet dog.

"Come here," Brian reached out with one arm. Justin's gaze was heavy as he launched himself over to the couch. Brian pulled him down, nuzzling his neck. "You smell good."

Justin sighed, and rubbed his hands over his face.

"Listen, it's not a big deal. I see people I've fucked every day."

Justin rolled his eyes and didn't even bother with saying, "That's different." Brian smirked. It was different and they both knew it. Still, Brian continued, "He's just a guy you fucked."

Justin shook his head. "I wish."

Brian studied Justin's face, looking for some sign about what was causing this much distress, and then he remembered how much it had hurt to see Justin when they were apart. Was that how Justin felt about seeing Ethan? Brian didn't want to think about that. He stroked Justin's neck and said, "Suck me."

Justin smiled, his eyes still sad, and then he slid down the couch to comply. Even Justin's hot mouth didn't block out Brian's unease. And that said a lot more than Brian wanted to admit.

Justin sat at the counter eating an omelet. Debbie had insisted he eat before he started work. She seemed convinced that Justin was incapable of feeding himself. Since he got free food, he didn't protest too much.

The diner was empty and early morning sun shafted through the windows and glinted on his fork. Justin stared at the light on the fork. He'd remember it for later. There was something there--a message that fit in with a piece he was working on.

"Justin?"

His stomach lurched and his heart stopped. Well, fuck fucking God almighty. Fuck Daphne and fuck Brian with their bullshit reassurances about Ethan not being a stalker, because why the fuck else was Ethan standing in the diner when he knew fucking well that Justin worked here? Son of a fucking--

"Ethan. Hi."

"I guess Daphne told you she'd seen me."

Justin picked at his omelet, took a tasteless bite, and let his fork fall. "How'd you guess?"

"Well you don't seem very surprised."

Justin smiled tight lipped. "Well, I have to admit that I'm surprised to see you here."

Ethan sighed heavily, adjusted his shoulder strap for his violin case. Justin shook his head, picked up his fork and tried to eat again. He felt like he was going to vomit.

"I'd hoped that you'd have reached a point where we could talk to one another like adults."

Justin closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Punching was not the way to handle this. And just why was he so fucking angry anyway? "All right, what do you want to talk about?"

Debbie burst from the kitchen and Justin let his head sink down, hoping she'd just let it--

"Well if it isn't the son of a bitch--"

Ethan bit his lip, looking at Justin with sad eyes.

"Debbie--" Justin stood up and steered Debbie back toward the kitchen "--please."

She stuck her finger in his face. "All right, but if he says one thing outta line, you just call me."

"I can take care of it, Deb. Thanks."

She straightened her apron and went into kitchen huffing dirty words under her breath. Justin sat down at the counter again and waited for Ethan to begin talking, or whatever it was he was here to do.

"Jus, I made a mistake. A terrible mistake--"

Justin raised his hand, stopping Ethan mid-sentence. "You should know I'm with Brian and I love him."

"I'd heard that you were back with him." Ethan closed his eyes, sank onto the stool next to Justin. "I guess I'd just hoped that it was for the money."

Justin scoffed. "I can not believe you just said that. You come in here with some dim plan to try to win me back and you call me a whore?" Justin stood up, gathered his plate. "Just leave. I don't need to hear any of your bullshit."

"Wait. Yeah, I wanted to see if you were--" Ethan grabbed Justin's arm to stop him from turning around. "But, okay, listen, it's more than that. I need to talk to you."

Justin rolled his eyes and jerked his arm away, swung the door to the kitchen open--

"Justin, I'm positive."

"You're what?"

Ethan lifted his hands, sighing.

Justin slowly placed his plate back on the counter, a swift glance to check, and, yeah, Deb was listening from the ticket window. "Since when?"

"I don't know. I thought--" He swallowed and then continued, "I thought it might have been you."

Justin choked. "Me?"

"Well, you were with Brian, and we all know--"

"He's not positive! I'm not positive!" Justin winced as he said it, a voice in the back of his mind reminding him that he hadn't been tested in awhile, not since just after he left Ethan.

"Well, regardless, I needed to let you know. And, Jus, I wasn't bullshitting you. I still care for you, and I am sorry. I made a terrible mistake."

Justin's was heart pounding and he realized he was holding his breath. He swallowed hard and tried to get a grip. "What--I mean, how are you? Are you doing okay? Who's taking care--"

Ethan put his hand on Justin's mouth. "Stop. I'm okay." His fingertips stayed on Justin's lips. "I've missed you."

Justin closed his eyes and turned his head away, dislodging Ethan's fingers.

"You never think of me, then?"

Justin took a deep breath and tried to steady himself. "Look, give me your number. I can't talk about this now."

Ethan used Justin's ticket pad and pen to jot down his number and address. Time seemed to stand still as he leaned in and kissed Justin's lips softly. "See you?"

"I'll call when I can think straight."

Ethan turned to leave and Justin's hand rose automatically to wipe the kiss away. He turned to Debbie when he heard the door swing open behind him.

"Sunshine...."

If he wasn't shaking so badly then he might have tried to play it off, but Debbie had her arms around him and he just couldn't stop trembling.

Brian unpacked the take-out boxes from the Thai place down the street, arranged them on the coffee table and dropped down to the floor to prepare his plate. Justin took a small helping of pad thai, keeping his head down; he'd been unnaturally subdued all evening.

Brian eyed Justin. "If I didn't know better, I'd think that Sunshine was keeping a secret."

"Am I not allowed to have secrets?" Justin asked quietly.

Well, fuck, then. This was worse than he thought. Brian grabbed Justin's wrist with the chopsticks half-way to his mouth. "Spill."

Justin stared into Brian's eyes for a long time before finally clearing his throat, jerking his arm away and saying, "Ethan came by the diner today."

Brian's heart rate picked up and he felt a coil of fear in his gut. He shoved it down hard. "Oh, yeah?"

Justin nodded.

Brian waited for a few minutes for Justin to continue, but was treated to nothing but averted eyes and silence. He measured the likelihood that Justin was doing this to fuck with him, and had just started to get pissed when he noticed the tell-tale signs of tears. Brian sighed asking, with what he hoped was a good measure of patience, "And?"

"And he wanted to talk to me." Justin met Brian's eyes then, head still tilted down, his expression pathetic. Brian nearly reached over to shake Justin when he didn't continue.

"What did he want?"

"I think he was going to try to convince me to give it another shot with him--" Justin held his gaze for a moment and looked away "--but I told him I was with you. Then he suggested I went with you for the money and I said that calling me a whore really wasn't the best way to win me back." Justin swallowed hard and gazed into Brian's eyes. "Then he told me that he's positive."

Brian's heart dropped and he sucked in a sharp breath. "Oh."

Justin nodded and his lip trembled, but he clamped down on it with his teeth. Brian scooted closer to Justin and wrapped an arm around his shoulder. He knew that it could be really hard when an ex-lover was diagnosed. He remembered how poorly Ben had taken it when his lover had died. Justin was a nurturer at heart, of course he'd be upset at this news. Brian frowned, the uncharitable notion that Ethan was making use of the disease to try to appeal to Justin's--

Wait. Ethan came to tell Justin he was positive.

Brian pulled away, held Justin at arms length and studied him. "Well, you were safe right?"

Justin covered his face.

"Justin?" Brian wasn't sure what his voice most conveyed: the anger, or the sheer terror that knifed through him. "You were fucking safe right?"

Justin started rocking and muttering, "Fuck, fuck, fuck," under his breath. Brian felt his stomach turn over.

Fuck really didn't cover it.

Justin lay on the bed and let the tears take him. He was alone now, so there was no need to hide. He clutched Brian's pillow and shook with the fierce sobs.

He didn't know what he'd expected but when Brian's face drained of blood, and his eyes turned coal-black, Justin had lost his shit. He'd stood up and pushed Brian away from him, screaming something about being disgusting and gross, waving his arms around, choking on repressed sobs and trembling like an addict in the middle of detox. He'd flung himself on the bed and wished fervently that he could die, or reverse time and take it all back, every last bit of fucked-up-ness that had ever led him to leave Brian in the first place.

He'd felt, more than saw, Brian in the doorway, and he yelled at him to get out, to go, to leave. He screamed at Brian that he wanted to be alone, to get the fuck away from him. Despite his theatrics, he'd hoped that Brian would climb into the bed and hold him until he stopped shaking. But he should have known better. Justin screamed into the pillow when he heard the slam of the loft door, signaling that Brian had taken him at his word.

Histrionics had never worked on Brian. Justin knew that, and he hadn't forgotten. He just needed to get it out. He'd been holding it inside for hours, trying to act okay at the diner after his brief melt-down when Ethan had left. Justin had even thought he'd keep it from Brian until he'd been tested; no need to worry Brian for nothing.

But he'd forgotten how closely Brian watched him now, ever vigilant for evidence that Justin would leave again; every school project subtly questioned to confirm that it wasn't another 'Ian', every time Justin showed up later than expected, he found Brian cautious and overly nonchalant. Brian protected himself against every indication that Justin might hurt him again--and what had Justin done? He'd hurt him again. He'd taken Ethan into his body without a condom, exposed himself, risked his life for the stupidest of all reasons--to soothe Ethan's jealousy--

and he'd never told a soul about it. He'd been ashamed even at the time. Worst of all, he'd never told Brian, probably putting him at risk as well, even though they were always safe, even though he hadn't topped since before Ethan. But, if anything happened to Brian, if he'd endangered him--

Justin sat up and wiped his face, rubbing his snotty nose on his sleeve; he didn't care if it was gross. He didn't care about much of anything. He could imagine where Brian had gone. He could imagine what Brian would think. He was probably hurt, fucking away his worry and rage. That was what Brian did. That was all he knew.

Justin cupped his head in his hands and looked around the bedroom through tear-weakened eyes. He didn't know if Brian would want him to be here when he came back--and, even worse, what if Brian returned with someone? He couldn't deal with that tonight. Not tonight.

Besides, did he even want to be here when Brian returned? Despite what he'd said, despite the hysteria, Brian shouldn't have left him alone. If Brian loved him--

Justin turned off those thoughts, knowing where they'd taken him in the past. He snorted when he had to acknowledge that those were the exact thoughts that had led him here, to this moment, to this terrifying place where he might be positive and all for what? Judging Brian's love was something he'd sworn he'd stop doing.

His bag was in the closet and he cleaned out the drawer next to the bed where he kept a few changes of clothes, grabbed his toothbrush, razor and deodorant from the bathroom, and splashed water on his face. He gazed at himself in the bathroom mirror, imagining the virus racing invisibly in his blood stream, waiting just under the surface of his skin to destroy him from the inside out.

Justin wiped his face on a towel and whispered to his reflection, staccato sentences of fear-drenched hope. "You're not positive. It means nothing. Don't panic. You don't know. It'll be okay." He wished Brian had been the one to say them.

He grabbed his bag and headed for the door.

Babylon throbbed around Brian, hot, wet suction on his cock tugging at his awareness. He clenched and unclenched his hand in short hair, dragging the trick closer, shoving deeper into his throat. All on auto-pilot because--

Brian was lost in a memory.

I want you safe. I want you around for a long time.

Why the fuck hadn't Justin listened to him? Christ. He'd told him! He'd tried to warn him that just because someone said they loved you.... Fuck! Brian pulled the trick's hair and thrust so hard the previously unnoticeable gag reflex clutched at his cock.

God. What if Justin was positive? What if Justin was a walking time bomb? Beautiful, brilliant--stupid fucking idiot, Justin! Goddamn him! Fuck! He doubled over a little, the pain slicing through his stomach again. The trick protested the violent thrusts of Brian's hips, grunting and struggling. Brian backed off, gained some control. He rubbed fingers over his eyes and tried to concentrate. The resolution of every pain waited in an orgasm. Assuming he could get there--which seemed less and less likely.

Images cut into his mind: Justin curled on the bed, shaking, fighting sobs, yelling at him to get the fuck away, to get out, to leave him alone. And he'd listened, seeking the one fail-safe solution to his anger and pain, but--since when had Justin ever meant anything he said when he was distressed? Justin was a dirty fighter; he lashed out cruelly when backed into a corner. Much like Brian, himself.

Fuck, he'd fucked up. Brian pushed the trick away, buttoned his pants. It was a mistake to come here, a mistake to leave Justin freaking out like that.

Somewhere along the way, old solutions seemed to have become part of the problem. Orgasm wasn't the answer. Keeping his head together, taking control, getting Justin tested, getting them both tested--

Being a man.

That was the solution.

Daphne was about to go ballistic. Justin sat on his bed, head resting on his knees while Daphne yelled for him.

"Fucking Christ! Brian left you there? To go out fucking himself into oblivion? Fuck him! You know, I hate to say it, because I love him madly, but he can be such a fucking, selfish prick!"

Justin hugged himself tighter, making himself as small as possible. He wasn't going to argue with her. The truth was the truth--Brian should have stayed. Even if he had screamed at Brian to leave.

"I'm going to tell him what I fucking think this time! Don't think I won't!"

Justin just nodded. She could do whatever the fuck she wanted. The one thing he wanted to do, he could never accomplish, anyway. He wanted to turn back time.

Daphne stopped pacing and stood in front of him. Justin met her eyes and saw that she was fighting tears, her lower lip caught in her teeth and her lashes wet. He reached out, whispering, "Daph, come here."

She immediately started to cry in earnest, crawling onto his bed and into his arms, clutching his shirt. "Tell me your not positive, Justin. Tell me that you're going to be okay."

"I don't know, Daph. I don't know."

He held her and she held him, taking comfort together. They rocked together for several minutes and both jerked at the sudden pounding on the door.

Justin asked, "Expecting anyone?"

Daphne shook her head and stood up. "I bet it's Brian."

"Brian doesn't 'go after' anyone. It's like rule number two, right after--"

"Brian Kinney doesn't do boyfriends? Come on, Justin, I know you're scared and your guard is up, but, Christ, give the guy a break."

"What happened to telling him what you think?"

Daphne narrowed her eyes. "Don't think I won't."

The pounding continued and Daphne finally seemed to realize that Justin wasn't going to get up. She sighed and shoved off the bed, wiping at her face and tugging at her clothes. Justin lay down, turning his back to the entrance of his room when she left to answer the door. Part of him hoped it was Brian and part of him dreaded the thought.

He still hadn't had to talk about it, hadn't had to explain the whole 'fucking raw' thing. Daphne wasn't pressing for details--yet. But he felt like he owed it to Brian. He needed to explain how he'd ended up letting Ethan fuck him without a condom--more than once. And Justin didn't want to remember that right now, or ever again.

"Thanks for your input, Daphne. I'm making a note of it and filing it under, 'Selfish Prick', right next to my mother's last invective against me. Now, get the fuck out of my way."

Justin curled into a tight ball when he heard Brian's voice. He didn't know what to think. Brian had come after him--maybe. Or maybe he'd come to tell him that he never wanted to see him again. Justin squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head. No, that wasn't Brian's style--but, neither was coming after him, so, it was hard to say--

The bed sank beneath Brian's weight and Justin rolled over, warily meeting his eyes. Brian frowned, reached out and touched Justin's cheek. "You okay?"

"Not really." Justin cleared his throat, looked at Brian's face trying to gauge the situation. "How about you?"

Brian smiled sadly. "Not really."

Justin grabbed Brian's hand and held it to his chest. "Yeah."

"Yeah."

Brian sat on the edge of Justin's bed feeling the heartbeat under his palm, staring at the floor, and fighting hard to keep under control. It was late, well after midnight. Justin should be asleep, safe and sound in his bed, or Brian's, dreaming of color, palettes, paint and canvas. Instead they both sat in heavy silence, Brian trying not to let his mind go where the heartbeat under his palm was trying to lure it--the place where that heartbeat stopped.

Brian cleared his throat and said to the blue and green carpet on the floor of Justin's room, "We shouldn't jump to conclusions. You need to get tested, but there's a good chance you're all right."

"Maybe."

Brian closed his eyes, clenched his jaw and steeled himself for the conversation. "Did he say who infected him?"

Justin clutched at Brian's hand and pressed it harder against his chest. Brian turned to him, felt a chill run down his spine. Justin's eyes were cagey again. "He didn't know," Justin said softly. "He said that he thought it might've been me, but--" Justin shook his head.

"You were barely together six months." Brian let the unsaid observation about time elapsed between partners and common sense about HIV prevention speak for itself.

"He said he'd been celibate for five months prior--" Justin interrupted. "There was no reason to think he was lying." Justin shifted uncomfortably. "The risk seemed to be all his, in a way, since I was the one who'd been with you." A hot blush rose on Justin's face, something Brian hadn't seen in awhile. "Since he was the one to--" Justin covered his eyes with his fingertips.

"Top," Brian finished for him.

Justin nodded behind his hands, silent for several moments, before saying, "I thought it was his decision to make, I guess." Justin let his hands fall, pressing Brian's palm harder against his chest, as though afraid he would pull back.

Brian nodded, kept his face as neutral as possible. He knew this was touch and go; he needed to remain calm or Justin would clam up, or possibly queen out again. Brian swallowed hard, and asked, "How long and how often?"

Justin released Brian's hand and rolled away, facing the wall. Brian smoothed his palm down Justin's arm, twined his fingers through Justin's and scooted closer so that he could see Justin's profile. His eyes were closed.

"I guess I should tell you everything." Justin licked his lips and gripped Brian's hand.

Brian waited silently, although he wasn't sure how much he really wanted to know. The thought that Justin had truly loved Ethan made his stomach twist, and the idea that Ethan had been inside of Justin without protection, raw, made him so jealous that he wanted to fillet the violin-playing prick slowly, and in inches. But he didn't have to; most likely the disease would do it for him.

Justin let the memories come to the surface. He'd spent a lot of energy in the last six months trying to keep these bodies at the bottom of the lake. They'd kept floating up to haunt him, startling him at the oddest times: in the middle of lunch rush at the diner, while laughing with Michael over new ideas for Rage, and more than once when he was on his knees for Brian. The hot flush of hurt and shame would overtake him, and in a near panic, he'd hasten to plunge them beneath the surface of his consciousness again.

But now he had to face it all. So, for the first time since that god-awful month between leaving Ethan and remembering that Brian had loved him for his balls, he let it all come up again. He knew he was fucked when his throat clogged with repressed tears. There was no way he would make it through this without crying.

He concentrated on the stable warmth of Brian's thigh and hip curved along his back, the strong fingers in his, and the weight of Brian's body as he leaned against him to see his face. Just a few more deep breaths and he would begin. In and out.

"I never planned to leave, you know." Justin kept his eyes closed, his voice hoarse and tight. "I was just so fucking angry."

Brian's free hand stroked his back. Justin was surprised to hear Brian whisper, "I know. I know you were angry."

A soft knock on the door interrupted the moment. "Justin?"

He cursed under his breath, rubbed a hand over his face and called out, "Yeah, Daph?"

"Do you both have your clothes on?"

"Would it matter?" Justin answered, rolling his eyes and turning onto his back.

Daphne pushed the door open and leaned against the jamb, looking between him and Brian. She crossed her arms over her chest and said, "If you're okay, Justin, and if Brian is going to stay with you, I thought I'd give you some privacy and go to Phillip's."

"Yeah, thanks, Daph."

Daphne glared at Brian. "Are you going to stay here? Or are you going to leave again if things get ugly? Because if you're going to--"

Brian stood up, pushed Daphne out the door, shut and locked it behind him.

Daphne called from the other side, "All right, Brian, you'd better take care of him. Justin, call me if you need me."

They were silent until they heard Daphne's keys turn in the front lock.

Justin took the opportunity to examine Brian's expression and to be examined in return. He didn't know what Brian took away from their mutual reading of each other's face, but he felt relieved that he didn't see any disgust there, just fear, and sadness.

Brian broke the silence. "You've got a fucking pushy fag hag."

"The best."

"I'll give her points for loyalty and for being kind of hot."

Justin managed to chuckle. "I'll be sure to tell her you said that. She'll be waiting naked on the sofa with her legs spread the next time you come over."

"You kiss your mother with that mouth?"

Justin wrinkled his nose. "I'm sorry. That was disgusting, wasn't it?"

"That was a humor break." Brian frowned, growing serious again. "As much as I want to avoid this fucking subject, let's just get it over with. As my dear old dad used to say, bitches are never prettier in the morning."

Justin felt his stomach surge, but he knew Brian was right. Waiting never helped anything. Even so, he had to know that Brian would listen, that he wouldn't just bail after Justin bared his soul. "Let's go out to the living room. It'd be better to talk about it out there, I guess. Face to face."

When they'd settled on the sofa, facing one another, a little further apart than Justin felt was entirely necessary, but recognizing the fact that a small movement would bring them close enough to touch, Justin tried to compose his emotions and began. "Brian, I need you to promise to hear me out, because I've got a lot that I need to tell you. Some things I should have told you a long time ago."

It only took a few seconds for Brian to meet Justin's eyes. "I promise."

"When I woke up in the hospital after the bashing, I felt different inside, like I was a different person. I guess the only way to explain it is--I felt like Justin had died and I was someone else, you know? Someone who still had some things in common with Justin, like his face, his body, his family, being gay, being in love with you--" Justin smiled sadly at that.

"Everything else though seemed completely foreign, like all of my priorities had shifted. What I believed about myself, what I believed about life and, well, the whole fucking world, really--it was all different. I remembered who I was before, how I felt inside and I knew that I wasn't that person anymore." Justin frowned. "I started to believe that maybe Chris Hobbes really had killed me after all. Or the best part of me, at least."

Justin closed his eyes for a moment, relieved when Brian scooted a little closer and put a hand on Justin's knee.

"That's when I started to get angry." Justin opened his eyes again, his throat tightening. "My dad never came to visit. You never came. I wanted to see you so much, and it hurt--" Justin cleared his throat "--it really fucking hurt that you never came. The two most important men in my life didn't fucking show up when I needed them. I was so fucking pissed off at you, Brian. So pissed off."

He dared a glance at Brian's face and saw no anger in the averted eyes, just the haunted look that always came when Justin brought up the bashing.

"It was weird, because at first I wasn't at all focused on being angry with Chris Hobbes for nearly killing me, or fucking up my hand and my life. I was furious with you and my dad, and determined that I was going to get out of that hospital and give you both a piece of my fucking mind."

Brian sucked in a breath. "I know what a fucking, selfish, prick I am, okay? I don't see what this has to do with--"

"It has everything to do with." Justin grabbed Brian's hand before he could pull it away, holding it firmly against his knee. "Don't you think it's time this was all out in the open? I mean, shit, Brian--I'm probably positive--"

"Justin, fuck, you're such a queen. We don't fucking know that, do we? We don't know anything; you haven't been tested, for fuck's sake. For all we know, you're going to be okay. Why do you need so much fucking drama?"

Justin shook his head. "No, Brian. I could be looking at a possible death sentence for some really fucking bad decisions I've made. I could have infected you. How much worse can it be if we just lay it all out on the table? Like your dad said? Bitches aren't--"

Brian finished, "Any prettier the next morning." Then he nodded, shoulders hunched and resignation in his voice. "My dad also said that putting meat in the sun leads to nothing but maggots."

"Uh, your dad was a--" Justin furrowed his brow "--man of many strange proverbs. But so the fuck what?"

Brian snorted, shaking his head with disgust. The inherent self-loathing attached to the action led Justin to reach out in comfort, but Brian pushed his hands away, rejecting his attempt, and forcing them back on topic. "Well, I promised, and a deal's a deal, right?" Brian smiled grimly. "Let's see those fucking maggots."

"Some things it doesn't do any good to remember, you know?" Justin began, dropping Brian's hands. "And some things are fucking impossible to forget. After awhile, I stopped letting myself be angry with you and just focused on getting better so that I could see you. It's embarrassing to say, but you sort of became my reason for living. I wanted to find out why you never came; I wanted to be with you again."

Justin shifted so that he could better see Brian's eyes. "I started having these dreams where I'd be out of the hospital and I'd go to the loft to see you, I'd be so fucking excited, but when the door slid open, it was Chris Hobbes--not you. Jesus, it doesn't take a psychoanalyst to see that I had unresolved anger issues when it came to you."

Brian looked up guiltily, then ducked his head again. Justin took one of his hands. "I'm not going to apologize for that. I had every right to be angry. You should have come to the hospital. You should have visited me."

Brian nodded.

Justin continued, "You know how I said earlier that Chris Hobbes killed part of me? It scared me shitless when I realized that it was gone." He broke off waving his free hand around, looking for words. "It's like, suddenly the world was the enemy, everyone was a threat, and I stopped being able to find meaning in my life on my own. Everything was just a fight to be won or lost. Everything seemed so life and death, in a way."

Justin had no idea if he was making sense, but Brian was nodding and listening as though he understood.

"And when I got out of the hospital, you were everything to me," Justin admitted, not missing Brian's flinch at those words and the weakness they reflected. "Yeah, you were everything, and for awhile it seemed like I was everything to you, too."

Brian pulled his hand away, a warning in his tone when he said, "Justin...."

"Brian--" Justin scooted close enough that Brian couldn't escape his eyes, ducking his head to keep Brian's gaze. "--it's no good to expect someone to be everything. But, you can't tell me you don't love me, can you?"

Brian stayed silent, but his face said everything. Justin leaned forward and Brian kissed him, sweetly, softly, and he fumbled for Justin's hand again. The kiss threatened to become heated, and as much as Justin wanted an excuse to shut the fuck up, and put this all off until later, he pulled back, wiping the spit from Brian's lips with his thumb.

"So, I was in a fucked up place, and I'd put you in an untenable position--alternately raging at you on the inside, and clinging to you for safety. That's when the whole thing went fucking insane, because then I was pissed at you for letting me need you, for making me dependent on you. And the craziest thing--I was so fucking angry that you could remember the prom and the bashing, and that I couldn't."

"God, Justin, fuck. I wish I could have forgotten it."

Justin smiled, his lips twisting nastily. "Sometimes I dream about it--the prom, I mean--and I'm not sure if it's real, you know? I don't know if it's something that I've made up from the versions I've heard from you and Daph, or--" Justin snorted. "But, here's the crazy part, I was most pissed off that you wanted to forget."

Brian's eyes went wide.

"I was fucking furious that you had this memory and I wanted it so much but you wanted to get rid of it. I know this is insane, but I felt like you wanted to get rid of the part of me I'd lost and then it'd be gone forever. I felt like you wished you'd never taken me home that night, never seen me under that streetlight--" Justin broke off when Brian turned his head away. "Brian, hey, I know that you've thought all of those things more than once, and I'm not angry anymore, because, after awhile, I thought them, too."

Brian wasn't sure he was ready for all this...honesty.

Justin cupped his chin, and kissed his lips again. "It's okay to feel that way. It's okay to think sometimes that maybe we would've been better off if we'd never met--"

Brian felt his stomach flip, because, Christ, he wouldn't have been better off, and he knew that now.

Justin smiled, softly, like he knew what Brian was thinking. "Because, in the end, we both know that's bullshit."

"Is it? Wouldn't it have been better for you? You never would have been bashed. I'd never have hurt you. You never would have been with Ethan. This--" Brian gestured to indicate their current predicament "--would never have happened. Maybe I should have left you alone that night. I knew you were just a kid--"

"Fuck you," Justin whispered, a smile sneaking across his face. "You love to play the martyr, so shut the fuck up."

"Martyr?"

"Drama queen." Justin kissed him again to keep him quiet, and Brian didn't protest, pulling Justin flush against him, trying to up the passion a notch to distract Justin from the whole course of conversation.

"Didn't you get off at Babylon?" Justin whispered against his lips before backing away.

"As a matter of fact, no."

"We probably shouldn't do anything until we're tested, anyway."

Brian rolled his eyes. "Give me a fucking break." He leaned in and started on the button of Justin's jeans.

"Brian," Justin said, batting at his hands. "I'm trying to talk to you--" he gasped when Brian pushed him back, grabbed the legs of Justin's pants and jerked them off his hips "--about important--Christ!"

Justin's head fell back as Brian sucked his cock deep. Brian glanced up, wondering how long before Justin--ah, yes, there was the responsible boy--Justin's hands grasped his hair trying to pull him off. "Stop it, Brian. Stop."

Brian sucked hard one more time and let Justin's cock slide from his mouth, before wrapping his palm around it and jerking slowly. "Come on, one quick orgasm to loosen us both up from all this conversation bullshit."

Justin's eyes were already dilated and Brian knew that he'd won when Justin's slim hips undulated, thrusting against his hand. Brian fumbled with his own jeans, and managed to get them down to mid-thigh, enough to get friction on his cock from Justin's leg.

With his back against the sofa, and his body pressed to Justin's side, he pushed Justin's shirt up and sucked a kiss into Justin's stomach, drawing a red mark to the surface. He used his free hand to hold Justin tightly, rutting against him in the same fast rhythm he was using on Justin's cock. It'd been awhile since frottage had been his outlet of choice, but Justin always had driven him a little mad with lust. The little shit knew it, too.

He shoved Justin's shirt up further, kept his open mouth to Justin's side and watched the flush spread up his chest. When Justin's head started rolling back and forth on the arm of the couch, his hands gripping the pillows, and the hot little noises he made when he was close started sliding from his lips, Brian upped the pace and felt his own orgasm building.

Justin's eyes were closed, his mouth open, and Brian couldn't tear his eyes away--always so fucking hot. When Justin froze and arched up, come shooting onto his chest, Brian felt his own release pulse through him, hot and wet between his pelvis and Justin's thigh.

Now, that was so much better than talking.

Justin blinked and ran a hand over his face. Fuck, why was even a fucking hand job so goddamn good with Brian? Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Jesus Christ, Brian, can't we have one conversation without fucking?"

Brian sat up carefully, reaching for the Kleenex on the coffee table. "We talk at least once a day without fucking. Sometimes more. And, tell me, where's the fun in that?"

Justin kind of wondered the same thing, but--fuck. They were talking about important things. What the fuck were they talking about anyway?

Brian wiped the come from their bodies and Justin let him, trying to remember where the fuck he'd left off in the very important conversation they'd been having.

When he had his pants back on, and Brian was leaning over him, trying to nuzzle and kiss him, Justin finally remembered what he'd been trying to say. "I was really fucking angry with you when I left."

Brian sighed and pulled back. "Nice mood killer, Sunshine. Thanks."

Justin pushed Brian off, struggling to a sitting position. He ran a hand over his face and prepared himself for the task of making Brian listen to him.

"I started fucking Ethan because I wanted something you wouldn't give me."

Brian groaned and fell back on the opposite side of the couch. "Let's not talk about you fucking Ethan. As my dear old dad used to say--"

"Brian, godammit, you are going to fucking listen to me. You promised."

A long moment passed with Justin's words hanging in the air, and Brian sat up, entirely sober and serious. "Okay, I'm listening. You started fucking Ethan because he loved you in the way you wanted, right? He wouldn't interrupt you to jerk you off, now would he, Sunshine? No, I'm sure he'd have hung on every fucking word."

Justin raised an eyebrow. "Brian, shut the fuck up."

He knew Brian too well. Things were getting too intense, time to deflect, even to the point of starting an argument if need be, in order to keep from getting wounded. Well, that was too fucking bad. The damage was done.

"I never wanted to leave you. I never planned to go. If Michael had kept his mouth shut--"

"You'd still be fucking the fiddler."

Justin shrugged. "Maybe. I don't hold a grudge on that front any more. I was--God, Brian, I was so fucking angry that I can't even tell you. Whenever I tried to get a grasp on my life, to take control, it backfired and left me even more dependent on you.

"When I worked for Sap, I was so fucking desperate to get some sense of myself back. I was willing to essentially--no, actually, prostitute myself for a sense of independence from you. And, Christ, I was almost gang raped because of it." Justin held his hand up to stop Brian's question. "I never told you. I never planned to tell you. I'm telling you now, and I'll answer questions later, but for now, you're going to fucking listen to me."

Brian's eyebrows went up in acknowledgement, and he kept his mouth shut.

Justin continued, "I was trapped, emotionally trapped, in a situation where you were the only one I could look to for every fucking thing in my life. And the emotional things, the trappings of romance and love, that I thought meant something--well, you just wouldn't give me what I needed.

"I told myself all kinds of things: You think he loves you, Justin? He doesn't even know you. He got a hustler for your birthday when it would have fucking made your day if he'd given you a magazine subscription, or a goddamn set of art pencils." Justin's hands were flying around and he tried to tame them back into his lap. He was letting emotion run amok and Brian's intense expression let him know that he was close to taking it too far. But he couldn't resist, he let the hurt show on his face as he asked, "A hustler, Brian? A hustler?"

Brian closed his eyes and shrugged. Justin let it go because it was one of those bodies that needed to remain at the bottom of the lake. Maybe now that he'd mentioned it the cement blocks would hold and prevent it from rising again.

"So Ethan showed up at just the right juncture, offering me something that you didn't seem to understand that I needed--or else you just didn't care."

Brian sighed, put out. "Of course, I fucking cared, Justin. But I'm not a goddamn--"

"Lesbian. Yes, I know. I'm not either, in case you hadn't noticed. That cock you had in your mouth a few minutes ago? That was mine. The only pussy in this apartment belongs to Daphne."

Brian fell silent and Justin didn't give him a chance to say more.

"You remember that night I wanted you to have a picnic with me on the floor of the loft?" Justin waited until he saw the memory register in Brian's eyes. "That's the first night I fucked him--or, rather, he fucked me."

The tightening of Brian's jaw was the only indication of the jealousy Justin knew he felt.

"And, you know, looking back, I should have known what I was doing and why, just based on that. I let him fuck me. You know, I really only let you fuck me. In general, I'm pretty much a top. But with you, with Ethan, I'm a bottom.

"I wanted to believe that it was because I loved Ethan, that I respected and admired him. That I wanted him in my body because he was beautiful, talented and amazing. The truth is--" Justin held Brian's eyes, surprised at how easy it was to say these barbed words. "I let him fuck me to hurt you." He smirked and lifted up his hands. "And look--I succeeded beyond my wildest dreams--completely fucking over myself in the process."

Brian blinked rapidly, and Justin had to restrain himself from reaching out to comfort. This was the reality, this was the truth, and fuck it all if they didn't both have to live with it.

"And when he wanted to fuck me raw, I said okay because I wanted to hurt you. And I wanted to hurt me. I wanted that most of all." Justin closed his eyes and shook his head, willing a way to turn back the clock. "It was the night of the Carnival for the Gay and Lesbian Center. I came home and found him waiting for me. I'd left him at a party to go to the Carnival and he'd gotten suspicious. You know the score, once a cheater, always a cheater." Justin smiled bitterly. "He accused me of going to see you. I lied and said I'd wanted to see what my posters had been advertising. " Justin dropped his eyes, this was the hard part, the humiliating part. "Prove it, he said. Prove it."

Justin shrugged, his throat closed up and tears welled in his eyes. "Fuck me! I'm so fucking fucked in the head!" He rested his head in his hands and fought the tears. "Shit. I'm sorry."

He was surprised to feel Brian's hand in his hair and a Kleenex being stuffed into his palm. Brian's voice was quiet and oddly calm when he said, "It's okay. It's just allergies."

It was three in the morning and Brian had heard enough. He'd definitely fulfilled his promise to the letter, finding out more than he wanted to stomach about Justin and Ethan fucking raw. Apparently, it had been five times altogether, over the course of four months. He couldn't think about it any more deeply than that. Something inside of him just clicked off and it was like the words were incomprehensible to him.

From the dark circles under Justin's eyes, and his hands shaking with exhaustion, Brian could tell that he was tired. The conversation was officially over. It was enough for both of them, at least for the night, and hopefully forever. It was imperative that they get tested immediately to put them both at ease, and then they could just forget all about it. Or try to forget.

As Brian waited for Justin to get out of the bathroom, he realized that he'd never slept over at Justin's before. There just hadn't seemed to be a reason, but looking around, seeing the particulars of Justin's home, he thought that maybe he should have made a point of it.

The room smelled like Justin, and it felt like Justin. There was a collage of pictures taped to the mirror over the small chest of drawers. Brian made note of a photo of himself and Gus playing on the floor of the loft; he remembered when Justin had taken that picture with his new digital camera.

The collage featured many pictures of him, but Brian was a little surprised to find that he wasn't the main feature on the little altar to their make-shift family. There were several photos of Molly, a few of Jennifer, and even one of the entire Taylor family, back when Molly had been just a baby. And others, all of their friends smiling, hugging, laughing together--Lindsay and Michael, Gus and Melanie, Debbie, Emmett and Ben, Daphne and Justin, Ted, Emmett and Debbie, Ted and Lindsay. Even one of Brian and Michael sitting together at the diner.

Brian liked the room, and when Justin came in from the bathroom, naked as the day he was born, he told him so. Justin smiled and just nodded, crawling into the bed. Brian stripped to join him, flipped off the lamp, and the shadows settled in the wake of the lights going out.

"Maybe you could bring some things to the loft."

Justin snorted.

Brian had to agree that the idea was absurd. But maybe one day....

When they curled together in the small bed, Brian lay awake long after Justin had fallen into sleep, studying the paintings on the wall. They had been vibrant, brilliant, and alive in the light, but now, in the darkness, they had faded into shades of gray. For some reason, the change frightened him, made him hold Justin a little tighter, made him close his eyes against the sight, and pray for sleep.

Justin woke up cramped and still exhausted, but too jacked up on nerves to sleep anymore. Brian must have been uncomfortable, or perhaps he was also too anxious to have slept well, because his eyes were already open when Justin rolled over towards him.

At the loft they had a morning routine that involved minimal words, mainly grunts and hand gestures to negotiate the timing of the shower, shaving, and coffee. But here there was no autopilot.

"Wanna shower first?"

Brian sat up, crawled over Justin to get off the bed, and then stood, staring at the painting on the wall next to the door. Justin looked at it, too. It was one of his favorites--a pink circle, covered in yellow and white, splashed like egg on the canvas, then a shining blue fork stabbing down as though from the heavens.

"Brian?" There was no response. "The towels are in the cabinet next to the sink."

Still Brian didn't move.

"What's wrong? Is it that bad?" he asked, trying for humor.

"No. It's...." Brian trailed off. "I want to buy it from you."

Justin resisted the urge to reach out and slap Brian's ass. Instead he rolled out of bed, too, taking Brian's arm and pulling him toward the bathroom. "We'll shower together."

And, considering they shouldn't really be doing anything until they'd both been tested, that may not have been the best idea. Brian's hands, slippery with soap, were all over him before he was even completely in the shower. Justin laughed a little when Brian's fingers found his ticklish spots as he straightened Daphne's Hello Kitty shower curtain to make sure the water didn't splash out.

Brian turned him around, and pushed him against the wall.

"Wait, we can't--"

"Shh." Brian covered him from behind, and Justin wriggled against his warm, wet body; Brian's erection sliding between his ass cheeks, but not pressing against him for entry. He rested his face against the cool tiles as Brian began to move, his hand dropping to stroke himself in time to Brian's rutting against his ass.

It was fast. Justin came quickly, and Brian came just a few minutes later. The shower washed away the evidence as they soaped one another up, and rinsed off. As the brief mental respite of sex wore off, the memories of their conversation the night before welled up, and he struggled with feelings of shame.

He'd never wanted Brian to know those things. He worried that he'd fallen in Brian's eyes, but he couldn't find that sentiment reflected in Brian's touch, or kiss.

As he toweled off, he broke the last of the bad news to Brian. "We don't have any coffee."

Brian looked at him as though he'd said that he no longer liked cock.

"We can go to the diner?" Justin lifted his brows, and smiled sweetly.

After he'd had two cups of coffee, Brian brought up the painting again. He felt a draw to it, like if he hung it up in the loft, then part of Justin would be there no matter what. It didn't make sense; it was purely from his gut.

"I'll give you \$600 for the painting," he said, sipping his coffee.

"Brian, if you want the painting, I'll give it to you for free."

"What kind of artist gives their shit away for free?"

Justin smiled at him and shrugged. "Okay, if you insist, then I accept your offer."

"What offer?" Debbie demanded, setting down Justin's omelet and Brian's pieces of toast. She snapped her gum and put her hands on her hips looking between them both.

"I was telling Justin here that I'd pay him \$600 to suck my cock under the table right now."

Debbie rolled her eyes. "It's always about you and your fucking cock, isn't it? What about Sunshine's cock for a change? You should fucking blow him under the goddamn table!"

Brian nodded and studied Justin's ridiculously innocent face, before saying, "You're right, Debbie. Justin, I'll pay you \$600 to let me suck your cock under the table. Right now."

"Okay."

Brian started to slide to the floor when Debbie kicked him. "Stop that, you asshole. Now eat your breakfast before it gets fucking cold!"

The bell rang in the kitchen and she took off at full tilt, but only after bopping Brian on the back of the head. He made a show of rubbing it and frowning.

Justin chewed slowly, his worries resting heavy on his face. "Is the clinic open on Saturdays?"

Brian nodded. He dreaded it every time he was tested, but they needed to know, to put their minds at ease.

"Can we go?"

"Right now?" Brian indicated their coffee and breakfasts.

"Yes."

A glance at his watch told him that the clinic wouldn't be open for another hour. "Finish your breakfast."

Justin took another bite of omelet, and Brian watched him eat it with the attentiveness of a mama bird feeding her baby. It seemed somehow important that Justin eat, as though it would make a difference in the way things turned out.

"Stop staring at me. You're making me feel weird."

Brian turned back to his toast and coffee, but Justin kept talking. "Oh, fucking great. Christ. I told him I'd call. Jesus."

Brian didn't need to turn around to know that Ethan Gold had just come into the diner, and the rise of heat in Justin's eyes let him know that his partner wasn't fucking happy about it in the least.

"What are you doing here? I told you I'd call."

Ethan looked between them both, and Justin wanted to punch him. The urge was so strong that he was tempted to sit on both of his hands, because he just didn't know if he'd be able to stop himself.

"I wanted to let you know that I got a phone call last night from a guy I knew a few years ago. He'd heard that I was positive, and he was calling to tell me that he was, too. So, it looks like it might've been him."

Justin fought hard to swallow his mouthful of omelet, the taste gagging him along with the news. He fell completely silent, trying to process the words, and heard Brian say nastily, "Thanks for the information, Ian. We sincerely and truly appreciate it. Now, fuck off."

Justin wished suddenly that he wasn't on the opposite side of the booth from Brian. He felt too exposed and vulnerable. It was all too easy for Ethan to slide in next to him. Oh, Christ.

Ethan put his arm around Justin's shoulder, attempting a half-hug. "Jus, it's going to be okay."

Justin nodded, shrugged, trying to dislodge Ethan's arm, and said, "Sure. Yeah, I know that." Ethan smiled and Justin remembered that he wasn't really that bad of a guy. He was just not entirely honest, but, then again, neither was Justin.

Ethan leaned forward to nuzzle Justin's cheek, whispering in his ear, "I promise it's all going to be okay."

More empty promises. Suddenly Justin was overwhelming glad that Brian hadn't promised him anything last night, hadn't declared that everything would be fine. Brian didn't lie like that. He pushed Ethan off of him, muttering, "Yeah, sure."

That's when he noticed Brian's eyes had grown frighteningly dark, and his knuckles were white on his coffee mug. Justin shivered at the inherent threat when Brian said, "I told you to fuck off. And I meant fuck off, now."

Half of Justin expected Ethan to fight back, to say something about Brian's jealousy, and miss the point of Brian's righteous anger. But that wasn't what happened, instead, Ethan stood up again, his face sorrowful and tired. "I'm sorry, Jus. I truly am. I wish things were different. Please let me know how you are...."

"I will. I've got your number."

"Use it any time."

"I'll let you know about the test," Justin hedged.

"Great."

Brian snorted, and leaned far back in the booth. Ethan nodded to him before walking away, an obvious concession to Brian's victory, or perhaps an apology for the situation. The chiming door signaled the exit of the villain of the piece, and Brian turned back to his coffee like Ethan had never been there.

Justin said, "If he got it from...."

Brian interrupted. "We don't know for sure where he got it from, so, there is every possibility that he wasn't even positive when you were together. Stop being such a drama queen; Christ, didn't we have enough last night?"

Justin shrugged.

"Listen, eat your breakfast, then we'll go. We'll both feel better when it's over."

Justin thought he might be put off omelets forever. Only bad news seemed to come from eating them. The omelet tasted like sawdust, but Justin finished it anyway.

Brian thought he should be given the fucking Nobel Peace Prize for the self-restraint he'd shown in the diner. He hadn't clocked Ethan, he hadn't castrated him, he hadn't even speared the smarmy, little, lying, fiddle-playing, twat with choice words. It had taken everything in him not to murder the bastard on the spot. He'd decided that

going to jail wouldn't be a constructive move to make today, not with everything else so up in the air, and Justin so upset. Once this was over, though? All bets were off.

Brian thought he might have to nail Justin's tapping foot to the floor before he went insane from the constant jiggling. He simply touched Justin's knee for the fifth time in the last hour then ran his hand soothingly up Justin's side, and over his shoulders, gripping the back of his neck firmly.

"We'll ask them to do the spit test. It's fastest."

Justin frowned. "But it's more expensive, and I don't have insurance."

Brian took a steadying breath. Fuck! Insurance! He hadn't even thought of that. If Justin was positive that would mean.... He shook his head. No, Justin would not be positive. "I'll pay for it. It's not a big deal."

Justin nodded, covered his face again, and slumped against Brian's side.

"Mr. Taylor? Mr. Kinney?" The nurse spoke from the doorway, her scrubs covered in colorful clown-faces and Brian decided the woman must be a sadist, because no one with any compassion would submit another human being to that. "You asked to be seen together?"

Justin stood up first, and Brian followed him, a steadying hand on his shoulder. The narrow hallway led to the typical room. A table covered in that crinkly doctor's office paper was the only place to sit, so he joined Justin on it, putting his arm around Justin's shoulder.

"I'm just going to take your vitals, temperature, bp, etc." the nurse murmured, popping thermometers into their mouths, and hooking Justin's arm up to the blood pressure machine. Several minutes later, she'd left the room, dropping their charts into the slot on the back of the door, saying cheerfully, "Dr. Rosa will be with you in a few minutes."

Justin started pacing then, back and forth--to the sink with the antiseptic soap, turn, to the wall with the eye chart, turn. Brian watched him for a few minutes, then closed his eyes, heaved a sigh, and buried his face in his hands. He felt nauseous, and that woman's fucking clowns hadn't helped any!

"Brian, if I die--"

Brian had to restrain himself from slapping Justin for that. Instead, he grabbed him, slammed his hand over Justin's mouth, and said, "Shut up. Don't. Stop. Sit down, and just...don't."

Justin's wide eyes filled with tears, and Brian felt like shit. He shifted to pull Justin between his legs, and held him tight, whispering in his ear, "You are going to live for a long time."

"You don't know that. I could die in an accident tomorrow."

Brian rolled his eyes. "Fine. Even if you did," he switched into his most sweetly sarcastic tone, "you'll live in the hearts and minds of your loved ones for eternity." He lifted Justin's chin, and shifted gears. "Now cut this shit out." He didn't want to see the hurt again, so he kissed him.

Justin melted into his arms, turning his face to nuzzle Brian's cheek. They didn't move apart when they heard the door open, and petite Dr. Rosa walked in. She was everyone on Liberty Avenue's favorite doctor at the clinic. She was warm, motherly, and often smelled like oatmeal cookies.

"Brian, good to see you. You're a little early for your regular check up, aren't you? You were just tested two months ago. Is there a reason that you're here to be tested today?" Her voice was mild, but there was just a hint of concern that warmed it considerably.

He rubbed the back of Justin's neck. "My partner here thinks he might have been exposed to the virus."

Dr. Rosa nodded, turning her dark eyes on Justin. "I see, so Justin, can you give me any idea of the last time you had sex with the infected individual?"

Brian smiled a little. He always liked the way Dr. Rosa was carefully gender neutral when it came to sexual partners. It as a casual thing, but one that he noted, and it said a lot to him about Dr. Rosa; it was, in fact, one of the very reasons he preferred to see her over any other physician.

Justin turned to face her, not leaving the safety of his place between Brian's thighs. "I guess it was six months ago now? Right, Brian?"

Brian nodded.

"Yeah, six months ago. It seems like a lot longer than that." Justin sighed heavily then offered up, "We, um, the guy from six months ago and I, had..." Justin rushed ahead, "unsafe sex. And so I'm worried about myself, and I'm worried about Brian."

Dr. Rosa lowered her eyebrows and echoed Justin's sigh. She flipped through both of their charts for a moment, biting her lips, and frowning. "Well, it does seem to have been awhile since you were last tested, Justin. So, this is probably a good idea anyway." Brian could tell she was holding back, because what good would a safe sex lecture do now?

"I'll send the nurse in to take your blood--"

Brian interrupted. "We want to do the new saliva test."

"Well, Brian, that'll be fine, so long as you are aware that it won't be covered by your insurance."

Brian shrugged.

"All right, then. I'll send Patty in to perform the test. She'll swab your mouths, and the results should be back twenty to thirty minutes after that. Do you have any questions about the test, or anything else, before I get her?"

"Yes," Brian began. "Can you send someone in who isn't wearing fucking clowns? Justin is afraid of clowns."

He heard Justin's snort of denial, and Dr. Rosa smirked at him. "Ookay, Brian. No problem. I'll send Jacob in to do the test instead."

"Yes, send Jacob." Brian smiled; if he had to go through emotional hell in the next half an hour, he wanted at least to have his mouth swabbed by Jacob. "He's hot."

Justin elbowed him, muttering, "How can you think of sex right now?"

Brian nuzzled his neck as Dr. Rosa made her exit. "Better to think of sex than to think of...."

"Death."

"I told you to cut that shit out. I was referring to thinking of clowns."

"Right."

Justin moved to sit beside him again, and they waited in silence.

The swabbing was painless, and Jacob was hot, and flirted with him and not Brian, which made Justin feel ridiculously smug inside, but it only lasted until Jacob had left the room. Then it was time to wait, and he'd never been good at waiting. Hell, that'd been how he'd met Brian to begin with. He just couldn't wait another minute to get fucked in the ass.

Brian was actually pretty good at waiting, which was always surprising to Justin, but it was like, when you least expected it, Brian would find this well of patience and get all zen-like. It was kind of freaky. Justin was the opposite--he had lots of patience, except when it mattered the most. Then he acted out, made bad decisions, fucked Ethan raw. Stupid shit like that.

"Sit down."

"No," Justin answered, pacing and pacing.

"Fine," Brian sighed and then lay back on the crinkly paper, shifting to take up the whole table.

After what seemed like a year, maybe three, the door opened and Dr. Rosa and Jacob came in, her expression serious, but carefully neutral. Jacob wouldn't meet his eyes. Brian swung up from his prostrate position, his mouth hanging open. Justin was going to vomit. He was going to vomit right fucking now.

Dr. Rosa motioned for him to sit down next to Brian, and somehow his wooden legs carried him to the table, and he lifted himself onto it. Brian's hand on his back was the only sensation he felt in the room, and he worried for a moment that he wouldn't hear Dr. Rosa when she spoke due to the buzzing in his ears.

"Brian, everything looks fine with your sample. Justin, we're just going to take a little blood to send off to the labs, we weren't able to get a good, clear reading from you."

Brian made a choked sound, and for Justin the whole world went into slow motion. He vaguely heard himself say breathlessly, "Okay. Sure." He watched as Jacob tied the rubber hose around his arm, tapped a vein, and withdrew three vials of blood.

Dr. Rosa stayed behind as Jacob left with the vials, making notes in her chart. She looked up, her eyes so serious that Justin's breath was completely knocked out of him. "The blood will be sent to our lab in Allegheny. They usually have a one to two day turn around time. I should have some information for you on Monday." She stood up, touched Justin's arm and asked, "Do you have any questions?"

Justin shook his head, and Brian remained uncharacteristically quiet. They were sending off blood-work because his reading wasn't 'good and clear'. Everyone knew what that meant. He didn't need to be told.

"All right, then, you can take your time getting ready to go. And, Justin--"

He looked up at her, wondering what his face said.

She smiled. "You're a strong, healthy kid, whatever the result, things will work out." Dr. Rosa turned to Brian saying, "Play safe. And be good to each other."

Justin didn't remember much after that. Everything sped into a terrifying blur.

Brian sat on the couch listening to Justin talk to Daphne on the phone in the bedroom. The loft carried noises like an echo chamber.

"No, I'm not going to tell my mother yet. No, no, no. She doesn't need to know yet." Justin sounded so tired, and Brian wanted to comfort him, but wasn't sure how. "It hasn't been confirmed, Daph. But, yeah, it's pretty much a given. Still, I want to wait until it's confirmed before I tell anyone, okay? So please keep it to yourself."

Brian rubbed his eyes. Fuck. He didn't know if he could deal with this, it was overwhelming. The idea of Justin sick--

He pushed away the thought. He wasn't going to accept it until they had it in black and white, signed by Dr. Rosa's hand.

"No, he's being great. Yeah, I promise."

Brian snorted, that was in reference to him.

"Please don't cry, Daph."

Fuck. That was the last thing Justin needed. Brian shoved off the couch, stomped up to the bedroom, and plucked the phone from Justin's hand. "He's going to be fine," he growled, and hung up, throwing it across the loft.

Justin sat on the bed open-mouthed.

Brian took a shaky breath. "You're going to be fine, you little shit, or I'll fucking kill you."

Justin nodded.

Brian sat down next to him, pulled him back to lay in the curve of his arm, and whispered against his blond hair, "Because what would I do without you around to piss me off? Huh?"

"Or to fuck?"

"Yeah, that, too."

Justin laughed, in a weird haunted way. "I'm sure you'd find someone else to fuck soon enough."

"Maybe. But not more than once. Never more than once."

Justin was supposed to work the afternoon shift at the diner, and he told Brian that he really needed to do it. The last thing he wanted to do was to sit around the loft, brooding about his life, listening to Brian tapping away on the keyboard. When Justin had gotten up to see what he was working on, Brian had quickly minimized the screen, pulling Justin into his lap, and distracting him from asking questions with kisses. Justin let it work, because he wasn't sure he wanted to know right that moment exactly what Brian was researching.

Still, later, when Brian was in the bathroom, he got on the computer to check his email, and surreptitiously checked the history pages. Brian had been looking up the statistics of false positives with the oral HIV rapid saliva test. It wasn't very reassuring. Like, at all.

Other pages included some HIV websites, all detailing information that any gay man worth his high school diploma already knew. But, Justin knew that Brian was at his best when he had a semblance of control over life, and this was just an attempt to regain that. And despite his comments to the contrary, Brian knew as well as he did the likelihood that the test he'd taken today was inaccurate. There was still a possibility, less than one percent, but there was still a small chance, and right now he'd take what he could get.

So, he checked his email, there was one from Daphne telling him that she loved him. He hit reply and said, "You, too." There was one from Molly in her hysterical twelve year old typing. He couldn't help but grin at the last line: I luv u 4-ever, even if u suck.

"Ah, the Sunshine smile in the midst of all this angst? Are you evil? Possessed by a demon?"

"It's just--" Justin waved at the computer screen "--Molly."

Brian opened the refrigerator and pulled out a bottle of water, then came over to read Justin's reply. "I heart u 2, beeyatch?" Brian didn't need to say more for his horror to be made clear.

Justin just shrugged.

Brian didn't comment again, and Justin replied next to an email about possible housing for school next semester, should he wish to return to PIFA--not necessary, thanks.

"You need to go back to school."

Justin really didn't want to have that discussion right now. "Actually, I really need to get to the diner."

Debbie pulled him into the back of the kitchen as soon as he arrived. Justin knew there was no avoiding her, and so he let her drag him by his sleeve without any struggle.

"So?"

Justin looked down, and Debbie's face crumpled. He hadn't even said a word. The next thing he knew, he was about to smother from the force of her hug.

"Deb, I can't breathe."

She didn't let go.

"Deb, I really can't breathe."

It took some pushing, and maybe a little stomping on her foot before she released him. Her lips were twisted and her eyes full of tears.

"Don't cry, Debbie. They just took some blood to send off, that's all."

"Why didn't you do the goddamn saliva test? It only takes--"

"We did. They wanted to send my blood off for confirmation of the findings." Debbie looked in danger of crushing him again, so he stepped back.

"Have you told your mother?"

He shook his head vehemently. "No, and don't you tell her. Please. I don't want to upset her until we're one hundred percent certain."

"I understand. Oh, Sunshine, oh, baby--" and she looked ready to spout tears, hysterics, or both.

"I really can't deal with this right now, Deb. I just want to work, okay?"

Debbie nodded, and Justin started to walk away, but she grabbed his arm. "And Brian?"

Justin smiled as best he could. "Brian's fine. Just fine."

"Somehow I fucking doubt that."

Justin had to agree.

Brian pulled on his oldest pair of jeans and a comfortable shirt before heading over to the diner. He couldn't read any more about HIV and AIDs or he'd fucking lose his shit. He was pretty close to that anyway.

Justin was right about going to the diner to get away from his thoughts about all of this. It was too early to go to Woody's, besides, hell might have frozen over, because the last thing he wanted to do right now was cruise for blowjobs. So, that left him with two options, Mikey or the diner. If he went to see Mikey, he'd end up confessing the situation, and sometimes his bestest buddy and pal wasn't the greatest at keeping secrets. Ben would no doubt know by midnight, and the littlest hustler would probably overhear.

He was kinda hungry anyway.

The diner was fairly busy and Brian was able to slip into a booth without Deb or Justin noticing him for a few minutes. He thought it must be because of his fear-heightened senses, but Justin had never looked more beautiful to him. Not ever. And that was saying something, because in his most secret of thoughts, he found Justin quite beautiful nearly all the time.

Not that long ago, he'd sat alone in his loft while Justin was off playing house with Ethan, and pondered just how in the fucking hell a one night stand had turned into a two, now almost four year obsession--and that ran both ways. How on earth had one kid turned his life upsidefuckingdown, and insidefuckingout? And how had the sex stayed soul-blisteringly, mind-numbingly, toe-curlingly good? Wasn't that supposed to wear off after a few weeks? A year tops?

Brian glared at Justin serving a plate of french fries to a Bear across the room. How the fucking hell had that happened? He'd never figured it out then, and he doubted he'd figure it out now. Sometimes he considered asking someone who might actually have an answer, like maybe Deb, or Lindsay, or even Justin, but he had a feeling all of their answers would somehow piss him off.

He kicked his feet up onto the opposite bench, and waited to be noticed. It didn't take long before Justin was looking down at him, eyes tired, and a half smile on his face. "What are you doing here?"

"I was hungry."

Justin nodded, looking him over in a measuring way. "I'm okay, you know. You don't have to follow me around."

Brian gave him his best incredulous expression.

"Why don't you go see Michael? I'm sure he's still at the comic store."

"Because I want a fucking sandwich, that's why."

Justin rolled his eyes. "The usual?"

Brian smacked his ass. "You're one smart kid, sonny boy."

"Guess I've got you fooled."

And he was off again, picking up empty plates, and glasses on his way to put in Brian's order. It shouldn't have surprised him when Deb slid in across from him, knocking his feet to the floor.

"Sunshine told me. What the fuck are we gonna do, Brian?"

"We don't know shit. The doctor still hasn't handed down her verdict," he said, hoping she wouldn't press it. Knowing that she would.

"Don't bullshit me, Brian Kinney. I know what it means when they send the blood work off after the saliva test. Everyone fucking knows what it means."

"Debbie, you're being hysterical. Take a chill pill until Monday, okay? Look at Justin. He's not making a big deal out of this, and if he's not then neither should you."

Debbie looked at him like he'd fucking lost his mind if he thought she'd believe that crock of shit. He supposed that if he really expected her to fall for it, then he would have been crazy. He just wanted her to take the hint, and shut the fuck up.

"Hey, Deb," Justin said, putting the sandwich in front of Brian. "You're needed in the kitchen."

Debbie stood up, pointed at Brian, and said, "Don't you go anywhere. Do you understand me, asshole?"

Brian shrugged, and winked at Justin in gratitude.

"She's been treating me like a ninety-pound weakling with pneumonia all afternoon."

"That's better than her usual sick bed demeanor," Brian commented, taking a bite of his sandwich.

"What? Screaming at you to get better, you little fucker, before she fucking hauls off and kills your ass?"

"That's the one."

Justin smiled. "I'd prefer that right about now."

"Do you think you could get some water for a paying customer?"

"You are such a prick." Justin grabbed a pitcher from the counter, and poured. "Listen, go see Michael, okay? You'll feel better."

"I don't want to tell him anything." Besides Michael not being the best secret-keeper, it would also make it all too real.

"So, don't. Let him tell you about the mess with Hunter and the school board, and how Ben's making them all eat some fucked up herbal crap every night, because Ben read that it will clear the body of all illness, or some shit like that." Justin smirked. "Take down the recipe; that might come in handy."

"I take it Michael came in already this afternoon?"

"Yeah. Go see him. And if you change your mind about telling him, go ahead."

"Don't tell me what to do."

Justin scoffed, turned on his heel, and started clearing the booth behind Brian. "Oh, and Brian--" He waited until Brian had met his eyes. "You know what Gus said to me the other day when I asked him to help me clean up his toys at the loft?"

"Don't tell me what to do?"

"You got it."

"That's my boy."

Justin flipped him off and headed into the kitchen. Brian finished his sandwich with one eye on Justin at all times. Finally, he decided that as entertaining as it was to watch Justin's hot little ass flit around the diner, he probably didn't need to sit around and muse on the idea that it might not be flitting around forever.

The comic store sounded like a pretty good diversion after all, and the walk over would clear his head a little. And after Mikey had stopped regaling him with the sick and sordid details of his happily homo-hetero home life, he could read some comics to waste time.

Christ, it was only 4:30, how in the hell were they supposed to make it through the rest of tonight, and then all of tomorrow? Maybe if they took some Xanax with scotch, they could sleep through it.

Michael was all words and hand gestures for about forty-five minutes, and that was great. Brian made appropriately appalled expressions, and snotty remarks about the foster-hustler and the husband-thing, and Michael was happy like the sweet puppy that he was.

Brian sometimes loved Michael so much that he was sick with it, but it wasn't like the way he loved Justin. In some ways it was deeper than that, and in other ways, not as deep. It was the love of family, brothers, totally unconditional and eternal. The love he felt for Justin was not as peaceful, not as ocean-like.

"So, what's up with you?" Michael asked, stacking some comics carefully into a box.

"Oh, not much."

"Don't give me that bullshit. You look like you're strung out on caffeine and nerves."

Brian shrugged, leaned against the counter and made a last ditch effort to escape the inquisition. "Got the new Spiderman around here?"

Michael reached across the counter, and plucked the comic from its place in a rack by Brian's elbow. "Here. Now, tell me what's going on. Is it Justin? Did you two fight?"

Brian shrugged.

"Mom told me that Ethan kid was back in town," Michael said, all pissed off and righteous. "If Justin's fucking around with him again, then you're better off--"

"Shut up, Mikey."

Michael sometimes learned lessons well; if he was startled enough by, say, something like a fist in his face, he didn't forget so easily. Brian was still a little ashamed of that, but Michael had deserved it. So, at his command, Michael shut up--but he huffed, sighed, and crossed and uncrossed his arms like he might explode.

"Justin isn't seeing anyone."

"Are you sure? Because he was acting all edgy and strange when I was in there earlier today, and--"

"I'm sure. Michael, sometimes things really aren't any of your business."

That drew Michael up short, and Brian felt kind of bad that he'd pointed out what really should be an obvious truth at their age, but not with Michael. He was his mother's son.

"You're my business."

Brian smiled, reached across the counter and laid a kiss on Michael, then rested their foreheads together. He closed his eyes and took comfort in the predictability of his best friend.

"That's not gonna shut me up, you know."

Brian smiled. God, he loved Mikey.

"I know." He pulled away, picked up the comic, and settled into a chair across the room.

Michael wasn't going to let it go at that, and he burst around the side of the counter. "Jesus, Brian! Tell me what's going on!"

Brian waited until Michael was crouching beside the chair, and then he said, "Justin tested positive today with the rapid saliva test. They sent off blood samples for confirmation."

Michael's face blanched, and his dark eyes grew shiny. "Oh, God. I don't know what to say. Oh, fuck, Brian."

"Yeah."

"And, you?"

Brian shook his head, and the look of relief on Michael's face, was instantly overshadowed again by fear and worry for Justin. "It's not a death sentence. Ben's doing great and he hasn't been in the hospital since that last--" Michael broke off. "Fuck me. I don't know what to say."

Brian looked at him, sweet, fucked up Michael who'd do anything for him at all--anything to make Justin better for him, including ripping out his own heart for the kid if that's what it took.

All the tension, all the fear, everything that had happened was too heavy and Brian could barely breathe, so when his lips started to tremble, and his eyes filled up, Michael was there, like always, basically in Brian's lap hugging him; and Brian felt safe, because for so many years this had been home in a way. So he let a few tears come.

The shift was nearly over, and the diner was down to just a trickle, but bracing for the first wave of the late night crowd hit. Justin leaned against the counter, working hard not to think about anything. The chime of the door grabbed his attention and he smiled automatically as Ben and Hunter swung onto stools across from him.

"Hey, guys."

"Hey, Justin." Ben smiled.

Hunter asked, "Where's Brian?"

Justin rolled his eyes. Hunter's crush was kind of obnoxious, especially since it hit a little close to home for his taste. It wasn't that long ago that he was a teenaged brat who followed Brian like a love-sick girl. And, technically, for another few months, he was still a teenaged brat.

But at least he wasn't a hustler, and he wasn't HIV--

It hit him like a bat in a darkened garage, and just like that he doubled over with the force of it. He gasped and turned away from the counter, feeling dizzy and completely unable to catch his breath. He could hear Ben asking if he was alright, and he held up his hand in reassurance, but he wasn't sure.

God, it'd been years since he'd had a panic induced asthma attack. He instinctively reached for the pocket where he'd carried an inhaler as a child, but of course nothing was there.

He found himself steered into a booth, while Debbie and Ben hovered over him. He heard Hunter shout, "Christ! Give him some room!" And then Hunter pushed them out of the way, so that Justin had some space to breathe. Whenever Ben or Deb came closer, Hunter shoved them, "Stay the fuck back! Jesus! Don't you know anything!"

It was a scary few seconds that seemed to last forever, and just as he was able to catch his breath, he started to choke on laughter. It'd be too fucking hysterical for him to die of a freak asthma attack at this juncture. It'd be like the guy who gets diagnosed with cancer and then dies in a car wreck on the way home to tell his wife.

Deb wouldn't hear of him working the rest of his shift, settling him into the booth with water and a teaspoon of honey and cinnamon. Hunter said that it was helpful for preventing asthma attacks. Justin was sure that Debbie would make him eat one every day for the rest of his life, knowing her.

Ben and Hunter sat across from him in the booth, and they ordered their dinner as Justin sipped his water.

"How long have you had asthma?" Hunter asked, when Debbie finally stopped hovering and went to attend to the other customers.

"I don't. Well, I haven't in years."

"I used to have it, too. Last time I got it was when I was nine and this bully at school was gonna beat me up. I was scared shitless. I'm serious. I think I crapped my pants. But when I fell to the ground wheezing before the bastard could even take a swing, everyone thought I was dying and the fight was called off. I don't think I've had an attack since then. Not even on the street."

Justin said, "God, was he going to beat you up because you're gay?"

Hunter grinned. "Who said I'm gay? But, no, that's not the reason."

Justin let the obvious bait slide, not feeling up to conversation really, but Ben definitely caught it.

"Wait, so you're not gay?"

Hunter rolled his eyes. "Duh. I never said I was. Christ, you think you know everything about me just because I live with you? Puh-lease." He turned his attention back to Justin, finishing his story. "Naw, he was really gonna beat me up because I was the teacher's pet, and I tattled on him for cheating." Hunter smiled, leaned in, and went on nonchalantly, "I was abused as a child, you know, sexualized too early, forced to sell my ass to help pay the rent. It was cool to have someone who treated me like I was special. Her name was Miss Nance. I still like her. Maybe I'll look her up and send her some flowers."

Justin couldn't tell if he was serious or not. Was he really on the street that young? And did he really want to send the teacher flowers?

Ben, who'd been listening, said, "That'd be nice, Hunter. If you want to do that, we can--"

"God, Ben, I'm trying to talk to Justin."

Ben frowned. "Hey, I'm just trying to be helpful here. And your attitude has been pretty darn awful today. I'd appreciate a little kindness, and a little respect; do you understand?"

Hunter leaned back, stretched his arm over Ben's shoulder. "Sure thing, Dad. I'll respect the hell out of you if you take me to some cool clubs tonight. I've still got my fake ID."

Ben shook his head. "Not for long, you don't."

Justin was glad to no longer be the center of attention. He honestly didn't know if Hunter had done it on purpose, acting like a little freak in order to get everyone to back off from Justin, or if he really just wanted the attention all for himself.

When Justin finally excused himself to step outside for some fresh air, he was surprised when Hunter popped outside, too.

"Hey," Hunter said, pulling out a cigarette, and carefully moving downwind from Justin. "Got a light?"

Justin shook his head. He did but it was in his coat pocket inside. It was chilly and he shivered a little in the night air.

"You shouldn't be out in the cold after an attack. It'll shock the lungs and you could have another one."

"I think I'm okay. Thanks."

Hunter grabbed the arm of an old queen passing by, and smiled provocatively. "Got a light for me, sexy?"

"Cigarettes are bad for you," Justin murmured, watching Hunter puff deeply, and repay the man with a long smile, and wink.

"Yeah, so's getting fucked in the ass, but that doesn't stop you, does it?"

"It's not bad for someone to--"

Hunter scoffed. "Don't give me that bullshit! Getting fucked in the ass can lead to anal tears, infections, HIV, and that's just the beginning of the list. I'm not saying you shouldn't do it. I'm not saying it's wrong. I'm just saying that it's not necessarily the best way to use your ass. But, then again, it is a damn nice way to use it."

Justin couldn't help but smile. "You're pretty funny. And you kinda remind me of me when I was your age. I was always lecturing Brian about drugs, and drinking, and too much caffeine." He snorted. "Now, look at me. I'm almost as bad as he is."

"Not nearly as hot, though."

Justin laughed out loud. It felt good, and yet wrong. It was the first time he'd really laughed since he'd first seen Ethan.

Hunter smiled and laughed, too. "You're not so bad, I guess," he conceded. "I mean, you can't help it if you're ugly, and not good enough for him."

Justin shook his head, still chuckling. At that moment Hunter didn't so much remind him of himself, as he made Justin think of what Brian might have been like at that age. "You're an asshole."

Hunter punched the air. "And he shoots! And he scores!"

Half way back from the comic book store, Brian noticed the sunset, pink, blue, and strange golden yellow streaking the sky. A sharp turn to the left, and fifteen blocks down, he stood in front of Justin and Daphne's apartment building, staring up at the light burning in their living room window. He was lucky that she was home; he should have called first.

He took the stairs two at a time.

Brian was late, but Justin had no doubt that if he wasn't here when Brian came by to collect him, (and Justin knew that he would), that there would be some backlash. He sat with Hunter, while Ben worked on his book a few booths down.

It had been nearly twenty minutes, though, since Michael had called Ben's cell to tell him that Brian had left the store, and Michael just had a few things to clear up before he'd join the rest of the family at the diner. Justin was trying not to get worried or pissed off. In all likelihood, Brian had run into a suitable trick, and was getting a quickie blow job. And, after all the shit of the last few days, Justin thought Brian wholly deserved it.

It turned out that Hunter liked some of the same things that Justin did, so they talked about computer graphics, the latest video games, high school, preferred sexual positions, and the best way to pick up men. Justin tried to convince Hunter that hustler techniques weren't really the best method in the average setting. Hunter maintained that what worked, worked--and why fix what wasn't broken?

He had just started to get truly nervous about Brian's whereabouts when Deb came over and told him that Daphne was on the phone. His heart skipped a beat, but he managed not to run to the kitchen.

"Daph?"

"Hey, um, sorry to bug you at work, but is it okay for Brian to take that painting in your room? He said he paid you for it?"

"He's there?"

"Yeah, and he really wants that painting." Daphne giggled nervously. "Um, I'm kinda scared of him right now."

Justin frowned. "Just give it to him."

"Good, 'cause I was getting the feeling that I'd rather take meat from a lion."

"Um, let me talk to him."

"Brian! Justin wants to--" he heard her yelp, as the phone changed hands.

"Hey," Brian sounded tired, but edgy.

"Just stay there, okay? I'll come home and we can--"

"No, I'm coming to get you. I want to hang this painting tonight."

Justin was quiet for a second. Brian sounded really wired. "Are you on something?"

"No."

And he knew that was the only answer he'd be getting.

"I'll be there in a few minutes. Be ready to go."

"I've been ready."

Brian said, "Good," and hung up.

Debbie was studying him as he turned to go back to the dining area. He shrugged. Shockingly, she let it go at that.

Brian measured the distance between the floor and the ceiling, and again from side to side. He focused on the area where the light fell just right along the wall, and placed marks to hang the painting dead center.

Justin sat on the sofa watching him, not asking any questions. Brian thought it might have to do with the fact that he was being kind of manic about this painting, and he wasn't sure how many times Justin had seen him in this state. The last time he remembered being this wound up was when Justin had left, and then, before that, when Gus was born. The same night he'd met Justin, fucked him, and somehow ended up with an annoying little shit stuck to his side, and now ripping him apart with threats of viruses and illness, deterioration and death.

So, that's why this picture was so important. It was life and it was going to be fucking right where he could see it, bright, intense, and almost too much with its mix of color and light. Because that was Justin, not all of the darkness and fear.

The neighbors probably wanted him dead when he started hammering at almost midnight, but he didn't stop until the nails were lined up, and the picture hung straight and hellaciously vibrant. The brightest spot in his loft. And that was exactly right. Exactly perfect.

Justin barely recognized Brian with such mad energy pouring off of him. The closest he'd ever seen to this kind of behavior from Brian was, well, the night they'd met. There'd been juggling, and dancing, and handstands, and fucking. Of course, there was also the time when Brian and Michael had fought over the birthday fiasco--that was nearly as intense, constantly seeking some resolution that was always out of reach.

But once the painting was hung, the anxious energy that had been streaming off of Brian, ebbed. It was a physical thing, like a fever breaking, and even though Brian's back was to him, Justin knew the moment when the panic had passed.

"Brian?"

"Mmm?"

"Are you okay?"

Brian nodded at the painting, remaining silent, just his head moving up and down. Finally, he turned to Justin, his eyes not as dark as before. "I'm kinda tired."

"Then let's go to bed."

Justin led him up the stairs, helped him off with his clothes, and joined him beneath the cool sheets. He was drifting off when he heard Brian whisper, "I want it there. I want you there."

Justin thought that should make more sense than it did. But he was too tired to try to puzzle it out.

After a bizarre dream where Justin had been hanging on the wall instead of the painting, Brian woke up with an urgent need for coffee.

As he managed the filter, and poured the water into the percolator, he thought about the images from his dream. Justin had been pretty happy on the wall, just sort of hanging there like a really comfortable Jesus. He'd joked and teased Brian about all kinds of things. Then, oddly enough, when the dream suddenly shifted, and Brian found himself in his office, Justin had been on the wall there, too, whispering the most amazing ideas for ad campaigns, making Brian look like a genius in front of his most important clients.

In the light of day, he still felt its significance, and he thought he might buy another painting for the empty space behind the office couch. He'd need to go over to Justin's apartment and choose one that would match the decor. Or, hey, fuck matching the decor. He just needed to find one that screamed Justin to him. He'd redecorate if need be.

The sound of the shower let him know Justin was awake, and he left the coffee brewing to join the Jesus-on-his-wall in getting clean. Or getting dirty and then getting clean.

Justin didn't even startle when Brian opened the stall door. His skin, wet and slippery, slid beneath Brian's hands and mouth. There was always this between them, even if everything else went to hell. Justin turned to press

against him, his mouth open beneath Brian's, tasting like toothpaste and tap water, his cock hard against Brian's thigh.

Brian reached for a condom, tearing it open, and pushing Justin against the glass. How many mornings had they done this? So many, but never enough.

"Brian?"

"We're playing safe."

There was no more protest after that, and Justin whimpered as he pressed inside. Brian dropped his head to Justin's shoulder, the hot water pelting his back as he thrust, wrapping his arms around Justin's body, holding him tightly as they moved together.

Justin gazed superstitiously at the omelet in front of him. He hadn't ordered it. In fact, he'd planned on getting grits and bacon just to make sure he didn't even have any eggs at all, but Debbie had placed the order for him, along with Brian's usual coffee, the moment they'd walked in the door. He looked up at Brian who was watching him curiously.

"What's the problem? Isn't that what you always get?"

Justin frowned at his plate. "Yeah. I just don't think I ever want to eat it again, that's all."

"Then tell Deb to take it back."

"She'll want to know why," Justin said with equal exasperation.

Brian rolled his eyes. "Tell her that it makes you want to hurl today."

Deb stopped by the table at that moment. "Sunshine, sweetie, you don't feel like eating today?"

Justin could just see her working into a state of worry about his lack of appetite. "Um, maybe just a few pieces of toast with jelly?"

"You can't stay healthy on that. You're going to have to start thinking about your fucking diet now, you know. Start working out--"

"Debbie!" Brian barked. "I believe Justin asked for toast."

He lifted his eyebrows pointedly, and Deb glared at him, pulling her finger up to jab in his face when the bell from the kitchen rang frantically. "Hold your goddamn horses!" She turned back to Brian, "You're goddamn lucky is what you are. You better watch after that kid or--"

"Toast, Deb. Now."

The bell rang again, and Frank, the new cook, yelled, "Deb! Order's up!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." She grabbed Justin's plate, on her way, yelling, "Fucking hell, you'd think the fate of the world depended on some fuckin' eggs not gettin' cold."

"Thanks," Justin said, folding his elbows on the table and leaning forward.

"No problem. You'd better eat it, though, or we'll both get chewed out, and I'm not in the mood."

Justin had just started to reply when the door chimed, and Hunter burst in from outside.

"Hey, if it isn't my new bestest buddy, Justin, and Brian, the hottest-guy-with-the-ugliest-boyfriend-i

n-the-world, sitting here, in my foster-grandmother's fine place of business, from which I intend to obtain a free breakfast, while practicing my ass-pedaling pickup lines, just in case I ever need them again!" Hunter slid into the booth next to Brian, throwing his arm across Brian's shoulder. "But screw those plans! Wanna go fuck?"

Brian snorted, and looked at Justin with amazed eyes. "Christ, he's more persistent than you."

Hunter grinned. "Oh, you like persistence, huh? I bet you liked to be bossed around, too, don't ya? I betcha like some hot young cock in your bed telling you to roll over, and--"

Brian held up his hand. "Please, stop with the fantasies before you jizz all over me."

"Oh, come on, you know you like that."

Justin chuckled and said, "He loves to be bossed around by hot, young cock."

"I knew it. I can tell these things."

Justin cracked up, and Brian looked pretty damn amused himself.

Deb showed up and kissed Hunter's head. "What'll it be, baby?"

"Um, I'll take him to go, with a can of whipped cream. Oh, and some of that hot fudge sauce, too."

Brian rolled his eyes. "Please tell me that you have better fantasies than that."

"I don't have all day, piss ant." Debbie slapped the back of Hunter's head. "Tell me what you want."

"Cheese omelet with hashbrowns. Like always." Hunter rubbed where Deb had hit him. "Jeez, I'm gonna tell the social worker that you abuse me."

"You do that, sweetums. Now, Justin, your toast will be right up. And you eat it all, you hear me? Gotta keep up your fuckin' strength."

Hunter frowned at Justin from across the table as Deb walked away to place his order. "Why?"

"Why, what?" Justin asked. "Why is the sky blue? Why is Brian fucking me and not you? Why is a guy's dick, the most precious of the appendages, hanging free and flapping in the breeze, just ripe for getting caught in zippers and--"

"Uh, no. Why do have to keep your strength up?"

Brian opened his mouth to say something, but Justin didn't wait to find out what. "I might be positive."

"Really? That sucks. I'm positive, you know. It...sucks."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Hunter slid out from next to Brian, and switched sides, focusing his attention on Justin. "We don't have to talk about it, but...if you want, I don't mind listening."

Justin smiled, and put his arm over Hunter's shoulder. "Thanks. You're not so sucky, you know that?"

"Nah, I'm cool. But you're still ugly."

"Good to know that some things don't change."

Brian watched Justin with Hunter, and felt some measure of relief. If Justin could laugh about anything, if he could tell someone else with that kind of ease, and accept the offer of help with grace, then maybe it wasn't the end of the world. The end of the world as they knew it, sure, but not end of the world.

Hunter scarfed down his breakfast, after being admonished by Deb to get to the comic store pronto to help Michael open shop; he took off with only a few more come-ons directed Brian's way, and a smile for Justin.

It took Justin longer to eat his toast than it had taken Hunter to eat a boxcar-full of food. And, that wasn't like Justin, but Brian didn't mention it, and he swore to himself that if Debbie did, he'd hang her up by her toenails.

"Do you want to see a movie?" Justin asked. "I have no idea what's playing, but I'm sure we could find something that might not make us vomit."

Brian shrugged.

Justin took another bite of his toast, and looked at his watch. "Only another twenty-four hours before we know my fate. I don't really want to sit around thinking about it all day."

Brian didn't either. "Let's go back home."

Justin nodded, put his unfinished toast down and pulled on his jacket. Brian didn't like the deep circles under Justin's eyes, and it scared him shitless to think they might always be there.

"Oh, Christ. What the fuck?"

Brian turned around, looking in the direction of Justin's gaze. Ethan stood at the counter, apparently ordering something to go.

"He always fucking hated this place, said the food was disgusting, and the patrons were degenerates. He fucking hated that I worked here. And now, three fucking days in a row.... Fuck him, fuck him, fuck him."

"Such judgments from the boy-genius who prostituted his music on the streets?" Brian muttered, fists clenched, and not at all sure that he didn't want to strangle the son of a bitch in public on a sunny Sunday morning.

Justin grabbed his arm as Brian started out of the booth with scathing words already forming on his tongue. "Brian, please. Don't."

Ethan turned their direction, his face blanching when his eyes met Brian's. Then he plastered on a smile and started to take a step in their direction. Brian saw, out of the corner of his eye, Justin's head shake firmly in an absolute 'no'. Ethan blinked, then turned to the counter, paid for his purchase, and left the diner without looking back. Brian didn't know whether to be pleased or pissed that Justin had taken the initiative and gotten rid of the problem, before Brian could smash the problem's head in.

"He's gone. Relax."

Brian stared at the door, only turning back around when he realized that the other diners were looking at him in amusement. Fuck them; they probably thought he was jealous of the little piece of shit, but he didn't fucking care right now.

"Let's go home. I'm tired," Justin said, caressing Brian's hand. "We can watch a DVD or something."

Before they left the diner, Brian cornered Debbie while Justin waited by the door.

"I don't think I need to tell you that I don't want this to be the hottest gossip at the Baths next week. So keep your trap shut."

"Well, fuck you, too, shit-head." Debbie put her hands on her hips. "I wouldn't do that to Sunshine."

"The fuck you wouldn't."

Debbie's talon was in his face, her mouth open to chew him a new one, but Brian was done with it, and turned away, grabbing Justin's arm on his way out.

"What was that about?"

"Nothing."

"My hero." Justin batted his lashes. "Protecting my sterling reputation."

"Fuck you."

Justin lay down on the bed, not bothering to toe his shoes off, just burying his face in the pillows and fighting the rising tide of fear. He marveled at his body's resilience, the fact that he could be overcome, adrenaline releasing ice-like in his veins, but then his body backed off, his mind diverted from the reality of his situation, and he was given a reprieve. Only to be shoved into the pool minutes later, drowning in it again.

He could hear Brian moving around in the bathroom, and he concentrated on the smallest details, trying to stop focusing on how slowly time moved, and how quickly his life could turn on a dime. Just like that night when he met Brian--

But, no, as pleasant as that particular memory was, it was always and inevitably followed by the memory of Brian sending him away, telling him that he didn't do love, that he would never love him.

Justin rolled on to his back, listening to Brian piss, flush of the toilet, hearing the water as it rolled down the pipes, and the small creak of the faucet as Brian turned it, the squish of the soap dispenser....

That night, and too many others, Brian had said he'd never love him. Now, Justin knew, if he were to ask Brian outright, "Do you love me?" there wouldn't even be obfuscation, just Brian turning his head away, his face devastated and lost, while silence echoed around them.

Not that Justin had ever asked. Not that he ever would. He just knew. But Justin also believed that there was the barest of possibilities that, one day in the far future, he might be able to picture Brian just simply saying, "Yes."

Justin's blue eyes were shut away behind closed lids, eyelashes touching soft cheeks, red lips open, and his hands clasped on his chest like a fucking breathing corpse.

Fuck that. Brian grabbed Justin's right foot and pulled his tennis shoe off, startling the corpse awake, then the left foot, tossing the shoes over his shoulder. He pulled his own shirt off, skimmed out of his pants, and climbed onto the bed, crawling up Justin's body to pull off his shirt, and unbutton his pants.

Justin didn't say anything, staring at him and licking his lips.

Lips that tasted good, sweet from the jelly, and warm. Justin kissed like no one else, as though he was infusing himself into Brian with the intensity of it. He'd never been able to understand why Justin turned him on so much. Why did this particular mouth and body move him to have to fuck Justin over and over? Justin wasn't even Brian's type physically, but for some reason it didn't matter. Justin made him insane, made him do stupid things like, Christ, love him, because it hurt so badly when he'd left, it hurt so much to think of him being sick, and he couldn't deal with the thought of him dying.

And he wasn't going to die.

Brian ran his hands over Justin's skin, trailing his fingers over sensitive spots that made Justin arch his back, or make those small grunting noises that were so fucking hot to hear.

He took his time. They had all day, and if he could stop Justin from thinking about it with six hours of sex, then he would. And then he wouldn't have to think about it either.

Playing safer than usual took longer, preparing Justin with a diligence that he normally forewent, because Justin liked it rough--but not today. Today it was gentle, and sweaty, and time-consuming.

Justin on his hands and knees, his ass clutching Brian's fingers, and his head thrown back in ecstasy. Justin on his back, his knees on Brian's shoulders, taking Brian's thrusts with wide eyes, and open mouth. Justin on his side, sweat-soaked and panting, as Brian pressed into him again, rolling his hips in a slow fuck, both of them

moaning as it went on, and on. Justin half-asleep, as Brian pulled out, exhausted and aching. And now Justin unconscious in his arms, as Brian breathed in his scent, and carefully thought about nothing.

Justin woke up sore, and sated. He couldn't remember the last time they'd fucked like that. Not that they hadn't fucked for hours in recent months, but not with that kind of emotional focus, the intensity of which had only happened between them a few times, so strong that it was too much to deal with. What they had every day was already fucking amazing, but today had been the kind of sex that could put someone into a coma. Emotional-fucking-overload.

Brian was still asleep, and Justin rolled onto his side, to study the slack features. Beautiful, as always, but getting a little older. Wrinkles fanning out from the corners of his eyes, and even though it was never-to-be-discussed Brian's hair was thinning a little on top. Justin loved it--this visual proof that he'd made Brian Kinney into a liar. He wasn't a one-night stand, destined to remember only one Brian. No, he'd been around for almost four fucking years, and he knew so many Brians that no one would believe him if he told them the truth.

A sudden, sharp banging on the door startled them both, and Brian woke, rolled angrily from the bed, and stalked to stop the noise without bothering to put on his clothes. Justin heard the door slide open, and Brian's voice mumbling.

Sitting up, wrapping himself in a sheet, Justin moved to see who had dropped by. Michael stood in the doorway, one hand on Brian's shoulder, the other clutching a bag of something--probably food.

"Can't a friend check in? Did I interrupt something?"

Brian cocked his head, "Now what would make you think that?" He grabbed the bag from Michael, opening it up and sniffing at the contents.

"Is Justin--"

"Hi, Michael," Justin said, waving from his sheet.

"I'll just--" Michael reached into his pocket, thrusting something at Brian "--go."

Brian pushed Michael's hand back, and wrinkled his brow. "Why? You just got here."

"I thought--wait, you said I'd interrupted something."

"No, you said you'd interrupted something."

Justin added, "And you did--our sleep, but we're awake now, so I'll go shower, and Brian can--" He gestured at Brian's nudity.

"Put on some clothes?" Michael offered.

Brian rolled his eyes, dropped the bag on the counter and headed toward the bedroom. Michael started to unload the food as Justin went to shower.

He lingered under the rushing water, giving Brian time with Michael. He'd known that Brian would tell Michael, and, in general, he was okay with that. Brian needed someone to lean on, whether he'd admit it or not.

As Justin toweled his hair, he hunted through the bag of stuff he'd brought, but couldn't find any clean underwear, or a clean shirt. So he went commando and pulled on one of Brian's least favorite sweaters.

"That's mine," Brian said before Justin had even reached the kitchen counter.

"Really?"

"You can't keep it."

Justin shot him a 'get real' look, and started snooping in the boxes that Michael had brought. Lasagna from Deb, lemon bars, Vic's homemade chicken soup, and then he'd also picked up Chinese food to top it off.

"Uh, Michael, there's a lot of food here." Justin wrinkled his nose. "Are we expecting more guests?"

"Well, you never know when you'll need--"

"A year's worth of food," Brian interjected. "Besides," his smile was saccharine, "Sunshine's a growing boy."

Michael stood nervously on the kitchen side of the counter, so earnest that it hurt to look at him. "If you need anything, Justin, you know that Ma and I want to be there for you, and you can call about anything anytime. And Ben--he's been really fucking amazing at supporting Hunter through all of this, and I'm sure that he'd be more than willing to--"

"Thanks, Michael. Really, thank you, but--"

"Shut the fuck up. He's going to be fine." Brian shoved away from the counter, pushed Michael aside, and threw open a container of General Tso's Chicken. "Let's eat."

Michael caught Justin's eye, and gave him a knowing look. Brian was dealing by not dealing. Michael didn't approve, it was there in his face, but Justin disagreed. He knew what Michael didn't, that Brian had already started to do the research, that he'd been practical up to a point, and now was working on keeping Justin together by holding the fear at bay. He knew that Brian would face whatever came their way, and he wouldn't be fucking it out of his consciousness at Babylon, because somewhere along the way Brian had grown up just a little, and Justin sometimes thought Michael forgot that. And that was the essence of their friendship, they were both still fourteen to each other most of the time; they'd never let the other grow up.

Justin shrugged off Michael's gaze, and grabbed a small bowl for Vic's soup. He wasn't that hungry. That's when he noticed it, a small silver medallion on the side of the counter closest to Michael. He sat down beside it and sipped the soup, turning his head to better read the inscription on the coin: First Place.

"What's this?"

Michael pressed the silver medallion into Justin's hand. "Here. It's for you. It's my good luck charm. I've had it since I was fourteen when Brian and I won first place in the three-legged race."

Brian peered over Justin's shoulder. "You still have that?"

"Yeah. Remember how you shoved Sally Sanders so that she and Meghan what's-her-face lost their balance? And then we won first place, and you picked me up, and those guys yelled that we were faggots, so you flipped them the bird, and got detention for a month?"

Brian sighed. "Yeah, good times."

"It was the only time I've ever won something like that!"

"But you cheated," Justin said, flipping the medallion in his hands, the metal cool on his fingertips.

"Sally Sanders was a bitch who probably ate dicks for breakfast," Brian muttered. "She didn't deserve to win."

Justin didn't bother to point out that they still cheated.

"Anyway," Michael continued, "something good always happens when I carry it."

"Then why didn't you get laid until college?" Brian asked.

"Ha, ha. You're so funny."

Justin pocketed the coin, and stood up to hug Michael. "Thank you, Michael. I really appreciate it."

Michael's hold was pretty tight, and Justin wasn't sure he was going to let go. When he finally did, he brushed a hand over his eyes, and Justin was touched to find him so moved.

When Michael finally decided it was time to go, he said, "Justin, can I talk to you alone for a second?"

Justin, confused, looked to Brian for the appropriate reaction, but he just appeared mildly amused by Michael's request. "Uh, sure."

Waiting for the lift, Michael pulled on his gloves, and Justin wrapped his arms around himself in an instinctive protective gesture, not knowing at all what to expect. Almost anything was possible, from a lecture on having let Ethan fuck him raw, if he even knew about that, to an ultimatum that if he was positive then he should leave Brian or else, as hypocritical as that would be, Justin wouldn't put anything past Michael.

"Justin, I just wanna say," Michael put his hands on Justin's shoulders. "I've said a lot of really shitty things to you over the years, and I remember last year, when you left Brian--"

"Michael, I don't--"

"No, this isn't about that. Listen, I remember you saying that I had always wanted you gone, and that I'd finally gotten my wish. But I want you to know that I never would have wanted this--"

Justin snorted. "I know you don't want me dead, Michael."

"No, I mean. Justin, I was wrong, and I said some shit that really was fucking uncalled for, and, well, I just want you to know that I'm sorry, and I, well, I've kinda grown to really care about you, and I want you to be here for a long time, because--" Michael gripped his shoulders. "He needs you."

Justin blinked, not sure how to respond.

Michael said it again, "He really needs you."

Brian cradled Justin's head in his lap, and ran his fingers through the short hair as the credits rolled for *The Lion King*. Justin's obsession with animation led to some really retarded movie choices sometimes. Brian didn't protest usually because Justin tended to get bored half-way through films he'd seen before, and would take the opportunity to give Brian head. That hadn't happened tonight. Still the movie hadn't been too bad, although Brian had a difficult time understanding how it could be appropriate for children. It seemed more traumatizing than *Bambi*.

Justin had fallen asleep on top of the remote control, and before the horrible death scene. Unwilling to wake him, Brian had been left to watch helplessly as a stampede of wildebeests descended on the daddy lion, and trampled him to death in full view of his screaming son. That was some twisted, fucked-up shit for a kid to watch. He thought he should call Lindsay and warn her against letting Gus view it until he was older. It was enough to give him nightmares. Still, the girl-lioness reminded him of Justin, the way she batted her eyes to get what she wanted. Justin did that.

Justin's cheek felt warm under his fingertips, and Brian stroked it casually, the growth of evening whiskers scratching at the pads of his fingers.

Brian hadn't asked what Mikey had wanted to talk to Justin about. He had an idea of what it was all about anyway. Despite the comic, and despite the fact that they both kind of liked each other, there continued to be deep hurt, and grudges, on both sides of Justin and Michael's relationship. He could just imagine Michael's earnest brown eyes gazing into Justin's wary blues, asking forgiveness. Brian wondered if Justin gave it.

The screen went black, and the DVD menu came back up. Brian shifted as gently as he could, groping under Justin's back, until he finally located the remote control. Justin shifted, sighing deeply, and then nuzzled against Brian's thigh. Turning off the television, Brian went back to stroking Justin's cheek, let his head fall back against the sofa, and drifted into a foggy sleep.

From the top of the cliff, hanging over the vast ravine, Brian stared off into the distance, watching the fiery ball of the sun dipping toward the horizon. He turned to his right, and blinked in the brightness of Justin's smile. The

light bounced off his gold hair, his eyes shining like the sky. And then Brian heard it, off in the distance, the sound like liquid thunder pouring through the valley below. The sound of hooves slamming into the earth, masses of them, hundreds of them, pounding and endless.

Brian turned to Justin again. "Look, it's a stampede."

But Justin wasn't there. He was down below, somehow he'd fallen when Brian wasn't looking, and he was standing there, smiling up at Brian, laughing almost.

"Justin! Hurry! Run! You have to hurry!"

But Justin just waved at him, the air around him sparkling with the shine of the setting sun.

"Justin! JUSTIN!" Brian screamed, scrambling to start down the massive embankment. He had to get there, had to save Justin.

But his feet didn't cooperate and he could only watch with his mouth open, an agonizing scream pouring from his lips, as the wildebeests turned the corner, dust rose from the earth, and the sun of Justin's smile was blocked in the thickness of it.

The herd slammed Justin down, and there was no scream, no cry for help. The only sound was Brian's voice yelling over and over, "No! No! NO!"

Something glinted in the corner of his eye, and he turned, hands up to protect himself. But it was only Justin, hanging casually on a cross, head tilted and eyes calm. His King of Babylon crown sparkled in the hot sun. Brian turned to see Justin's body broken in the dust below, and he whirled back to Justin on the cross.

"Why didn't you move? Why did you just stand there?"

Justin smiled sadly. "Don't you understand? It should have been you."

"Brian?" Justin, scared and worried, knelt on the sofa beside Brian, touching his face and trying to rouse him from his obviously troubled dream. Brian's face and neck felt slick with sweat, and the broken crooning noises that slid from his throat sounded like the tail end of screams.

"Come on. Wake up." Justin's own heart beat rapidly, feeling a little panicked to have woken to such mournful, frightened sounds.

Brian jerked awake, breath coming in harsh pants, and his eyes wild. He stared at Justin for a long second, while Justin tried to soothe him, shocked when Brian pushed him away.

"I'm all right. Just a fucking dream," Brian said, standing up, and running his hands over his face.

Justin stayed on the sofa, watching as Brian strode into the kitchen, grabbed a bottle of water, and guzzled it like a man fresh from the desert. "It must've been a really terrible one," he offered.

Brian grunted and shrugged, his eyes focused over Justin's head on the painting they'd hung the night before.

"Do you wanna talk about it?"

Brian snorted.

Justin stood up from the couch, and meandered over to the kitchen counter, glancing at Brian seductively. "Want me to take your mind off of it?"

"No!" Brian burst out angrily.

Justin felt a little hurt, but dismissed it. It had been a long day. A long weekend. Brian had every right to be high-strung.

Then Justin felt Brian's eyes on him, dark and brooding, and he couldn't look away, although his breath caught in his throat. He knew that look; he'd seen it before after the bashing.

"Brian, this isn't your fault."

Brian's face twisted, and he slammed the bottle of water on the counter. "Who said anything about it being anyone's fault? It was just a fucking dream."

He stared after Brian as he stalked to the bedroom. After a few seconds, Justin walked across the loft to stare out the window onto the city's glittering lights. His heart hung in his throat, and his stomach tightened, but he stood there until he heard Brian calling to him softly from the bed.

Brian didn't sleep the rest of the night, but was relieved when Justin drifted off only minutes after climbing in next to him. He hadn't meant to upset Justin, and he certainly hadn't intended to be such an ass, but the dream had him spooked.

The sun came up and some light managed to filter through to the bed, and Brian took the opportunity to look at Justin unaware, ripe lips open, long lashes splayed on his cheek, and golden fuzz on his chin.

He remembered the first morning he'd woken to this face, but then the eyes had been open, gazing at him adoringly. He stifled a chuckle at the memory, and climbed carefully out of bed.

He had only been in the shower for a few minutes when the stall door opened and Justin stepped inside, his hair messed, and face smudged with sleep.

"Hey," Justin muttered, his body still languid and relaxed.

"We've got two hours before we can call to see if they have the results."

Justin tensed immediately and his eyes went from drowsy to alert within an instant. "Right. Okay. Um, we could just go by, right? I don't want the anxiety of being called in; I just wanna go."

Brian pulled Justin close, slid his hands to cup Justin's ass, and whispered against his cheek, "Whatever you want."

The shower was chaste, both of them too wound up to fuck, or suck. So they shaved in near silence, dressed quickly, and headed off toward the diner. Justin made a call on his cell as they walked asking Daphne to meet him there. "For moral support," he said.

Brian put his hand on Justin's shoulder and squeezed.

The diner was bustling, and Deb yelled a greeting across the room. Justin lifted his hand and let it fall again. Brian nodded her direction, and she flipped him off. He guessed she still wasn't over his attitude from the day before.

Daphne strolled in, cheeks flushed from the cold, and Justin got out of the booth to hug her. They held on to one another for a long time, long enough that one of the patrons walked by, smacked Justin's ass, and laughingly asked if he had 'seen the light'. Justin ignored the question entirely, pulling Daph into the booth next to him.

"Daphne, you look absolutely fabulous this morning," Brian began. The usual banter seemed like the best way to go.

"So do you, Brian."

"Yes, I know. It's so difficult to wake up every morning, and go out into the world knowing that you're going to be the most beautiful person in it."

"Such a trial," Justin murmured, his arm over Daphne's shoulder.

Deb slammed down an omelet in front of Justin, some coffee for Brian, delivered with a smile and a middle finger, then turned to Daphne, "And what can I get you, sweetheart?"

"Umm, I'll have--"

Justin pushed his omelet over to Daphne and said, "She'll have an omelet, and I'll have toast with grape jelly, and a side of hash browns, please."

"Sunshine, that's no way to start the day. You need to--" She caught Brian's eye, and he glared at her. She said, "Fine. Fucking fine. Toast and hash browns. But this is the last day of this, do you fucking hear me?"

Justin just looked at her like she'd lost her mind, and Deb stomped off to place his order.

"I thought you loved omelets, Justin," Daphne said, picking at the one he'd pawned off on her.

"Well, not anymore," Justin muttered with a dark tone.

Brian rolled his eyes. "Sunshine has developed an aversion to them of late."

"Try more like a phobia."

Daphne looked confused but Justin shook his head, and so they dropped the topic. At first they sat in silence, but by the time the toast arrived, Justin had prompted Daphne to tell him all about her new boyfriend.

Ten minutes into a rather suspicious sounding list of positive qualities, Daphne enthused, "He's got great taste in clothes! I'm not even embarrassed to take him anywhere, and I don't have to dress him!"

Justin glanced at her, "Are you sure he's not gay?"

She punched him, giggling, "He didn't seem gay last night, if you know what I mean."

"You're such a slut."

Daphne sighed. "Don't I wish."

Still, Brian shot Justin some glances and it was evident that neither one of was convinced that the guy wasn't gay.

Justin held Daphne's hand in the waiting room at the clinic. Brian sat on his other side, an arm around his shoulders. It was unbearable how long it took ten minutes to pass by. Justin spent the time in silence, because opening his mouth made him feel like he might vomit. His entire body was trembling, despite Daphne's fingers stroking his palm, and Brian's gentle squeezing of his shoulder.

He remembered the first time he met Daphne. They'd been kids, and he'd thought she had really cool hair, and liked the way she did her braids. They'd played together, equal parts dolls and soldier. And then they'd grown up, and he'd liked boys, and she'd liked boys, too.

Then there was the time they'd had sex. He thought about it more often than she might imagine that he did. He supposed that she probably imagined he never thought of it. But there were certain times, when he'd look over at her in an unguarded moment, and remember how nice it had been to be close to her, how her skin had smelled and tasted. He remembered how much he loved her, and still loved her, in those moments.

It'd taken a long time before they could cuddle again. It had almost ruined everything, but now Justin was glad they'd done it. He was glad that he'd known her that way, and that she'd known him.

Justin leaned over and whispered, "I love you, Daph."

She squeezed his hand, her eyes going teary, and he looked away.

"Mr. Taylor, Dr. Rosa will see you now."

It was the same nurse as last time, but without the clowns. This time it was baby giraffes.

"Can--um, I want my friends to come, too."

The nurse shook her head. "Only one guest is allowed back with the patient, Mr. Taylor."

Justin took a deep breath, and turned to meet Brian's eyes.

"Are you sure?" Brian asked. "It's okay if you want Daphne."

Justin couldn't speak; he just shook his head, and grabbed Brian's hand, standing up without a backwards glance at Daph, intent on just making it through the door.

It was time to face the reaper.

Brian sat on the paper covered table, and held Justin standing between his legs. He could feel the throb of Justin's heart against the inside of his wrist, and he lowered his head to the curve of Justin's neck.

The nurse, Patty, came in with her fucking hideous baby giraffes, and Brian was tempted to demand Jacob again, but decided that now was not the time. Patty took Justin's bp, temperature, and pulse. Then she pulled out a sheet of paper with a list printed on it.

"Dr. Rosa wants you to answer these questions, okay, Mr. Taylor?"

Justin nodded from his perch next to Brian, but then hopped down to stand between Brian's legs again. "Okay. Sure." His voice sounded so young, and Brian wrapped his arms around him more firmly.

"Mr. Taylor, do you have any allergies?"

"Yes. I'm allergic to...well, everything."

The nurse nodded, and made a mark. "Please name some of your allergies."

"Um, dogs, cats, trees, pollen, penicillin--"

"Ah, what do you use when you're sick? Sulfa drugs?"

Justin nodded, then murmured, "I try not to get sick."

Brian swallowed hard, and kept his eyes lowered as the nurse continued.

"When was the last time you took sulfa drugs, Mr. Taylor?"

"Um, last month. They thought it might become pneumonia."

"Do you participate in anal intercourse?"

Brian felt Justin stiffen a little, but he answered, "Yes."

"Do you generally act as the penetrated partner, or the penetrator?"

Justin whispered, "It depends." He cleared his throat, and Brian could feel the heat of Justin's blush when he brushed his lips over Justin's neck.

"In general, the majority of the time--" Patty prompted.

"Um, I guess I'm a bottom."

She nodded and made note. "Use recreational drugs? Poppers? Cocaine? Heroin?"

"Poppers, some other stuff...sometimes."

Another note was scribbled down, and Brian was getting ready to ask just how all of this was relevant when she asked, "And what about blood transfusions? Have you had any in the last several years?"

Justin nodded. "Um, I had to have several, actually, a few years ago when I was...hurt. Why? I don't think I got it from that--"

Patty waved her hand dismissively. "I think I've got more than enough information here. I'll send Dr. Rosa on in, okay?"

Justin started to tremble in his arms, and Brian held him tightly. They didn't say a word, just stared at the door. They didn't have to wait long, even though it felt like hours.

Dr. Rosa bustled into the room, frowning down at the medical charts in her hand. She made some odd noises, and then looked up from the files.

"Justin, I'm sorry you had to wait so long. I hadn't had a chance to review the information. I just have a few comments to make and then you can go."

Justin shifted restlessly in his arms. "Wh-what do you mean, then I can go?"

"The initial rapid saliva test came back positive, as I'm sure you figured out." Dr. Rosa smiled kindly. "Because there is a legitimate concern for a false positive due to the possibility of the ELISA test being overly-sensitive to non-HIV antibodies, it is standard procedure to send a blood sample for the Western Blot, which is deemed to be the gold standard. False positives, as you know, are extremely rare, but there are some situations that can result in such an outcome."

Brian felt something shifting inside of him, like light breaking between trees.

"Strangely enough, Justin, you have many of the potential factors for a false positive. Anal intercourse can lead to the introduction of many foreign bodies into the system: bacteria, fungi, as well as chemical substances. This can result in a heightened immune response, yeast issues, amongst other things. In addition, individuals with allergies are likely to have antibodies in their system that will react with the kits in some rare cases. Blood transfusions and sulfa drugs, also can correlate to a false positive."

Brian let out a breath he didn't even realize he was holding; the world felt startled into sharp focus.

Dr. Rosa smiled. "Justin, if I ever see you in here again because you haven't played safe, then I will personally see kick your cute, little ass for your stupidity. This is a miracle, a blessing, and you'd better treat it as such." She met Brian's eyes. "You, too, Brian."

Brian felt Justin turn to jelly in his arms, and then start shaking hard. He looked at Dr. Rosa, and her face had melted into sympathy. "I'll just leave you two alone, now."

Brian managed to slide off of the table, and turn Justin around, holding him as he fell apart.

Justin didn't know how long they held each other before he got himself together enough to blow his nose and splash water on his face. He was so relieved that he didn't even feel stupid for crying, and based on the wetness of Brian's eyes, he wasn't the only one feeling overwhelmed by the reprieve.

Fuck, he didn't know what he'd done to be so lucky, how he'd escaped death twice now, but he'd do anything at all to make it worth it to whatever or whoever had let it happen.

He grabbed Brian's hand and pulled him up. "We have to tell Daph; she's gotta be freaking out."

As he opened the door, he felt Brian tug on his arm, and he turned around to face him. Deep, hazel eyes stared into his own, Brian's mouth was slack, and emotion spilled out of him. "Justin--"

Then silence.

Justin kissed him, softly on the mouth, then the cheek, pulled back to say, "I know. Let's go tell Daphne."

Daphne's eyes filled with tears as soon as he opened the door to the waiting area, and Justin realized that she could tell that he'd been crying. He smiled hugely, and shook his head. She ran over to him, and clutched him in a hug as he whispered to her, "No, no, no...Daph. It's negative. It's okay."

Brian watched Justin with Daphne, and held back, walking behind them as they left the clinic.

They dropped in at the diner where the patrons probably thought that Justin had just told Debbie that she'd won the fucking lottery. She danced around whooping, and screaming for someone to bring out a slice of pie for everyone to celebrate. Luckily for her there were only five other people in the place at the time, and two of them were Michael and Hunter.

Hunter hugged Justin, slapped him on the back, and said, "How can someone so ugly be so fucking lucky?"

Justin laughed, and then turned to hug Michael. Brian smiled when Justin reached into his pocket and handed Mikey the silver medallion. "It worked, Michael. Thank you for giving it to me."

Michael grinned, accepted the medallion back, and hugged Justin again. Brian actually fought a lump in his throat when Michael turned to Hunter and pressed the medallion into his hand, starting in on the story of why it was such good luck.

The door chimed and Brian was the only one who seemed to notice. He turned around to see Ethan Gold, boy genius, standing in the doorway watching the commotion. Brian watched as Ethan's face broke into a huge smile.

"You're okay!" Ethan shouted, dropping his violin case, and running to hug Justin.

Justin hugged him back, and they swayed together for a moment before Ethan pulled away, grinning into Justin's face. "Thank God, Jus. Thank fucking God."

Justin was smiling too, eyes mere slits with the force of it. "I'm fine. I'm fine." Then as though to prove it, he hugged Ethan tightly, grunting, "I'm fine."

Brian felt Daphne's eyes on him, but he didn't look her way. He waited until Ethan had been released, and had gathered his coffee to-go and his violin. He waited until Justin was distracted, and until the chime on the door had already rung, then he turned on his heels and followed Ethan.

"Hey!" He yelled after the dark retreating form.

Ethan stopped, turned around, and Brian took some delight in the look of fear that passed over his face. "Hey, I'm just glad Justin is okay. I love him, but I know that he's with you. So, um, back off."

Brian scoffed. "You think I have any concern about that? Then you don't know me and you don't know him. I'm just coming to tell you--" Brian drew up close, clasped the back of Ethan's neck, and leaned down to whisper in his ear. "If I ever see your skinny ass again, I'll make you wish you'd been born a nice little girl with pigtails."

"Jealousy is a very unattractive trait."

Brian clenched Ethan's neck harder. "Who said anything about jealousy? Maybe I just don't fucking like you."

With that he turned his back on Ethan Gold, and wasn't at all surprised to see gold hair glinting in the sun. Justin stood just outside the diner, watching closely. Drawing up close, Brian drew him into a hug, buried his nose in Justin's hair and breathed.

Epilogue:

Brian stared out the window smoking. It had been twenty-four hours since Justin's reprieve, and in-between fucking and sucking him, Brian had come to one absolute conclusion. His love was dangerous. Everyone he'd ever loved was the worse for it. The first person he loved had suffered for it. His mother took the brunt of his father's wrath, let him hit her so that Brian wouldn't be hurt. His dad-- Brian snorted. He'd managed to be a disappointment to his dear old dad before he was even fucking born, and he'd remained a disappointment until the day his father died. And when he'd tried to win or buy his dad's love, it'd always ended badly, and he'd always gone crawling to Mikey.

Ah, yes, Mikey. Brian's love had brought him nothing but pain, too. If he was honest with himself, he could admit that over the years his love had wounded Michael to the core, teaching him that the people Michael loved most, would never really want him. And that was just the beginning of a long, disgusting list of ways that Brian's love had damaged Michael. But he didn't want to think about that. Michael was digging his way out, now, with Ben and Hunter; he was on his way to something good, and Brian didn't know if he could actually do it, but he'd sworn to himself that if his love got in the way of Michael's happiness with his family, that he'd step away forever and for good. Michael deserved to be free of him.

Then along came Justin. And he'd tried not to care for him, but Justin was so pushy, so insistent. The next thing he'd known, he was living with the kid, taking him to school for God's sake, then paying for his school, then watching him walk out, and letting him go, because someone else would love him better, would love him right. Brian wanted him to have that. And if Justin didn't get that from that Ethan kid, then he'd get it from someone else.

Brian had never realized that it would hurt that badly to let someone go. He hadn't understood just how far under his skin Justin had gotten, because at first it had felt like a total system failure when Justin had left. Brian went a little crazy for awhile, but he'd managed to get it together, swearing to never fall in love again.

He'd felt so stupid when he realized that he'd never fallen out of it, that maybe he never would. And when Justin had wanted to come back, Brian wondered if it was the right thing to do, but something told him that Justin was his one shot, his do-or-die, and if he couldn't do it now, then he never would. So he gave it a try, was giving it a try, and he thought he'd done pretty well. But, now, after all the drama, he knew that Justin would never have been in that position, would never have been with Ethan, if Brian had never loved him.

He knew it was a twisted sort of thinking, but it made sense to him. His love wasn't good for anyone, and Justin deserved better. Just because he was Brian's one chance, didn't mean that Brian was his, and he deserved better than what Brian had to offer.

"What are you brooding about?"

Brian jumped, surprised by Justin's breath against his back, and arms wrapping around his waist. He sighed impatiently to get across the point that he wasn't pleased at being startled.

"Let me guess, you're thinking about how many different ways you want to fuck me."

Brian shrugged. Justin slid around him, palms running over his skin as he moved, and frowned up into Brian's face. Justin didn't say anything more, just gazed at him, reading his face, studying his eyes, and making God knows what observations, then checking them with his mental copy of the Brian Kinney Manual, trying to decide how to proceed.

"You were lucky," Brian said.

"Yeah," Justin agreed.

"I--" Brian cleared his throat. "I don't think I could live with myself if this happened again. So, I think you should leave."

"Leave leave?"

"Yes."

Justin half-laughed, then realized he was serious. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Brian could hear the underlying note of panic in his voice. "I can't do this again. I want you to leave."

"Christ, Brian! Is this because--" Justin's lips twisted, and his voice went gravelly "--because you think I'm-- because of what I did with Ethan?"

Brian knew if he kept talking that he'd lose. Justin always won when he let himself talk, but they were both mostly naked, and kicking Justin bodily out wouldn't be ideal. And he didn't really want to do it; he wanted to take Justin back to bed. Fuck, his resolve was already weakening, and he had to get Justin to leave, because it wasn't safe for him here.

"Get out."

"What makes you think I would leave? Because you told me so? Puh-lease. We've done this before. It doesn't work. Remember?" Justin pushed him a little. "And you know what? Fuck you! Fuck you for doing this to me after everything else I've been through! You mother-fucking asshole!"

Brian felt himself shutting down. He closed his eyes, and tried to decide what to say, what would be the thing that would kill all the love Justin had for him, to make it easier on him to leave.

"You're a fucking martyr-complexed shithead, and if you think for a single fucking second, that I'm walking out of here just because you've somehow convinced yourself that this whole thing was your fault, then you don't know me at all!"

Justin's eyes were always an unholy blue when he was pissed; Brian couldn't look away from them, flashing back to the last time Justin had called him on his shit, flaying him open with a kiss. With just a few angry words Justin made his fears seem ridiculous, like his father throwing open the closet door and turning on the light, "See, Brian, no fucking monsters. Now sleep, you little shit."

"I don't know what kind of egotistical fairytales you've been fucking weaving for yourself, but let me assure you, Brian, I'm not going to buy into them, so fucking drop the martyr act. Or, better yet, let's get a cross, hang you on it, and be fucking done with it!"

Brian closed his eyes, and pretty Justin smiling at him from the wall filled his mind.

Justin must have recognized that he'd won, because he felt Justin's hand on his arm, and let himself be guided to the bed. Justin pushed him down, and climbed in next to him. Brian lay flat on his back, listening as Justin settled in, curling against Brian's side.

He didn't know if it was the Justin-on-the-wall, or the real Justin who whispered, "Now sleep, you little shit. Daphne's coming over for brunch tomorrow."

.....

THE END