

Holding On To Let You Go

By Lane Carson

Part 1

Brian closed the door to his office and dropped his suit jacket across one of the chairs that sat facing his desk. He'd been brilliant enough for one day and now he wanted nothing more than to leave it all behind and go home. He took a seat at the desk and brought his hands up to the bridge of his nose. He wanted to leave but the file folders on his desk and the unpleasant undertone of being in the loft meant that he wouldn't leave just yet. He'd check his e-mail and then settle in for a few more hours of the perfectly manicured appearance that was his life.

He hadn't been sleeping well of late. Not that anyone noticed and not that he would have admitted it even if they had. Had they known, they would have attributed it to something sappy and something that he thought was thoroughly inaccurate. It wasn't because he was alone or upset or because his eyes had suddenly been opened to his mistakes. He wasn't feeling regret or even anger for that matter. He wasn't sleeping well because he thought he just didn't need that much sleep any more. He didn't need or want to keep to the regulated schedule that governed most everyone else's lives. He didn't feel the urge to eat breakfast anymore, or to eat lunch when meetings broke at the appropriate time. Nighttime didn't call out a yawn or make him ache for rest. At some point he'd disconnected from all of it and now he was marching to the beat of his own drummer.

Brian had taken to eating for mere sustenance whenever he remembered to or whenever Cynthia set something in front of him and reminded him it was there. He didn't eat at the loft anymore and he didn't drink more than coffee in the times that he went into the diner. He'd had some of his suits retailored to fit his slimmer more disconnected frame and had taken to relying on protein shakes and power bars for quick fix nutrition without all of the excess of actually rousing the taste buds. Much like his new opinion about sleeping, he didn't need to taste anything but wheat germ and soy anymore. The more devoid of flavor or color it was, the better.

He'd been scrolling through the messages on his computer screen when Cynthia knocked lightly on the door. She'd waited for his one word acknowledgment before entering the room and standing in front of his desk.

"Did you decide on whether you wanted to reschedule tomorrow afternoon's meetings?" Cynthia spoke with a cool relaxed air but in this newer more subdued state, Brian made her more nervous than she'd thought he ever could. He hadn't snapped at her in a month and nothing anyone said or did seemed to rouse him beyond a state of mild annoyance.

"Yeah. Move everything to the morning or next week. I want to be out of here by one o'clock." Brian hadn't taken his eyes off the computer screen, having deleted three messages from Michael and printed two messages about client meetings in the time since his assistant had entered the room.

"One of the meetings is with Vance. What should I tell him about your rescheduling?" Cynthia dropped her eyes to make a note of Brian's direction while she waited for his response to her question. She'd raised her eyes back to Brian's face when she felt him level his gaze in her direction.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Brian flipped through a series of responses bordering on unabashed rage before settling on something more civil and more subdued. "Tell him something came up." The momentary flash behind his eyes dulled and his stare froze over once again.

More often than not he'd found himself flying into internal rages over the slightest thing. The trick was to maintain that veil of control so that no one saw how close to the surface his feelings were or how close to the edge he'd actually come. The technique was near perfect, but he was literally hiding in full view of anyone who would take the time to look.

It was just a thin shell of ice over something deep and dark and dying.

Cynthia exhaled slowly. She'd unwittingly been using the same breathing technique Brian had been practicing for the last month. It had helped her to calm her alarm at the look that she saw pass over Brian's face and had helped him keep back the acid that threatened to spill out of him.

"Did you need anything else before I leave?" Cynthia lingered by the door and glanced out towards the darkened sky beyond the windows. Brian had watched her as she moved across the room and he shook his head almost imperceptibly as she turned to look at him again.

"Turn the lock." Brian gestured towards the door handle and watched as she flipped the lock and pulled the door shut behind her.

He'd taken a few more deep breaths before turning back to face the computer and disconnecting once again. He wouldn't notice the deli sandwich Cynthia had left on his desk until some hours later when the smell of the meat and the roasted peppers had started to turn his stomach.

Brian slid the door back on its tracks and stepped into the loft slowly. There was no one there that the noise would wake up and he'd never been careful about the noise even when there was, but for some reason he did it quietly anyway.

He hadn't been careful with a lot of things back then but now he couldn't help but be as quiet as possible when he was in this place. It felt haunted to him and any noise seemed to wake things that he didn't want to see, hear or notice. He'd concentrated hard on doing the basics and closing his mind to the rest.

To the kitchen for water or liquor.

To the bedroom to change out of his suit...he would make sure not to linger there for too long.

To the shower.

To the bedroom for a pillow and a throw...again, he made sure not to stay there for too long...

...and then to the couch where he pretended that counting the wooden slats on the ceiling was just as relaxing as actually sleeping through the night.

Brian tossed his suit jacket across the bed and began his nightly routine. He'd noticed the message light flashing on the phone at his desk but he had no intention of answering it. The last time he looked, he had eight messages and the caller ID told him they were all from Michael.

Brian turned his back towards the rest of the loft and turned his attention to the doorway of the bathroom. He was steeling himself for going in there and he was devising a plan for doing it without catching his own reflection in the mirror. He pulled his tie from around his neck and it soon joined the pile of clothes that he'd left on the bed for the housekeeper to send to the drycleaners in the morning. He'd been halfway through unbuttoning his tie when he heard the knock on the door.

Brian turned towards the direction of the sound and crossed the loft slowly. He was careful not to disturb whatever avalanche the noise seemed to threaten and he pulled the door open just as quietly as he did before.

"Where have you been and why haven't you called me back?" Michael pushed his way into the loft and stood on the other side of the doorway. He watched as Brian closed the door slowly and turned to face him.

"I've been at work. It's eleven-thirty and I'm tired. What do you want?" Brian huffed his words as he brushed passed the other man on route to the bedroom.

Michael turned and followed him, noticing how clean and sparse the space was.

No more clutter. No more evidence.

"I'm worried about you. I haven't seen you in days. I know you've been at work because your secretary calls me back to say 'you're in a meeting'.

You're in a meeting every time I call and every time I leave a message. At this rate, all you do everyday is go to meetings." The words just flowed out of Michael's mouth as he took in the rest of the loft and climbed the steps to the bedroom. The bedding was crisply made and except for the pile of clothes at the foot of the bed there weren't any running shoes, any portfolios or any dirty dishes... there wasn't anything but clean and sparse.

"You're right, I do have to be at a lot of meetings. Now why don't you run along home so I can get some sleep and be rested and ready for the ten meetings I have tomorrow morning." Brian dismissed him as he stepped out of his pants and crossed the space to the bathroom.

"You should try and get over him. He isn't worth all this." Michael called his words through the door to the bathroom. He'd frozen stock still as Brian turned to look at him.

That same flash of fire that Cynthia had seen and then...something...something that was hiding...barely.

"What are you talking about?" Brian hissed his words quietly. Clearly he knew and understood exactly whom Michael was referring to. He'd been silently willing Michael not to say the name and not to conjure that particular demon tonight.

"You know what I'm talking about so don't give me any bullshit about it not being true." Michael pushed passed the unease he always felt in broaching this subject. He'd seen Brian slide for weeks now and he wanted to reach him before the man completely disappeared.

"Lock the door when you leave." Brian stepped into the shower and turned up the spray as Michael crossed the threshold into the bathroom to continue his protest. Brian was still willing his friend not to say the name.

"I'm trying to help you Brian. You're doing it again and..."

"...and I said get the fuck out of here." Brian pulled the door open and spat his words in Michael's direction. Michael had baited that reaction out of him and no breathing technique could have veiled Brian's emotions.

The steam billowed from around Brian's wet body and filled the air in the room. Michael could feel the temperature rising around him both literally and figuratively. He didn't like being in this situation with Brian but he'd made a decision before he came here tonight and he planned on seeing it through.

"You can't keep doing this. I don't know when or how but he's gotten completely under your skin and even though you've gotten rid of all his stuff, the only way you're really going to get rid of Justi..." Michael stopped just when Brian started.

"Get out of here now. Go home and nurse your hubby and enjoy his good health. There's nothing for me to get over and nothing for you to help me with." Brian held Michael's attention until Michael's gaze wavered and he looked away. Brian's words had been clipped and cool but the heat in his eyes could have been the source of the temperature change in the room.

Michael picked through his mind for another way to get Brian to listen to him. He couldn't find what he'd been hoping for in Brian's eyes and what he saw made him even more worried. What he saw was that same nonchalance that Brian had tried to project after Justin's attack and that same nonchalance that Michael had mistakenly accepted as the truth when he'd first told Brian about Justin's lover. He didn't have what he needed to get through to Brian tonight and he'd either need to regroup or to send in reinforcements.

"Will you call me when you're not so busy at work?" This was Michael's way of regrouping. He'd pushed Brian as hard as he'd been prepared to go and he hoped he could secure a second chance at this. He was sure that he'd see Brian within the next day or so but seeing the man in the diner or at Babylon didn't mean he'd get Brian's attention, let alone the one on one that he wanted. The shadow that pretended to keep up his routine of breakfast at the diner and the predator that abused himself and any other willing body that he could find at Babylon, were not men who

would listen to reason. Inasmuch as they wouldn't willingly entertain a discussion about getting over a lover, the Brian that stood before Michael now would also have no part in that discussion.

Brian had nodded his response to Michael's question and then watched as Michael backed out of the room and closed the bathroom door. It had been an odd thing for Michael to do and enough to set off the threatened avalanche in Brian's mind. That door had almost never been closed in all the time that he'd lived in the loft and in all the time that Justin had been living there...Except.

Except...Justin had started to shut it behind him while he took his showers in those last few weeks.

Brian scrubbed his hands over his face and willed the thoughts and images to disappear. He braced his hands against the back wall of the shower as he let the water beat down on the crown of his head. He'd tried to concentrate on the sound of the water but the images were coming unbidden now. He wouldn't fall asleep tonight and tonight he'd have his haunting to keep him company while he waited for daylight.

A few days after the Rage bash at Babylon, Justin had come to the loft to collect his things while Brian was at work. He'd refused Ethan's request to come with him because something seemed wrong with bringing him into Brian's space. Justin figured Ethan had wanted to see more of what he was up against and also to make sure Justin didn't change his mind and stay.

Justin didn't think there was much danger in his deciding to stay now and he tried hard to not think about what he was doing while he packed.

He and Brian had made their choices and there was no turning back for either of them now.

It had taken Justin a while to pack and he'd been genuinely surprised at how much of 'him' was actually in the loft. To see the place, it still looked as though not even Brian lived there, but to see the size of his bags Justin realized how much he actually had there.

He'd been equally surprised to see how interwoven his belongings had been with Brian's. There was no couple of drawers to quickly empty into a bag and there was no half of a closet of clothes to quickly pull off their hangers. His underwear and Brian's shared the same drawer and his tennis shoes were intermixed with the Prada and Gucci that Brian worshipped. He'd had to root through Brian's things in order to separate them from his own.

For a man who felt so distant from him and for a lover that was so remote, their living space didn't show it.

Justin had walked around every inch of the space consciously searching for anything he might of forgotten and unconsciously looking for more evidence that he hadn't simply imagined the times he thought he and Brian were close to sharing one life. He'd told himself he was looking for CDs when he visited Brian's desk drawer. In reality he'd been looking for a photograph that he thought Brian kept there...a picture of them together...a memory of something that happened a long time ago.

He hadn't found any photo but he'd found more of Brian and he together than he cared to see. Instead of a picture, he'd found more of Brian and him in the form of loose sticks of his Big Red gum and loose sticks of Brian's Wrigley's spearmint lying together at the bottom of the drawer. According to this, they'd been together long enough to create the habit of dumping half packets of gum there and long enough for dust to settle on this little detail.

Justin had sat for a while just looking at the gum and he would drive Brian crazy that night when the man couldn't shake the smell that lingered from Justin's shampoo in the area of the computer.

Enough of his own demons rekindled, Justin had left and he'd taken as much of himself as he thought he could cut away from the loft and away from Brian.

"So you and Justin still aren't talking?" Emmett leaned over the counter to hand Michael the last box of comics from the doorway of the shop. He'd stopped by to pick Michael up for lunch and he hadn't stopped talking about Brian or Justin since he'd arrived.

"There's nothing really to talk about. The only things we ever talked about were Brian and the comic. Now I don't even want to hear him call Brian's name after what he did so we keep all discussion strictly to his artwork for the stories." Michael unpacked the last of the inaugural Rage issue and filled the display case as he spoke. His visit with Brian the night before had left him in a position where he was even more worried and even less likely to get Brian to let him help.

"But you two are a creative team. How are you writing the stories if you don't talk?"

"Just leave it alone Em. I write the stories and he draws them. It's working out fine. I give him the text and the story line and he does the pictures. We have a short meeting to iron out a few details and change a few things and then both of us get out alive without having to discuss the fact that we can't stand each other."

"That good, huh?" Emmett turned his back to Michael and leaned against the counter. He'd been eyeing the clutter in the small shop and thinking of new ways to stir things up in his friend's lives. "I saw him...and lover boy the other day." When Michael didn't bite Emmett went on talking. "They were on Liberty. I think they were coming from school or something and...they were holding hands." Emmett turned his head to see Michael's reaction to that little visual. He hadn't seen Brian to share his wealth of information so he'd test Brian's reaction by observing Michael's.

"Is that supposed to mean something to me?" Michael raised his head from what he was doing in order to bite out his response. He'd seemed more than a little upset by Emmett's line of discussion.

"Nothing. Nothing. Just thought you'd be interested. Maybe Brian would be interested." Emmett pretended to be engrossed in the fringe work on the front of his shirt as he waited for Michael to calm down.

"Well Brian wouldn't want to hear it and neither do I. Now are you going to help me unpack the other comics or are you gonna keep talking about what's not your business." Michael was trying hard to change the subject but he'd managed to keep silent only for a few minutes before his frustration spilled out again. "You know Brian doesn't need him. He cheated on him remember. Brian doesn't want to hear anything about him. He doesn't even want to hear the sound of Justin's name so I'm warning you Em, don't say anything like this to him." Michael watched unconvinced as Emmett feigned shock and then gave him his scout's honor not to repeat his newsflash in Brian's presence.

"I won't say anything, but if you ask me, someone who doesn't care wouldn't have such a hard a time hearing it." He'd been playing with the fringe again as he spoke.

"Aren't you listening to me. It's not that he doesn't care. That's just it. It's never because Brian doesn't care. I've known him for years and I don't always get that, but I definitely get that now. I'm asking you to leave him alone for your sake and for Brian's." Michael finished his thought and then dropped his eyes.

He hoped Emmett would get it.

Brian pulled on his sunglasses and turned up the air conditioning in the Jeep as he pulled into traffic and headed away from his office building.

He'd managed to get through his morning meetings without running into his business partner and now he turned his attention towards the unpleasantness of the afternoon that lay ahead of him.

It was Friday afternoon and it was hot and smoggy. He'd planned on leaving early today because of the shit Claire had roped him into doing for their mother. Guilt had never worked on Brian so it had taken nothing less than a solemn vow to deal with all crises for the next six months without calling for the aide of anything more than his checkbook.

Brian watched the scenery fly by as he steered the Jeep towards the interstate and headed to the burb's. He figured that the upside to this afternoon would be that fact that he wouldn't be able to think about anything else other than how much the woman prayed for his immortal soul.

He'd revised his read of the afternoon when he remembered the circumstances around the last time he saw his mother and who'd been with him during her last visit.

Brian reached across the passenger seat for the pills he kept in the glove compartment. He'd swerved a little in his maneuvering and had given the finger to the thick neck who'd honked at him from a passing pick-up. He popped two pills into his mouth and dry swallowed them before bothering to read the label on the package. Besides the notation not to keep the pills in a heated place, he took note of the fact that they'd expired that past January. Either he'd rendered the once potent painkillers impotent by forgetting them in the hot glove compartment or he'd managed to poison himself on top of the poison he would endure that afternoon. Either way, Brian figured he was driving to hell in a black hand-basket and no pills would be able to shake the headache that was determined to follow him.

Emmett and Michael had been in the booth for only two minutes when the proverbial pink elephant of their usual diner discussions appeared across the room. Justin had rearranged all his shifts but there were still those unexpected crossovers and schedule changes that made Brian suddenly lose his appetite for his coffee and have to leave if he was there or which led to indigestion on Michael's part.

Justin had spotted Michael in the instant that he came back from his break and he'd thought of going to the back and getting someone else to serve them. He'd felt Debbie slip her arm around his shoulder before gently shoving him in the direction of the table.

"You do it enough times, you get used to it." She'd leaned in to whisper in his ear before delivering her order to a table in her section.

"Yeah. I let Michael chew me a new asshole each time and I'll eventually get used to it." Justin grabbed an order pad as he spoke and walked towards the two men. He smiled in response to Emmett's cheery looking greeting and studied the hard set of Michael's profile.

"What can I get you guys?" Justin stood a foot from the table and waited.

"Another waiter." Michael spoke without looking up.

"Shhhh." Emmett reached across the table to touch Michael's arm before looking back at Justin. "Don't mind him sweetie." He'd looked up to soothe Justin and also to gauge his reaction for future updates in his gossip about the relationship/breakup that kept getting juicier and juicier by the day.

"Look Michael, I don't give a fuck what you think of me. You don't want me to serve you that's fine by me. You can go sit the section that Debbie is working today and save us both the grief." Justin stood back and waited for Michael's reaction.

"Nobody's moving to my section. I'm up to my ass in orders as it is and you boys are gonna have to grow up." Debbie chimed in behind them. She'd been addressing her words as much to Michael as to Justin. "The way I see it you both still have one very big factor in common and it ain't gonna go away any time soon. You broke things off with his best friend and each of you blames the other for a little part in that mess." She'd fixed her gaze squarely on Michael's face as she said her next words before addressing the rest of her comment to Justin. "You'd save everybody a whole lot of grief if you remembered being a supportive best friend only goes so far. And you should remember that life after Brian still includes living in his world and seeing the people who were around him long before you came along."

Debbie had meant her comments to be biting. She'd seen enough of this song and dance between Michael and Justin to be tired of it and she didn't find it the least bit as entertaining as the patrons who'd been listening to her seemed to think. "Now tell Sunshine what you want to eat and then hurry up and get back to minding your stores." She'd turned to eye Emmett before adding. "The both of you."

"I don't need your help. I've called the church and they're trying to find someone who can drive me over to my appointment." The woman tried to pull the screen door shut as Brian pushed his way inside.

"You've been trying to get someone from your fucking church to drive you for last three Fridays and you've been late for every appointment because you've been catching a bus." Brian stepped across the landing and stood at the foot of the stairs. "I can think of a hell of a lot better things to be doing with my afternoon besides standing here, half of which include having some painful procedure performed without the aid of anesthetic." Having spat out this comment, Brian added a topper he thought would really goad his mother's good mood. "Hey maybe after your

doctor is done with you, you can ask him do something like that. If your insurance won't cover it I'd be happy to pay." Brian smiled as his mother's glare widened.

"I already told you that I'm not going anywhere with you so I want you out of my house. Go home to that teenager of yours and leave me alone." He should have remembered the size of the old woman's teeth and strength of her bite.

Brian's smile thinned and he eyed his mother through the throbbing of the headache that had suddenly returned. He'd thought to pawn dear old mom off on to Claire for the rest of either of their lives. "Your appointment is at two and it's ten to two now. Do you want to miss it or do you want to come with me?" He'd taken two steps toward the front door and toward his mother as he spoke.

His intention hadn't been intimidation but like both Cynthia and Michael had noticed, this new Brian who seemed as safe as a thin crust over a raging volcano, could be very intimidating nonetheless.

Joanie had checked the time for herself before retrieving her purse and slipping her key into the door for Brian to lock it behind her. She would go with Brian out of necessity and he would continue to be grateful that his mother hadn't known Justin's name in order to have said it out loud just then.

He could handle her nastiness but the previous night of again 'not needing' to sleep had told him that he couldn't afford to even half hear that particular name.

Justin pushed the door and slowly entered the small apartment. He'd been careful not to disturb Ethan's playing. Whereas Brian was careful not to make any noise when he went into the loft, Justin sought to make sure Ethan never stopped playing when they were in the apartment together. Justin had needed to hear the sound of this violin and he needed to focus his thoughts only on the sound of this violin.

"You're back." Ethan turned to face him and let the strains of the last note he'd played fade away. He crossed the room to reach for Justin and the other man had fallen into his arms as they listened to the fading note.

There was something soft and tender about the music and there was always something soft and tender about their greetings. Justin struggled to appreciate that fact without comparing it to something else that he'd felt before.

"I left early. I wasn't feeling too hot and somebody wanted to pick up an extra shift." Justin spoke softly as he dropped his backpack beside his foot.

"Would it be terrible for me to say that I'm glad you're not feeling well because it made you come back earlier?" Ethan had nuzzled his face against Justin's ear as he spoke his words and Justin smiled slightly.

Justin thought that most everything Ethan said to him was sweet...saccharine...way to sweet...no, just plain sweet. He wasn't sure if he'd actually decided which of these descriptions fit and he'd made yet another note of something Brian would never have said to him. Some part of Justin figured Brian hadn't come up on the losing end of this particular comparison. He'd shaken these thoughts out of his head when he realized that he needed to say something in response to Ethan's comment.

"I was trying to be quiet so I wouldn't disturb you." Justin reached out to push a strand of hair out of Ethan's eyes. He'd felt it when the other man slipped his hands under his shirt and ran his fingers over the small of his back.

"What if I said I was waiting for just this particular brand of disturbance, that is if you're feeling up to it?" Ethan's comment was playful and right in line with something Brian would have said.

Justin silently continued to curse the situation at the diner that afternoon for bringing Brian so close to the center of his thoughts. He'd stepped forward to kiss at Ethan lips as the other man rubbed his erection against his groin.

Justin had been holding tightly to the present in hopes of soon forgetting the past. He didn't want to think about what Brian was doing with his Friday night or who he was doing it with. Justin was having enough trouble maintaining this moment as it was.

Justin reached under the pillow to hold tight to the sheets beneath his head. He could feel the weight pressed up against his back and he struggle to catch his breath as the sensations continued to streak through his body.

He could feel the heat of Brian's kisses on his back and he could feel the heat of the man inside him. He'd wanted so badly to see the man's face right now but he hadn't dared to turn around for fear of what each of them might see.

Justin didn't want to trick himself into seeing love in Brian's eyes and he didn't want to let his guard slip and betray anything of what he'd been feeling of late. He wanted to enjoy this momentary reprieve and he wanted to think only about the man he was with and ease at which they fulfilled each other's needs...in bed.

He reached around to run his hand across the back of Brian's thigh and pushed back into the feel of his thrusts. He didn't notice that the feel of the skin under his hand wasn't of the same taut muscle or that the soft moans coming from the voice by his ear weren't Brian's words.

He'd closed his eyes and tried not to make comparisons as Ethan pushed into him again.

Part 2

"Tell me something." Ethan was awake and looking at him when Justin woke up at a little after ten that night. Justin had been instantly wary of what he thought he heard behind Ethan's tone. They had fucked after he got home from the diner and then had dinner before falling asleep.

"What?" He'd scrubbed his fingers over his face and met the dark eyes of the man who sat facing him. It was obvious that Ethan had been watching him sleep for a little while now.

"Do you remember your dreams when you wake up?" The man had spoken his words haltingly as he watched Justin's expression change with each word uttered. It was obvious that Justin remembered this particular dream.

"Why?" He'd sat up slowly as Ethan finished his question.

"They seem pretty real to you, so I wondered if you remembered them. I usually remember mine."

"Why, did I say something in my sleep?" Justin tried to keep the alarm from reaching his voice or his face. It didn't quite work.

"Brian. You were dreaming about Brian." Ethan pushed his hair away from his eyes and fixed his attention even more intently on Justin's reactions.

"What did I say?" Justin wasn't entirely sure he wanted Ethan to repeat what he knew couldn't possibly be good.

"Don't look so freaked out. Things might change in your conscious world but the subconscious takes a little while to catch up. You were with him for a while Justin, he's bound to cross your mind every now and then." Ethan had reached out to run a hand up Justin's hip to his waist. He pulled Justin closer before finishing his comment. "Anyway, you can learn a lot about a person by watching them sleep."

"What did I say about Brian?" Justin's mind had been looping on the fact that Brian had indeed managed to creep into every corner of his mind and settle in.

"You were having an argument or something with him. You were begging him stop doing something and then you were begging him...not to stop...sounded like you guys used to fight hard and then make up...hard." Ethan's smile didn't quite reach his eyes.

"I'm sorry...I didn't mean for you to hear any of that..." Justin had been flashing back to how distant Brian had gotten whenever he'd made any kind of reference to Ethan in his presence. If the ice-king himself couldn't stand hearing his boyfriend refer to a piece of music that he liked, then there was no way that Ethan was as cool as he appeared, knowing that the man in his bed had been conjuring up his ex in his dreams.

And in a sex dream at that.

"It's no big deal. Like I said, it was just a dream and in any event..." Ethan paused. He'd paused to enhance the drama of his next comment but all he succeeded in doing was temporarily increasing Justin's worry. "...you can make it up to me." He pressed closer to Justin now and threw his arm completely around Justin's body. "You must have been really tired because you fell asleep before I could tell you my news."

Justin was relishing the opportunity to change the subject but his mind was still reeling from the little he did remember about this dream. If he'd said even half as much as he remembered saying to Brian, then he'd certainly given Ethan an earful about the way things had been between he and Brian behind closed doors.

"What's your news?" Justin focused his attention on Ethan and tried to block all uninvited images of Brian Kinney from his mind. Brian was the past and he would excuse some of his behavior of late in the same way Ethan had. He could chock his behavior up to the fact that Brian was his very recent past...but Justin would try harder to remember that he was the past nonetheless.

"I made the final ten for the competition."

Justin refocused again to find that Ethan was even closer to him now and had been running a hand through his hair. Justin had been thinking about remembering to forget Brian when Ethan began speaking and so he'd had to playback Ethan's words in his head to figure out what had been said.

"The next cuts will be down to three and some people that I know on the board think I'm a shoe-in. Twenty-five thousand dollars, Justin." This time the smile did reach Ethan's eyes. All thoughts of Brian Kinney had been banished from this bed for now.

"I know you'll get it. There isn't anyone better than you." Justin had spoken his words softly. He'd been winding his fingers across Ethan's chest and now he stopped to kiss the man.

"What'd I tell you? I'm a genius." Ethan smiled again. He'd pulled away from Justin's lips only long enough to breathe these words before finding Justin's mouth again.

"Yeah, I remember you saying something like that." Justin had let Ethan pull him over on top of him as Ethan rolled over on to his back. The mattress had protested the sudden movement but neither man noticed it.

"I want to celebrate tonight. What do you wanna do?" Ethan had reached up to run both hands over Justin's face, savoring the feel of Justin's weight on him. He hadn't missed any of the other man's distraction and he was now determined to keep Justin's attention and focus for the rest of the evening. They'd make their own memories to erase the ones that haunted Justin's thoughts.

"Friday night with no where to go first thing in the morning? I can think of something." Justin had pushed Ethan's thighs open with his body and settled his full weight on top of the other man. He was trying his hand at being playful and he would try to dismiss the last lingering images of Brian's face.

The face that lay below him offered him something unconditional and complete. It was what he'd wanted and he'd give this man as fair a chance as he had hoped Brian would have given him.

Six weeks earlier, Brian had fixed his stare on the computer screen and he listened to the familiar whine of the freight elevator slowing its way to the top floor. It hadn't been the first time that he had waited for Justin this way but it turned out to be the last.

Brian saved the little work he'd managed to do and leaned back in his chair. He'd been impatiently waiting for the fallout having "introduced" Justin to the man that Brian knew was his lover at the diner earlier.

Brian had known Justin would make sure to be home early that night and he'd in turn left work early so that they could get this over with. All the cards were on the table now and this was what the last two years would come down to.

He listened as Justin's key slid into the lock and he heard when the catch turned and the lock released. Everything seemed to be going in slow motion and Brian was on the verge of screaming for Justin to come in already so that they could finish what they'd started. None of this urgency showed on the outside though. On the outside, he looked like he was paying rapt attention to whatever he was working on and on the outside he didn't betray any of the humorless pain he was feeling.

Brian drifted away for a few moments and he could still see the look on Justin's face as they ate their quiet lunch after Ethan's retreat. As reserved as Justin had been over the last few weeks, nothing compared to the pure silence with which Justin watched him. Justin had apparently forgotten that Brian's method for dealing with a wound was neither to treat it nor ignore it. Brian's method was and had always been to make the cut deeper. If he was going to bleed, then he was going to make sure that he bled until he couldn't feel anything anymore. Justin had remembered this detail at some point during lunch and he'd sat in stunned silence as he tried to figure out what he wanted to do to wash some of Brian's blood off his hands.

"Brian." The smell of Justin's shampoo had pushed its way to Brian's nose in the instant that he made his way through the door and Brian took a deep breath before holding up a finger to silence him.

He'd made a few nonsensical changes to the text he'd been working on before looking up to meet Justin's eyes. The fact that the younger man was standing this close to him told Brian that there had been no fucking on the side today and Brian took some strange pleasure in knowing that he'd at least managed to break Justin's stride in this way.

"I'm sorry." Justin spoke his words honestly.

"What for?" The man was finding it very hard to keep his voice even.

"You know what for. I never meant for it to happen."

"I know. You were the poor helpless victim of a love bashing." Brian had meant his words to sting and he'd seen Justin flinch slightly at the comment. If he had to feel this, then Brian was hell bent on making sure that Justin felt it too.

"I should have told you about him." Justin genuinely regretted what he'd done.

Brian huffed a small bitter laugh. "And taken all the fun out of it?" It had been anything but fun watching Justin pull away from him each night and he didn't doubt that it had been as unpleasant for Justin to live.

Justin dropped his eyes slightly before finding Brian's face again and the two locked stares before Brian looked away.

"So how big's his dick?" The man had pushed away and leaned back in his chair as he looked at the computer screen again. He hadn't meant to shut down the conversation with his comments, so he'd thrown this question out to keep Justin talking.

"That has nothing to do with it." The younger man turned to move away. He'd honestly felt badly about the way he'd handled having Ethan in his life but it was shit like this that reminded him why he needed more.

"Since when?" Brian got up from his chair quickly and covered the distance between he and Justin. "You love cock." He'd had to force his way closer to Justin to reach the man's lips for a kiss as he reached down to unbutton his jeans. "You love it down your throat. You love it up your ass. You love riding it... and after you come, you love to fall asleep with it still inside you."

"Cut it out..." Justin tried to pull away from Brian's hand and what it was doing to his body. "...cut it out." That Brian Kinney turned him on had never been in doubt.

"You're hard now so don't tell me it doesn't matter." Brian pulled away only after filling his lungs with Justin's scent. It had really been a long time since he'd held him and smelled just him.

"There are other things." Justin called out his words as he watched Brian retreat to the kitchen. Erektion and sex aside, he had come back here today to plead with Brian for more than just the guarantee of a good fuck.

"Like flowers...picnics...violin music?" Brian spoke his words mockingly while pushing away the voice at the back of his head that nagged the fact that he would have done any one of those things if only Justin hadn't turned such a spotlight on them.

"He loves me." Justin pleaded with Brian.

A solid punch to the gut and Brian could easily have doubled over had he not been holding on to the refrigerator door at the time. He'd had to look at something other than Justin in that second because now the betrayal was real. The fact that Justin had been fucking around was nothing. The fact that Justin had lied to him caused Brian great discomfort. But what Brian found unbearable was the fact that Justin had let his emotions get involved.

"Your dreamy eyed school boy." Brian turned to look at him when he thought he had the stomach to do it.

"In ways that you can't." Justin spoke his words quietly and waited. He and Brian had slipped into an uncomfortable debate and this was Justin's parting volley. He hadn't said it in hopes that Brian would rebut it. He'd finally managed to put words to some of the things he'd been feeling and the thought had simply flowed out of his mouth as it flowed into his mind.

'How the fuck can you compare him to me Justin?' Brian screamed his words inside his head. He didn't speak his thought out loud so he didn't warn Justin that this was not the way to go about things.

"In ways that I won't." Brian's tone was cool. The words left Brian's face feeling numb and heavy and he'd said them to push Justin, not out but to actually push him back in. Just the same way that Justin had used Ethan's declaration in hopes of making Brian see the proverbial light, Brian had hoped that seeing the end looming on the horizon would make Justin wise up.

"He told me that I'm all he wants." Justin had pushed on to do even more damage than Brian had thought possible.

"They're still using that one?" Clipped and cool, this was Brian's way of telling Justin that it was all bullshit. How could this kid he'd known all of a month find these depths of love and make such declarations for a person he didn't know?

Fucking didn't count and as far as Brian was concerned it never counted. Beyond fucking, he'd given Justin so much and he was finding it hard to believe that Justin could have forgotten it all based on a few well-placed whispers during pillow talk.

"It's more than you've ever said."

Brian had moved toward Justin in these moments because he could actually feel him slipping away. He'd wanted the chance to feel him before they finished saying the things that they wouldn't be able to take back. "And it's more than I ever will, so...what the fuck are you still doing here?" Brian held the other man close and closed his eyes.

"Would you care if I wasn't?" Justin's voice cracked a little and Brian heard it. Justin had laid his pride to waste yet again and was begging Brian for something...anything.

Brian didn't hear things that way and he opened his eyes and pulled away from Justin as soon as the reality of the comment hit home. It was one thing for Justin to threaten abandonment in hopes of delivering a wake up call but it was an entirely different thing for him to honestly consider leaving.

Brian pulled back to make sure he was reading Justin right and he took in the lost look in the other man's eyes. Despite what he said or didn't say in this moment, Justin had been considering leaving him and that could mean only one thing for Brian.

There had never been any locks on their doors and if Justin didn't choose to stay then Brian wasn't sure that he even wanted him to.

Brian pulled back to meet Justin's eyes and looked at him for a long while. The fact that Justin could even question what he felt hurt him more than any other comment they had spoken. "It's your call where you wanna be...you decide." Brian let his fingers play over Justin's skin and he brushed against him as he moved away. Moments like these were a dying breed and Brian all but fell in on himself as his fingers slipped away from Justin's face. He didn't even need one hand to count the number of times that he would touch Justin like that again and he could feel it.

Justin stood shell-shocked as Brian walked away. He had spent the last few hours before coming back to the loft sitting in the park up the street thinking about what it would take for him to stay and never see Ethan Gold again. He'd come here to tell Brian that his list of demands was nowhere near as long as he'd made them back at Babylon all those months ago. Justin figured that he'd been stupid to think those affectations actually meant that Brian and he would be okay and today his list included only one demand.

Justin watched as Brian settled into his chair and rested his head against his hand. He'd taken note of the way that Brian had almost collapsed as he sat down and he'd felt his own share of weakness at the thought that he'd helped to bring them to this point.

"I only wanted one thing Brian." Justin whispered his words to the other man as he crossed the room to stand behind his chair. He watched as Brian lowered his head to rest it in both palms.

"Get out of here Justin. You don't owe me anything, least of all an explanation." Brian sat motionless and waited for Justin to leave.

He'd stayed in that same spot for the next four hours before shutting off the computer and the lights and making himself undress. He hadn't expected Justin to make his curfew that night or any other night after that and he was reeling from the fact that Justin had actually left.

He'd still been reliving that moment when the other man returned at just after midnight and had he been honest, Brian would have admitted that for a little while there, he would have accepted Justin back to stay. Even though the sadness that bled from Justin's every pore was enough to tell Brian that his lover had only come back because tonight someone else didn't want him, Brian had willingly held on as they closed their eyes. Touching Justin's skin and hearing him breath, some part of Brian had been willing to settle for second choice if it meant that Justin had actually made a decision to stay.

Brian picked his way through the crowd on a mission. He'd spotted his eleven o'clock fuck toy by the bar and been pushing off intruding hands as he made his way across the space. He hadn't been going to Babylon during any of the nights he thought he might see all too familiar faces but he'd been ordering his tricks in or popping into the club to pick up takeout nonetheless.

Brian stopped at the end of bar to order himself a drink. He'd casually made sure that the tall blonde hadn't moved from where he stood before turning to survey the mass of bodies around him. He didn't spot Emmett, Ted or Michael and he downed his shot quickly in hopes of being able to leave the place without running into them. He'd had to abandon many a run at Babylon in the last few weeks and had to go to some other club, just to get away from these particular well wishers.

Brian felt an arm slip casually around his waist and he turned to identify the man whose head he was about to tear off. It was one thing to fuck, but an entirely other thing for a trick to make himself familiar or to do anything affectionate.

This contact had felt all too affectionate to Brian and all too familiar.

The trick from across the bar lost his nerve for a second and loosened his arm slightly. He'd gotten back his shot of courage only when he thought he saw recognition pass over Brian's face. "You were taking your time so I thought I'd meet you halfway."

Brian thought about the man's words and right away part of him didn't want to fuck him so much anymore. This trick assumed things. He'd assumed Brian had chosen him even though Brian hadn't made eye contact with him more than once in all the time he'd been tracking him. For some reason this unabashed confidence didn't sit well with Brian.

"More like you wanted to come over before I saw something better and changed my mind." Brian offered these words by leaning in and letting his breath tickle across the man's ear. He'd pulled back only to offer the man a cold smirk.

The words were harsh and even though Brian had offered them in a cold monotone, everything he was doing was about pure seduction. It would have done Brian no good to let this all too 'affectionate' trick continue with the assumption that he'd met someone that he could touch this way or to think he had the upper hand. Brian had felt the man pull his arm back a little further and by the look on the man's face, his message had been delivered loud and clear.

These little details having been settled, Brian reached forward and grabbed the front of the man's jeans and pulled him closer. He'd pressed his erection against the man's thigh as their bodies made contact. "How much can you take?"

The man glanced down Brian's body to his cock and rolled his lips into his mouth reflexively. "All of it. Let's go to your place."

"No. This isn't an all-nighter. I want you up against a wall in back." Brian didn't pause to give the man a choice in the matter before pushing off the bar and stalking toward the back room. For all the body heat around him, Brian could feel the heat of the man close behind him as clear as day.

He'd just passed through the entry way to the back hall and started down the stairs when Michael spotted him from across the room. Michael had tried to call out to him, but Brian was out of sight before he could form the words.

"If history has taught you anything honey, it's that you should never follow Brian in there." Emmett had taken hold of Michael's arm to dissuade him from what he knew Michael had intended to do and Ben had smiled his agreement. Some people mind fucked themselves into believing they could forget if only they just focused and tried hard enough. Brian on the other hand wasn't averse to seeking out help in forgetting. In times like this he didn't need anything but hard cock, willing ass and an abundant supply of hallucinogens.

Brian pulled the man close behind him as they picked their way through a throng of bodies fucking and rubbing in every possible position and on every available surface. He'd chosen as secluded a spot as the backroom could offer on a busy Friday night and pressed the man up against the wall.

The room was dark and the lighting from the television monitors around the space cast dark shadows on everything. Brian found the trick's eyes and leaned in to lick across his mouth. He'd only returned to kissing these men over the last few weeks and everything about his kissing of late was carnal and urgent. Affection and tenderness no longer resided in many of the things that Brian did.

Brian ground his crotch against the other man's body and felt the tickle of breath as the man exhaled sharply. The couple next to them was on the verge of orgasm and the man on top kept announcing the impending event to no one in particular. Ignoring that show, Brian stepped in close and let his lips play over the trick's throat. He'd reached down to unzip the man's fly before reaching in to pull out the hard on the man had been pressing against him as they'd searched out this spot in the room.

Brian stroked him firmly and watched the lust play over the man's features. He'd always gotten off on driving his lovers wild long before the actual fucking began.

Pushing the man's pants over his hips, Brian turned him around so that his face was against the wall and his back was pressed firmly against Brian's body. He'd continued to jerk the man in his fist, ignoring his own erection and ignoring the climax next to them.

The trick reached back to try to rub Brian through his jeans and Brian shifted slightly to let the man reach him. All the while that he continued his assault on the man's cock, Brian had been licking at his throat and rolling his face through the thick curls of the man's hair. Brian and the trick hadn't noticed that their neighbors had now taken to watching them while they relished in their afterglow.

Brian pulled back long enough to undo his belt and fly. No underwear to slow his progress, the trick sucked in deep breaths as he watched Brian roll the condom over his length. The man had practically been panting as he pushed his face harder against the wall and pushed back closer to Brian's body.

"I'm gonna fuck you so hard your ass will be out of commission for a week." Brian licked over the trick's ear again as he dragged his cock head up and down the man's crack. There was definitely something to be said about pushing these men to the brink before using his cock to send them into freefall.

Brian had only pulled back briefly before finding the man's hole and pushing in hard and sharp. He hadn't been trying to hurt this man but he had warned him that he was in for a rough ride.

The trick reached back to find Brian's body and hold on. He'd needed to hold on to something to keep back the moans that threatened to turn into screams as Brian continued impossibly harder and deeper inside him. Brian on the other hand hadn't missed any of the man's attempts to maintain control. He taken note of the man's rough breathing and he'd continued to quicken his pace until this particular backroom exploit became the center of attention for all those around them.

With a sizable audience to their fucking, Brian continued to pummel the man until the edges of his own vision had started to blur. Reality having long since been forgotten, Brian pushed against the warm body to ride out the waves of his orgasm. He'd worked hard for this next minute of oblivion and he closed his eyes as it took him.

Justin crawled out of Ethan's bed just after midnight. He'd found himself waking up in time to go home, then remembering and lying awake waiting for sleep to take him once again. Ethan hadn't woken up this time and Justin had been relieved not to have to see the equal parts disappointment and worry in the man's eyes as he recognized the significance of the timing. No matter how much Ethan pretended that it didn't bother him, Justin knew how he felt about the uninvited third member of their relationship.

Justin had pulled a sheet around himself to quiet the chill in the room and moved to sit on the sofa. From this vantage point Justin could see the space around him, he could see out the window across the room and he could see Ethan asleep. He tried hard not to turn his mind to the fact that he'd spent many a night in another apartment doing just this same thing.

Ethan shifted in his sleep and Justin tensed. He'd been thinking back to the night he went back to Brian after Ethan made him leave. He'd been thinking about the way that Brian held on to him and molded himself to his body. Brian hadn't so much as looked at him when he'd told him to leave earlier but then in the dark of the night, Brian had held him so tight and he hadn't let go once.

As soon as the sex was over, 'he' was back.

All of it was back. The haunting that followed Brian around at every minute and the memories that lived and breathed in the loft just waiting for him to come home so that they could play. All of it flooded back on the same path as the blood to his brain and Brian couldn't think or breath or move without triggering a memory or seeing something that his mind would loop on for the next few minutes. This was the down side to completely letting go or letting his mind focus on any one particular thing. Just like every action had a reaction, any period of utter and total oblivion and any freedom from his haunting came at the cost of a tidal wave of memories when it was all over.

Brian took the stairs out of the back room in twos and took a deep breath of the sweat and the smoke that filled the air in the main area of the club. He'd let his eyes pan around the room to gain his bearings before moving off towards a face that he recognized even under the pulsing light of the room.

His trick had failed to do the trick so to speak and Brian was in search of a distraction that would last at least a few hours. He'd come up next to the man before slipping an arm around his shoulder and flicking a fifty under the man's nose.

"Give me something you know I'll like." Brian eyed the pusher and watched as the man smiled and reached out for the money. He'd slipped a small package into Brian's hand in the same fluid movement and then moved off to spread his charms elsewhere.

"What are you doing?" Michael came out of nowhere.

"Getting high. What does it look like I'm doing?" Brian unrolled the brown paper and shook three pills out on to his palm. He'd popped all three into his mouth before reaching out to take Michael's beer and bringing it to his lips.

"You don't even know what that shit is and you're taking all three?" Michael had reached up to snatch his bottle back from Brian's hands as he eyed the taller man.

"With my luck it'll be fucking horse tranquilizers." Brian raised his voice a little to be heard above the driving beat of the music. He'd slipped back into his breathing technique just after leaving the back room so Michael was met with his familiar nonchalance.

"Let me drive you home." Michael reached over to put his bottle on the bar before turning back to face Brian.

"Mikey go play wifey slash nursemaid with Ben. He looks like he misses you." Brian gestured towards a very concerned looking Ben who was leaning against the railing above them. He'd flattened a palm to Michael's chest before pushing him away gently.

Michael grabbed hold of Brian's arm as he pulled away and Brian stopped to look back at him. "I didn't tell you to cause problems between you two. If anything, I figured that if you knew then you'd fix things." Michael's words hit at Brian's ears like a ton of bricks. Michael still hadn't said the name but he'd already said enough to bring on a cramping in Brian's stomach that had nothing to do with the mysterious pills.

Michael wasn't sure that was what he'd intended to say when he grabbed Brian's arm but he knew that he'd been meaning to offer that apology for some time now. Michael glanced away as he saw the puzzlement spread across Brian's face.

Brian rolled his lips into his mouth and took a moment to refocus his breathing. Just like when Michael had first thought to shine a light on Justin's lover, the noise of the club around them faded away and everything seemed to slow down. Brian had known Michael long enough to recognize his friend's way of apologizing but as deep as he was into his month long haunting, Brian heard it as an accusation.

He'd reached up to lace his fingers around the back of Michael's neck before pulling him close and pressing his forehead to Michael's. "We all have choices Mikey. He didn't owe me shit so stop taking credit for things you don't have the power to do and stop making it my responsibility to fix other people's fuck ups." Brian had spoken his words against Michael's skin and Michael felt them as much as he heard them. Now Brian tipped Michael's face back to look at his eyes before leaning in to press his lips to Michael's.

Brian had pulled away a moment later leaving his friend to watch him disappear into the grinding crowd.

Brian slipped a cigarette between his lips and focused on steadying the lighter in his hands. The pills had started to wind their way through his limbs and joints first and he was having trouble getting his body to keep time with his commands. He moved slowly through the exit of the club and pushed a palm against the brick exterior of the building in order to steady himself. He'd spent the last few minutes on the receiving end of a blowjob that he only remembered because his dick was still wet. Relief with trick number two of the evening having been even more temporary, now Brian welcomed the muddiness that his recent self-medication was bringing him.

He'd found himself thinking about everything but the sex during the entire time the other man was on his knees and the headache that had stopped only after he dropped his mother off and pulled out of the driveway had returned with a vengeance.

"Want some company?" A man with grey eyes stepped up close to Brian.

In his mind he'd told the trick he wasn't interested but in reality Brian hadn't said a word and just kept walking. Still keeping one hand against the brick wall to keep his balance he'd been making his way to where he thought he remembered parking the Jeep.

"You're in no shape to drive asshole." The trick called from behind him and Brian gave him the finger. He'd been amused with himself that he'd managed to command that precise movement of his hand in this new floating condition.

Brian reached for his keys and fumbled around for a few seconds waiting for the right one to slip home. He pulled the door open with some effort and hauled himself into the driver's seat. He'd contemplated going back inside and taking Michael up on his offer of a lift but decided against it.

There was something very uplifting about this buzz and he didn't want any more references to reality to crush his mood.

Brian laid his head back against the leather upholstery and closed his eyes. Just thinking about Michael had brought back the man's reference to Justin and Brian winced as he and Justin's last real intimacy drilled through his temples. Brian had shaken his head to clear the thoughts of Justin crying next to him while he held him in silence and he concentrated on fitting the key into the ignition.

There had never been any locks on their doors. There had never been anything to keep them inside or to keep anyone else out. These thoughts pushed a shiver down Brian's spine and he credited the drug for his reaction as the engine roared to life.

A few miles away Justin shivered too. He'd had no drug in his system to credit with his reaction.

Part III

Justin opened his eyes to the thin strips of sunlight streaming across the room. He could hear the distant sound of a radio playing in the apartment next door and the shared ventilation system meant he could smell the neighbor's bacon and egg breakfast. Justin's mind had wandered for a second or two and his thoughts settled on Brian's oft-repeated joke that the younger man's cock and his stomach always woke up before the rest of him did.

Trying to dismiss the thought, Justin rolled on to his side and reached out to run a hand across the back in front of him. Ethan was breathing evenly and steadily and Justin watched his hand rise and fall with each movement of breath. He let his eyes pan across the man's sun freckled back and the disarray of his hair. He'd managed to put Brian out of his thoughts for six consecutive hours the night before and Justin considered that to be a great victory. This even though Brian was currently at the forefront of his thoughts again and Justin suspected he would remain so for the next little while.

Morning had always belonged to him and Brian. They may have shared their nights with tricks but by morning it was always just the two of them and it was there that Justin had his most comforting memories of his time with Brian. No games were played in the light of morning and there was no doubt between them that the day always began with a few minutes of their solitude...

...their kissing

...their touching

...their fucking.

Justin swallowed hard at the memory and he quickly forced his blush and the thought away as he looked over at Ethan again. There were a lot more things to remember about Brian than the sex and the few times that he'd actually thought that Brian belonged to him.

The shrill ringing of his cell phone pierced the haze of the morning and Justin shifted off the bed slowly. He'd been trying to reach it before it woke Ethan up but at the same time he hadn't wanted to wake the man in the process.

"Hello." Justin whispered his word while turning back to watch Ethan turn over and curl up in the spot he had just vacated. Ethan was still asleep and Justin walked gingerly across the room in an attempt to avoid all the floorboards that he knew squeaked.

"Justin. It's Lindsay, I'm sorry did I wake you?"

"No. No you didn't, most of me has been awake for hours." Justin smiled reflexively at his comment and his repeated memory and then dismissed both of them when he realized what he'd been doing.

"I wouldn't have called you this early only I'm kind of in a bind and I'm hoping you can help. Mel and I would owe you big for this." Lindsay spoke breathlessly into the phone. On her end of the line, her entire household had been up for hours with Gus screaming to be released from his playpen and Melanie was working herself into a frenzy by cursing all things Brian Kinney.

"It sounds crazy over there. What's going on?" Justin had returned to the spot on the sofa that he'd spent part of his night and he pulled the discarded sheet around his naked body before sitting down.

"Mel and I are supposed to catch a flight at 9:30 and we should have been at the airport twenty minutes ago. Brian was supposed to come pick Gus up this morning and he never showed. I drove to the loft and he's not there. I've been calling his cell and he's not answering."

"I don't know where Brian is Lindsay. You should call Michael or maybe Debbie knows something." Justin thought to add the fact that he hadn't seen Brian in close to two weeks now and he was the last person that anyone should call for information about the man these days.

"I realize that Justin. I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind coming over here. Maybe sitting with Gus for the weekend. If you can't stay that long, we're still trying to call some friends of ours and they may be able to pick him up later." Lindsay hadn't come up for air once and now Justin could hear Melanie's voice getting closer to the phone. Lindsay had stopped to say something to her and covered the phone slightly before launching back into her plea to Justin. "It's just that he's getting over his ear-infection and his cold so we can't take him with us. Debbie is working all weekend and I wouldn't want to expose Vic to anything. We'll only be gone till Sunday afternoon and Brian was to watch him until then."

"And that selfish asshole is too busy fucking to pick up the goddamned phone and tell someone that he's not going to do the shit that he promised that he would do." Melanie yelled into the phone and Justin held the receiver away from his ear. Between Melanie's yelling and Gus's crying, Lindsay's nerves were on the verge of fraying.

"Justin, I would really appreciate this. You could use the time to work in the studio, maybe catch-up on homework. Gus sleeps a lot because of the medication. Once I get him settled, he shouldn't be a problem at all." Lindsay had sat down on the couch and brought one hand up to her free ear to block out some of the noise.

"Don't worry about it Lindsay, I'll come. I'll leave right now and I should be there in twenty minutes tops." Justin jumped up off the sofa and dropped the sheet around his ankles. He'd been looking around for his clothes while he listened to Lindsay thanking him. "See you in a bit."

Justin closed his phone and dropped it into his backpack before reaching for the one foot of his running shoes that he'd spotted beside the bed.

"The other one's over there." Ethan spoke up behind him and Justin turned to look at him.

"Did I wake you up?" Justin asked sheepishly. He hadn't been aware of the fact that even the quietest whisper of the name Brian would have been enough to wake Ethan from the deepest coma.

"Nah. It's time for me to get up anyway. You know, practice, practice, practice." Ethan shrugged off the sheets and stood up slowly. He'd reached around cup his ass as he did it. "I hope I have some energy left, considering the fact that someone wore me out last night."

Justin huffed a little laugh before crossing the room to pick up the other shoe. "I'm going to go over to Lindsay and Mel's and I might be there for the whole weekend. They need someone to sit with Gus and if they can find someone else on short notice, then I should be back tonight."

"Brian was supposed to do it and he bailed huh?" Ethan folded his arms across his chest and waited to Justin to look over at him again. The other man had already found his underwear and was now stepping into his jeans.

"Why'd you mention Brian?"

"I heard you tell her that you didn't know where he was. I'm assuming they were looking for him since they expected him to come get his son." Ethan let his words hang in the air and waited for Justin's inevitable defense of the man.

"I don't know anything about Brian. I just know that they need someone right now or they're gonna miss their flight." Justin pulled on his socks and reached for his t-shirt on the chair beside where Ethan stood. He'd expected the other man to reach out for him once he came close enough and Justin let himself be held.

"I thought you and I would do something together this evening. You know, a date. Student Union is showing some more French films and you really liked the last ones right?" Ethan leaned in to kiss Justin lightly and Justin kissed back.

"I did, but they need me over there. Maybe we'll still be able to go out if they find someone to sit with him or maybe Bri..." Justin stopped short.

"Maybe Brian will actually remember he has a son and come get him. Well that would let you off the hook so at least that's something to look forward to." Ethan leaned in to kiss Justin again and Justin stepped out of his hold, putting an end to the kiss. He'd pulled his t-shirt over his head and grabbed for his hoodie and backpack.

"I've gotta get going. I'll call you later and let you know what's happening for tonight." He stepped into his shoes and moved towards the door. He'd tie the laces as soon as he got out of there.

"You do that." Ethan offered a half smile. Even though Ethan had noticed that Justin was less than his receptive morning self, at least Justin wasn't defending Brian.

Justin pulled the door shut behind him and closed his eyes for a second or two. Having regrouped quickly, he dropped his bag beside his leg and set about tying up his laces. In a few minutes he'd be outside in the sun and fresh air and he'd have a moment to himself to sort out the thoughts that had been swirling through his head since he heard Lindsay's voice.

Brian rolled his head against the headrest and grimaced against the light that stabbed at his eyes. His mouth felt like someone had lined it with sandpaper and his throat felt raw. His first reaction had been to sit up in his chair, but he'd rethought that proposition when the first wave of nausea swept through his stomach.

He turned his head slightly and took in the exposed brick wall outside the window of the Jeep. From the looks of things, he hadn't spent the night at the loft and he had no idea where he'd been since he left Babylon or where he was now.

Brian pulled himself up in his seat and grabbed for the steering wheel to steady himself. This hadn't been the first time that he'd spent hours folded against the bucket seat of the Jeep but it had certainly been the first time that he recalled sleeping a high off there. He could hear the sound of cars passing behind him and he turned around gingerly to eye the somewhat bustling street at the end of the alleyway behind the Jeep. His head was beginning to clear and his path up to this point was flooding back along with some of the sludge that he was now barely able to keep down in his stomach. He'd made it no more than two blocks from Babylon before everything had started fading to black and he'd just managed to maneuver the Jeep into the narrow path between two low rise buildings before passing out.

Brian pushed back from the steering wheel and lifted his eyes once again. Now he focused his attention on the woman who was walking down the alleyway toward him. She looked to be in her sixties at least and through the leftovers of his drug haze, Brian's only thought had been that she hadn't held up well at all.

"I didn't call the cops because you were snoring loud enough to hear it through the glass and I didn't think you'd cause much trouble all out of it like you were. But now it's time to rise and shine and move this show to someone else's backyard." The woman had come up beside the driver side window and gestured for Brian to roll down the window.

"Who the fuck are you?" Brian spoke slowly as he drew up his brows. He thought his words sounded a little slurred.

"The person who will call the cops if you don't move this monstrosity so that I can get my car out of the back lot and do my grocery shopping." The little woman spat back and Brian couldn't help but smile. "From the looks of your fender and brick scratches along this side, your drunk driving skills are just as foul as your mouth." The woman stepped back a little to eye the damage to the Jeep and Brian popped the lock so that he could see what she was talking about. He'd been unstable enough on his feet to fall against the door and he'd succeeded in scraping the edge when the door connected with the brick wall.

"Take it easy. Don't think that I'll be hauling you up off the ground if you fall over." She'd stepped back and out of the way as the six foot plus man found his walking legs again and closed the door before moving around to where she had been standing.

"Motherfucker!" Brian ran a hand through his hair as he took in the gouge marks that almost ran the entire length of the left side of the Jeep. From the looks of this and the fender, he'd bounced off the walls of the alleyway as part of his bumpy ride the night before.

"If you don't like that, then don't look at this side." The woman folded her hands across her chest and shook her head from where she stood on the other side of the Jeep. She hadn't bothered to lift her eyes to Brian's face as she spoke, instead settling for one last look at the mess Brian had made of his paintjob before turning and walking away. "Now like I said, move this show somewhere else, so I can get on with my day."

Brian scrubbed a hand through his hair before bringing it to rest on the back of his neck. It had taken this disaster to completely clear his head and now except for the queasiness and his ever-present headache, the drugs had let go of his brain. He took a look in the direction the woman had walked before slowly trudging back to the driver's door. Not believing for a second that the bile in his stomach would stay put if he took a look at the other side of the Jeep anytime soon, Brian climbed in and started the engine.

He'd swallowed to moisten his sandpapery throat before throwing the so-called monstrosity into reverse and slowly backing out of the alley.

"Justin, thank God." Melanie greeted him at the door sweetly before looking over his shoulder to yell at the irate cab driver that'd been leaning on his horn for the last ten seconds. "What is your fucking problem? I said that we were coming right out." The veins in Melanie's neck stood out against the skin and the cab driver stopped honking.

The woman ushered a very concerned Justin into the house and he took in the disaster area that Lindsay had described as not being a problem. Gus had been released from the playpen only to be trapped once again in his high chair and he was just as pleased with this prospect as he'd been with the pen. There were baby clothes thrown across the normally neat living room and he'd just missed tripping over an overnight bag as Lindsay breezed into the room passed him.

"Oh sweetie, thank you for doing this. I promise you that once Gus settles down, you won't even notice that he's around." Lindsay leaned in to kiss his cheek and Justin checked out the new view of the disastrous room from this angle. Now he could see that the bag that had been packed for Gus to take with him to Brian's was now leaking its contents of mixed formula and that there were at least two soiled diapers sitting on the coffee table beside Gus's playpen.

"Did you get in touch with any of your friends?" Justin spoke meekly. He was still being smothered in Lindsay's hug and he felt the woman pull away slowly.

"I'm so sorry sweetie but I'm afraid you're it." She'd scrunched up her face a little and was getting ready to plead with him to stay for the weekend. Lindsay was again on the verge of singing the virtues of an overly medicated two-year old and her quiet studio.

"It's okay. I'm happy to stay with him." Justin dropped his backpack on the sofa and soaked up Lindsay's smile of relief.

"I'll keep trying Brian on our way to the airport and maybe he'll still come and get him." Lindsay had said this in hopes of offering Justin some hope of salvaging his weekend but she'd also regretted having to be the one to again mention Brian's name in Justin's presence.

"That's fine Lindz. Don't worry about it just get out of here and keep me posted on what happens between now and when you get to the airport." Justin shooed the woman away. Melanie had made short work of transferring their bags to the cab and now Lindsay reached for her purse before crossing the room to stroke a wailing Gus's cheek.

"Mommies will see you tomorrow night honey. Be good for Justin and bite Daddy with your new teeth if you see him." Lindsay kissed the baby before kissing Justin and heading towards the door. "Justin, all his medicines and the instructions are in his bag."

"See you tomorrow kiddo." Melanie called her words to Justin as she leaned down to pick Gus up from the highchair. She'd given him a kiss on the forehead and the baby settled down instantly, having now been released from his confines. The woman handed Gus to Justin and then moved off toward the door.

"Be good boys." Lindsay called out as she disappeared out the door and Melanie closed it behind them.

...Lock turning in the door.

...The sound of footfalls on the porch and then...of car doors slamming.

....Baby no longer screaming.

Justin took in the fallout around where he stood and Gus smiled at him before reaching out to pull on his ear. As far as Justin was concerned, he could handle this.

Six blocks from Tremont, Brian was following the car ahead of him from one and a half car lengths behind. He wasn't up to his usual tailgating self and whereas he would have practically ran this turtle off the road, he didn't think he had it in him on this fine morning.

"You're so lucky that I don't have any place else to be asshole." Brian reached over to the passenger seat and pulled out a cigarette from the package. His thoughts had settled on the fact that he was almost out of smokes and that he'd have to pick up more and get a few out of the way before he went to pick up Gus.

"...Shit."

Brian made a screeching u-turn and flattened his foot against the gas pedal as he glanced at the dashboard clock. He was supposed to make an appearance at Muncher Villa close to two hours ago.

Justin had set Gus down amidst the chaos and the baby had promptly set about pulling tissue from the tissue box that had been on the chair next to him. Turning his attention to righting the disarray around him, Justin hadn't noticed the baby until the box was nearly empty.

"No Gus." Justin plucked the box from the small fingers and paused as he waited for Gus to start wailing. He and his father shared the same temperament. Things had to go their way or all hell was sure to break loose.

When the baby didn't start to cry, Justin considered his mission successful and set about picking up the thin papers from the carpet. Gus had busied himself with trying to pull the tissues out of Justin's grasp in hopes of returning them to their rightful place on the floor.

"Gus c'mon, work with me here." The baby smiled in response and Justin tried not to take note of the resemblance.

The door buzzer sounded just then and the two of them looked toward it in unison. The noise started again almost immediately and now by the sound of things, the person on the other side of the door was leaning their hand against the button with no release.

Justin pulled the door open and got ready to let his displeasure be known.

"Before you both take turns chewing my nuts off, take one look at the Jeep and be thankful that I'm still here." Brian drawled his words as he leaned against the doorframe. He'd covered his red eyes with very dark sunglasses and been looking down while he stubbed out his cigarette under his boot.

"They'll chew them off when they get back." Justin spoke up and Brian finally looked up from his cigarette.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" The composure that had been lost in the instant that he saw Justin's face had quickly been recovered and Brian was glad that he'd decided to pull on his shades before getting out of the Jeep. There were some reactions that were better left unseen.

"Your were missing in action, so Lindsay asked me to come by for the weekend." Justin thought he'd stammered out his words but in reality Brian was amazed by how calm and cool he seemed.

"Daaaaa...daaaaaaaa" The large sound came from the very small body and both men looked into the house to watch Gus walking toward them.

"C'mere Sonny Boy." Brian stepped forward and Justin moved back and out of his way. He hadn't moved fast enough to avoid the familiar smell of Brian's cigarettes and cologne or to avoid contact with the skin of the man's arm against his own. He'd felt Brian tense in that instant and Justin thought he'd seen something in Brian's eyes even behind the depth of the glasses.

"Careful he's still pretty runny because of his cold." Justin offered his words quietly as he watched Brian lean down to pick up his son. He'd moved away and gone into the living room when he grew tired of not looking at Brian's skin...Brian's arms...Brian's hair...Brian's hands.

The last time he'd laid eyes on Brian, it had been Brian who'd beat a hasty retreat from the diner without so much as a look in his direction. Now Justin was the one beating the hasty retreat and trying hard not to see what he would

inevitably see if he looked in Brian's direction. He'd busied himself with straightening out a few more of the tissues Gus had scrunched up on the floor before setting the whole stack on the coffee table.

"You don't have to stay. I'll get him out of your hair and then you can get back to bigger and better things." Brian's voice came from somewhere to the left of him and Justin turned around slowly to look at him.

"I'm not in any hurry and I told Lindsay that I would stay. If you wanted to take off, you could." Justin pushed his hands into the pockets of his Levi's and waited for Brian to look away or do something to break the spell. The man had taken off his sunglasses and now Justin could see the originals of the eyes that he'd spent the last hour looking uncomfortably at.

"I said I would keep him at my place this weekend. I was late but I'm here now. You can get back to whatever you were doing Justin." Brian was instantly aware that he'd said the name out loud thus breaking his own intended silence where those syllables were concerned.

"Whatever." Justin shrugged his shoulders a little and looked around the room. He'd physically managed to break the spell when Brian looked away after saying his name and Justin tried not to let his mind settle on the fact that Brian had more closed his eyes than looked away. "I'll repack his stuff then. They were pretty much like this when I got here but I did manage to clean up the formula spill that I found." Justin was reaching for Gus's bag and he'd set it on the table furthest from Brian's frame before pushing the little boy's clothes back into it.

Brian watched him move around the room. He hadn't said anything in response to Justin's words and had set a squirming Gus on the floor by his legs. Brian hadn't noticed the baby immediately move towards the box of tissues before finishing off the few that still remained unscathed.

Brian had let his eyes fall on Justin's back and skim across the shape of his body.

Even from across the room, he could smell Justin's shampoo and Brian cursed under his breath for the immediate reaction his body had had to Justin's proximity. Like with Justin's subconscious and his dreams, even though the reality may have changed, there were still parts of them that were playing catch-up.

Brian had wanted to tell Justin to leave the mess and just get out of there. He didn't trust the sound of his voice just then so he'd kept quiet. He'd instead settled for watching Justin move and watching his hands at work folding and smoothing Gus's clothes. Whatever he wanted to say to Justin would stay unsaid and Brian blinked hard at the Technicolor of the memory that was starting to flood his senses.

He'd said the word and conjured the demon...and now one particular memory came crashing back with full force.

It was late and he'd been thinking...and drinking. Neither one of which was a good thing for Brian to do alone in the dark and even he realized that the combination of the two made him deadly.

Brian had slipped out of Woody's three hours ago without any goodbyes after the bowling fiasco and now it was just after two in the morning. It seemed like three lifetimes ago since he'd left a moody Justin unloading the dishwasher, kissed him on the cheek and told him not to wait up. By the looks of the lifeless loft and the crisply made sheets, Justin had taken his advice.

Hindsight now told Brian that he was never in any danger of finding Justin waiting in bed for him when he returned. He hadn't been there when Brian got home from work that day and considering the warmth of the homecoming from Chicago, Brian was getting bitterly used to the fact that Justin wouldn't wait for him.

Scrubbing his hands across his cheeks, Brian let the sound of stubble fill his ears and drown out the din of the empty loft. He'd been making a slow circuit of the place since getting home, having started out collecting provisions at the bar and then moving from chair to chair whenever he got restless. He hadn't turned on any lights, relying instead on his sense of smell to guide him to each of Justin's 'places'.

Brian had started out on the sofa, leaning back to rest his head against the cushions so that he could smell the telltale scent of Justin's shampoo. When that smell had started to fade for him, he'd moved on, drink in hand, to the table Justin had turned into his workstation. He'd flipped through Justin's papers and pretended not to be skimming through the contents of Justin's book bag. There wasn't much of Justin's scent on these objects. There was just enough to remind him that Justin worked in a greasy diner but not enough to tell him where Justin spent almost every minute of his free time lately.

The distaste over the fact that he'd been searching through Justin's things having finally hit him, Brian moved on.

He reached for the bottle next to him and refilled his glass...

...He'd ended up as close to the bed as he could let himself get and settled for sitting on the platform instead. The empty bed seeming anything but a comfortable retreat considering his thoughts.

Brian had been playing a drinking game with himself for the last little while. He took one shot for every time over the last few weeks that Justin had pulled away from him to head to the bathroom claiming the need for a shower. For every time he remembered finding hickeys he hadn't left on his lover's back or neck, Brian took a shot. He'd emptied one bottle of Absolut and was starting on his second. He'd had a lot of memories and so he'd taken a lot of shots.

At some point Brian had changed the focus of his game. He'd stopped thinking about Justin and started to count of the number of times he'd told Michael or Lindsay that he would never do this. How many times had he told them that he'd never be stupid enough to fall into the traps that kept them awake thinking about something that was never there.

He realized that his thoughts had come full circle back to Justin when remembered telling Justin that same thing.

In the beginning he'd been able to deny Justin with words. To tell him to stop hoping and dreaming because he'd met a man who didn't want anything from a lover that couldn't be delivered with a hard press of urgency and a satisfying release. He'd told Justin that truth then and he'd made it his calling card to tell him the truth ever since.

After a year of hearing Brian say it, part of Justin had started to believe it.

Brian took a deep swallow and the glass found the platform with a low thud as he set it down beside him. He'd crossed the room to retrieve his cigarettes from the nightstand before returning to his perch and returning to his quiet brooding. There was a flash of light across Brian's face as the lighter sparked to life and the flame warmed the room. Within seconds the light and the warmth had receded and Brian's features returned to dim outlines in the dark once again.

He'd drank a lot tonight but he wasn't drunk. He was no where near drunk and in this stark lucidity he was perfectly aware of the fact that he was waiting for Justin to say something or just waiting for himself to snap and say it for them both. He was faintly aware of the fact that he was doing everything in his power to ensure that the man he was waiting for wouldn't know he was there when he finally returned.

Despite what he had and would always tell anyone who asked, three shots ago he'd come to the realization that Justin did owe him something.

"Brian...Brian."

Brian raised his eyes and found Justin's face. The memory had subsided and now the reality was even more blinding.

"I said...he's all packed." Justin had been standing beside the closed bag and holding Gus in his arms. He'd turned around to find Brian's stare fixed on a spot on the floor while Gus ran rampage on the loose tissues he'd left on the coffee table. "Are you alright? I saw the side of the Jeep but you didn't look hurt or anything." Justin shifted the weight of the baby on his hip and eyed Brian closely. This time he wasn't trying to avoid the parts of Brian's body that brought back memories and temptation.

This time he was trying to gauge Brian's quiet.

Brian rolled his lips into his mouth and reached for his son. A damaged paintjob was easy enough to spot but a lot of other things didn't show on the outside.

Part 4

When he was fourteen, his parents took a test run at getting divorced.

"Test run," offered the best description because it seemed like they'd worked out all the kinks back then and had only to pick the actual date and the actual events that would spur the final decision. Last year when it finally happened, he'd come to realize that deals had long since been brokered and documents had long since been signed deciding who would get what and who would get who.

He remembered being blindly sure that it was his fault and that he'd fucked up their lives so-immensely by pushing them to a point from which no relationship could recover. He'd remembered thinking this way until someone had told him differently.

"We make our own pain". Justin could hear the words in his ears and he could still feel Brian's breath on his cheek as he'd said it. That was something Brian had told him very clearly and that was one message that hadn't gotten lost in the translation from Brian speak to Justin speak.

This thought had just hit home for some reason and now on some level Justin wondered if Brian even remembered telling him that.

Justin's millisecond retrospective came to an abrupt halt as Brian's fingers grazed his in the effort that it took to pass the squirming toddler from one body to the next. He'd watched the man closing the distance to cross the room and he'd been thrown into flashback reels about a lot of the things that had passed between them.

"C'mere snot face. Let's see if you can't give your old man a cold by the time the weekend's over." Brian settled Gus into the crook of his arm and smoothed the back of the baby's t-shirt as he did it. Part of him had cut his own jaunt down memory lane short in an effort to get himself out of this house and away from Justin as soon as possible. "Do you need a ride somewhere?" Brian had lifted his eyes in Justin's general direction but hadn't looked at the other man.

"No...um...I walked over. I can make it back by myself." He hadn't thought about his answer to Brian's offer and he hadn't meant to sound as dismissive as he had.

"I'm sure you can." Brian turned on his heels and took a deep breath. He focused his attention on not listening to Justin's movements behind him.

Brian hadn't been offended by the man's comment so much as he'd been chastising himself for making the offer in the first place. There was a certain unspoken aspect to his offer that neither had been prepared to acknowledge and Brian had been stupid to bring out into the open.

There was no way in hell that Justin would accept an offer from his ex-lover to drive him home to his new 'love'.

"Fresh air and all." Justin offered his weak explanation and an even weaker smile as Brian turned to look at him from over his shoulder. Brian had swallowed a little but other than that, offered no reaction to Justin's words.

Justin watched the set of Brian's shoulders for a few more seconds before starting back on a track that seemed a little bit more grounded in reality.

"The Jeep? What happened to it?" In his head, Justin was still flipping through the thought of that long time conversation. Most people would never peg Brian Kinney for the type to give sage advice, but Justin had always known the part of Brian that refused to let some things go unsaid. The part of Brian that was never above giving

anyone a well needed kick in the ass or saving anyone from themselves. He'd have been the first to tell you the lowdown and call you on your bullshit when no one else would.

That part of Brian had been in full operation when it came to most every issue, but had been on hiatus when it came to anything that had been brewing between he and Justin. That part of Brian had stood on the sidelines and for all intents and purposes, it was still watching from the sidelines.

"Had a little accident. No big deal." Brian sounded dead. Michael would have recognized the tone, Cynthia would have recognized the tone and Joan Kinney would have recognized the tone.

Justin listened to the explanation and he figured there was no reason for him to buy it. Brian had referred to the Jeep as a 'company car' but Justin had been close enough to make fun of the man's attachment to the thing.

He'd watched Brian's shoulders slump even more and he'd decided that it wasn't the weight of the baby in the man's arms that was causing it.

"Can I tell you something?" Justin slowly sat down on the sofa behind where Brian stood and waited.

"Why ask permission now? You never did." Brian called over his shoulder. Gus had looked at him just then and the kid had looked very serious. No more fidgeting and no more gurgling. For all of his two and a half years the baby had looked like he was about to deck Brian for that last comment.

Maybe the kid had inherited a little of the no nonsense ass-kicker gene and since Brian seemed to be on vacation in that department, Gus was all the more willing to take up his role.

Brian blinked a little, deciding that he'd imagined something in the all too similar eyes that simply wasn't there. His ears would sting when Justin finally responded to his comment.

"I figured I'd ask because all the other times that I didn't, you never listened to me." Brian turned around and Justin met Brian's gaze with a sharp look. For the second time in as many seconds, Brian would meet a similar look on his son's face.

Brian having been properly silenced, Justin continued. "I'm not happy." He'd made this statement while watching Brian's face.

"Why not? His cock not as big as you'd originally thought?" Brian huffed a little laugh before rolling his lips into his mouth. He'd been avoiding Gus's attention and chose instead to focus on the wall directly in front of where he stood.

"Your cock was plenty big enough and I still wasn't happy with you." Justin spoke slowly and softly and he eyed Brian as the man was forced to drop his eyes to look directly at his face. "I don't know why I'm telling you that, but I figured, since nobody's even dared to ask, then what the hell, you might as well hear it from the horse's mouth." Justin smiled ruefully and then stood up from the chair. He didn't bother to look at Brian anymore, having decided that he could no longer stand to look at the coldness that the man was eyeing him with.

Justin had been pushing his sleeves up on his forearms as he moved towards his backpack on the other side of the room. He'd felt his blood pressure rising as he came closer to the statue that now housed his former lover.

Justin hadn't been anticipated an interception and he stood frozen for a second as Brian reached for his arm. The man had been balancing Gus on one side while holding Justin and the contact of his fingers on Justin's bare arm sent heat and blood right through Brian's whole body.

Justin looked up to meet Brian's attention and tried hard to read the look the man was giving him. Brian's eyes were just as desolate and just as cold as they'd been before. If not for the heat from his hand, 'statuary' would have indeed been an apt description of this man.

"Why are you telling me this?" Brian's voice was deep and his breath was hot against Justin's face. They weren't standing that closely but despite the cool facades, the mild proximity was doing them both in.

"I told you. It just sort of came out. I don't know why I'm telling you that." Justin shrugged his shoulders and dropped his eyes to look at the arm that Brian held him with. Justin could feel himself touching every strand of the short soft hairs and he could feel every cord of muscle even though both his hands remained motionless at his sides.

"Your musician not able to keep you in the style to which you've become accustomed?" Brian's mouth offered his words wryly and Brian's mind and body cried out for it to shut up.

Justin looked up to try again in reading Brian's mind. "I can't read you Brian." He'd whispered his words. "I think we're here like this right now because I could never read you as well as I'd thought." Justin felt a certain burning behind his eyes and he was willing himself to hold his ground.

"That why you stopped trying?" Brian's mouth alone spoke up again. It seemed all other parts had been relegated to the sidelines and it had happened against their will.

"I..." Justin fell silent as the phone on the table began to ring. He dropped his eyes to watch Brian release his arm and step back from him.

"You get it." Brian was cold and desolate again. Even colder and more desolate than Justin had remembered moments before.

"Hello." Justin had crossed the room to pick up the phone and now he stood with his back to Brian on purpose. He'd tried to be discrete as he wiped at the corners of his eyes but Brian had recognized the movements for exactly what they were. He'd taken his own moment to regroup and he'd set Gus down in his playpen before taking a deep breath and moving to the kitchen for some space.

"Justin. It's Lindsay. How are things there?" Justin could hear the sounds of announcements over the P.A. and he could here the muffled sounds of Mel hurrying Lindsay's call along.

"Everything's fine." Justin's voice cracked a little and he cleared his throat. He'd heard when Brian left the room and now he turned to look at Gus who'd now seemed to find peace with sitting in his pen.

"That's good. Look sweetie, I still can't find Brian. I'm not really worried because you know how Brian can be. He'll show up eventually and find a way to blame me for his not..."

Justin cut in after a second or two. "Brian's here Lindsay. He got here a little while ago and we're getting Gus ready to go with him."

"He did? That shit. Did he say why he was so late? Let me talk to him."

Lindsay rushed her words partly due to the fact that Mel was cutting her glares as their boarding call was announced for the third time.

"He said he had an accident and the Jeep looks pretty messed up so I believe him. Hang on and I'll get him if you want." Justin didn't wait to hear Lindsay's response. He'd simply set the receiver down on the table and turned to call to Brian from the kitchen. As soon as he'd heard the footfalls of Brian coming back, he'd crossed the room quickly

and ducked into the downstairs washroom. For his quickness, he'd only had to suffer through meeting Brian's deadened gaze for a split second or two.

"What?" Justin could hear Brian's side of the conversation more clearly than he'd wanted to behind this closed door. He'd dropped both hands on the basin to steady himself and kept his head down as he listened.

"I'm here now aren't I, so no need to get your panties in a knot."

"I don't give a fuck what Mel predicted and don't forget to tell her that I said so."

"Lindsay...Lindsay...save the fucking lecture for when you get back. You can even ask Justin, you and Melanie have first dibs on chewing my nuts off when you get back here and I promise you, all coupons will be honored." Brian drawled his words and Justin could hear the familiar clink of a heavy glass being set down on a table. He'd raised his eyes to look into the mirror and he'd begun to list for himself all the reasons why he shouldn't be here right now and why he shouldn't still be feeling the feelings he was feeling right now.

"Why do you automatically assume I was high or drunk when it happened. I wasn't driving drunk and I wasn't driving high." Brian lied. "...and I fucking know better than to take Gus if I was still messed up." He'd added something that was the gospel truth. "The last and only time my car got totaled, I was the victim of a crime, remember." Brian huffed and Justin winced before swallowing hard.

Justin's previous list had been forgotten as another one had started to form in his mind. 'Brian stood up for me. Brian stood by me. Brian took me in. Brian took care of me. Brian saved my life. Brian...'

"Well far be it from me to sing of my own virtues. After all it's fucking common knowledge that I'm a heartless piece of shit who couldn't give a good goddamned fuck about anything but fucking and myself."

Justin's stomach cramped at those words and he leaned further over the sink to run the faucets. He'd wanted to wash his face and he'd also wanted to drown out the sound of Brian's voice in the other room. That mission accomplished, he didn't hear Brian's next few words.

"I'm leaving as soon as I get all the shit you have him traveling with into my Jeep."

"Why the hell would he take a ride from me? He's barely taking anything from me as it is."

"Keep the dyke meddling to a minimum on this trip Lindsay. If you can do that during one yenta fest with Mel's family then maybe you can put your newly learned skills into action when you get back." Brian turned to eye the closed washroom door and dropped his voice slightly.

"And I'm warning you. Don't you say a word to him about that stuff with his school." Brian waited for Lindsay to offer her promise not to leak what she'd only discovered by accident during a recent trip to the loft and he listened to Mel practically pull the phone from Lindsay's grasp before hanging up.

The drink waiting for him on the table seemed like a welcomed soothing for the penance he'd served during that single conversation alone. He'd slumped into a chair and finished his drink in the space of time that it took Justin to come out of his hiding spot. Brian had quickly taken in the reddened look of the younger man's face and the wetness around his hairline and he recognized it for what it was. He'd been nothing if not observant and in the time he'd been living with Justin, he learned Justin's reactions to stress and what the man did to offer himself some relief. It seemed Justin had been feeling the pressure of this reunion much the same as he had and he'd sought relief in cool water as opposed to the cool drink that Brian had opted for.

"I'm gonna go now. Here's the key Lindsay left but I'm sure that you still have yours on your bunch anyway so you can lock up. Just give this back to her for me or leave it here for when she gets back or whatever." Justin stumbled over his words weakly and pulled his backpack up on his shoulder.

He'd set the key down on the coffee table and he'd lifted his eyes to confirm the cold manner he'd observed from Brian moments earlier. He'd prepared himself for finding it there once again.

Brian leaned forward to set his glass on the coffee table and focused his lowered eyes on the slight fraying on Justin's jean clad legs before him.

He hadn't looked up in response to Justin's words because he hadn't been able to. "Let me drive you home." Brian's voice was a low rumble.

"Brian, you obviously know that I'm staying with Ethan. I don't want you to drive me there." Justin spoke weakly. The force with which he'd challenged Brian's earlier bullshit having washed away down the drain.

"You look like shit." Brian raised his eyes to find Justin's face. "You're getting one of your headaches, aren't you?" He hadn't waited for Justin's response, instead standing and finding Gus's bag and car seat, before reaching down to lift the baby out of the pen. "Give me directions to some place a block away and you can walk from there. The

fiddler will never have to know and you'll get home before you pass out." Brian tossed his words over his shoulder as he moved toward the door. He glanced back to make sure Justin was following him before he pulled the door open and stepped outside.

Ethan opened the door to the busy restaurant and stepped inside. He scanned the room knowing that he wouldn't find a particular blonde. He hadn't spent much time on Liberty but he'd known that this place existed.

"Justin's not here." Debbie had looked over when the bell above the door sounded and she'd recognized the young man instantly. She'd been privy to witnessing him playing 'fly' to Brian's 'spider' during the little scene the man had staged at the diner and she'd seen Justin leave with him during the ultimate staged event of the Rage party.

"I'm not looking for him." Ethan made his way to the counter across from where Debbie stood. "I'm looking for someone who can tell me about Brian Kinney."

Debbie took in the nervous look on the man's face and decided to be kind.

"A lot of folks in here could tell you a lot of things about Brian Kinney, but I suspect that's not the kind of information you're looking for."

Debbie popped her gum a little and smiled as she leaned in closer. "I'm Debbie kiddo and what can I get you to eat?"

"I don't really want anything to eat, I just need to..." Ethan spoke as he chose a stool at the counter and sat down.

"You're gonna eat. That much you and Brian do have in common." Debbie laughed her laugh. "People having to practically force feed you to get something down." Debbie reached for an order pad and wrote out an order that she didn't even run by Ethan first. "This'll do to fill you up and if you can keep that down while we talk, I'd say you were one up on Brian."

She'd alluded to her last drop in at the loft wherein she'd disturbed the man's vomiting. He'd said it was due to food poisoning and threatened to sue, while she'd known it was due to their conversation at the diner that she'd followed him home to continue.

That story left for another day, Debbie refocused her attention on the man that sat across from her.

"How do you know Brian?" Ethan asked.

"Look. I'll answer most of your questions because without a little info, you're not gonna survive the fallout that's bound to happen. Justin is a good kid and if he thinks you'll make him happy or happier than he was with Brian, I say more power to him and more power to you. You'll get enough out of me to have a fighting chance, but that's it. A lot of my Brian info is off limits." Debbie regarded Ethan seriously and waited for him to accept her terms.

When he nodded, she continued. "First, tell me something about you. Sunshine's still not talking about a lot of it and so I miss out on the details of a fresh new love." The woman had turned back to sweetness and light and it threw Ethan a bit.

"Um...I play violin. Justin and I met at one of my recitals a while back." Ethan reached down to strum his fingers over the paper placemat in front of him.

"Did you know about Brian when you two met?" Debbie eyed him carefully. She'd been well aware of how things worked between 'the boys' and how loose the rules seemed to be about some relationships but she'd never in all her life been able to abide a 'home wrecker'.

"Not at first. But I knew before anything happened between Justin and me." He'd met her glare squarely and watched her purse her lips a little. She'd obviously identified his unspoken challenge.

"You're all grown ups here." Debbie shrugged a little before adding with a certain measure of sarcasm, "Who am I to tell you what rules to play by?"

She'd turned to reach for the coffee pot behind her before flipping Ethan's cup over and pouring him some.

"So, about Brian?" Ethan reached up to push his hair out of his eyes before looking at Debbie once again. She'd been taken aback a bit by the sadness in the younger man's eyes and she listened intently as he continued speaking. "I know he's loaded, I know he's beautiful, I've heard that he's an amazing fuck and I know Justin is still in love with him. What was that about you telling me something that would help me survive the fallout?" Ethan smiled ruefully.

Debbie matched his smile before reaching out to stroke his cheek gently. She'd felt an instant attachment to Justin and all her boys and now she felt a similar pull to this one. "Brian is trouble, Brian is an asshole, Brian is temperamental, but Brian is a good man and Brian is still very much in love with Justin." She watched as Ethan's face fell a little before patting his cheek again. "Now drink your coffee and I'll see how your order is coming along."

Debbie moved off down the counter and Ethan closed his eyes a little. He'd forced a breath into his lungs as he considered the thought that he might actually lose Justin and he physically felt sick to his stomach. He would never know that Brian had sat on this very stool and had the same reaction to Debbie pointing out that same reality.

Ethan would sit there and listen to what this woman had to tell him and then he'd make a decision whether to stand and fight or whether to walk away from the person he was sure already controlled whether his heart continued to beat or not.

Setting Gus down beside his legs Brian held his breath at the door as Justin's all too fragrant head passed in his vicinity. As he closed the door behind them, he was sure that this was one of those smells that would remain vividly clear to him light years from this day.

He'd pulled Gus back up into his arms before following Justin to the Jeep and unlocking the passenger side door. Brian had been equally careful in installing Gus's car seat, as he'd been careful not to brush up against Justin as he did it. The other man had been holding Gus while Brian worked on the seat and once again, fingers had grazed arms as the little boy was passed between them.

Brian waited until Justin had gotten into the Jeep before locking the door and walking around to the other side. He'd pulled his door open and climbed in, all the while making sure to look at nothing else but the street ahead.

Justin turned in his seat to glance at Gus before turning back to eye the tree lined street again. He'd been trying to shake the dread that had been building alongside his headache. Very soon this car ride would be over and he would go back to not thinking about Brian while the man went back to doing whatever he did best.

Brian pulled on his sunglasses and pulled away from the curb. For his part, he'd been thinking about the fact that at least tonight he'd be able to chock his sleepless night up to the fact that Gus was underfoot. Never mind the fact that Lindsay and Mel had the kid programmed to be out like a light by seven, Brian figured he'd spend the night up and without the comfort or release of any liquor or pills.

"Brian, can I ask you something?" Justin spoke nervously some minutes later as they slowed at an already red light. "You didn't answer the last time I asked you and maybe now you can."

"What is it?" Brian turned to face him. His throat felt dry and he longed for a cigarette.

"Do you think about me? Cause I don't miss the shit you did to me, but I miss you sometimes." Justin pulled his eyes away from the glare of the sun off Brian's glasses. It killed him to not be able to see Brian's eyes in the wake of his question.

"What the fuck is with the 'I'm not happy' shit and now this?" Brian spat his words reflexively. Justin was calling up things he had no business saying or asking. "What do you want from me Justin?" Brian's throat tightened as he said the name. They'd both ignored the honking behind them as the light changed.

"We make our own pain. Do you remember saying that to me?" Justin looked over at the other man quickly. "I've been gone for a while now and maybe now..."

"Maybe now what?" Brian threw the Jeep into second gear and finally followed the traffic.

"I'm not saying I wanna come back. I'm not asking you that because I'm not sure that I want to. I just wanted to know if you noticed me being gone. If it even made a difference..." Justin reached up to stroke at his temples as his migraine went into full swing and Brian swallowed at the nausea that was building in his gut.

"None of this shit makes a difference. So why bother asking me this stuff?" Brian ran a hand through his hair and reached across Justin's body to the glove compartment. He'd needed a cigarette badly.

"You can't smoke with Gus here." Justin said matter-of-factly and Brian dropped the package of cigarettes into Justin's lap. Justin had reached down to pick up the package before depositing it in the cup holder between them.

"I'm driving you to the fiddler because you made that choice." Brian had paid no mind to Justin's interruption except to give up on his need for a smoke. "There's no fucking reason for us to have this conversation again. I remember telling you something about that. No regrets, remember?" He'd pulled off his glasses and turned to face Justin for a second or two.

"I don't even know if they're regrets Brian because you've never answered my questions."

"No need for me to start now Sunshine." Brian clenched his jaw at the end of his words.

He'd driven in silence the rest of the way as Justin gave him directions on where to turn. More silence had followed and they'd been stopped at another red light when Brian reached over to place a hand on the back of Justin's neck. He'd waited for the other man to turn and look at him before leaning over and pulling Justin closer.

"What're you doing?" Justin pushed his words into the closing distance between his and Brian's faces. He'd been frozen into place by seeing the hazel green of Brian's eyes up close again for the first time in what seemed like an eternity.

"Kissing you. Or do you two already have rules against that?" Brian had paused a little to finish his words before leaning in further and finding Justin's lips. He could feel the familiar push of air out of Justin's nose and mouth as the other man let himself be kissed.

Brian had tightened his grip on the back of Justin's neck and he felt the other man reach up and run a hand across his bare arm. There was heat against Brian's face and he could feel his body flushing and floating a little as Justin's breathing turned into slight moaning. He'd pushed his tongue out to meet the tickling of Justin's and Justin had had to pull back to catch his breath before leaning in again.

Brian's lips were wet with Justin's saliva and Brian had licked and kissed and touched as much of Justin's mouth and face as he could cover in those few very public seconds.

Brian released the steering wheel and reached over with his free hand to find Justin's crotch and rub. He'd opened his eyes somewhere along the way and now he felt Justin reach down and move his hand away. His lips still resting against Justin's, he'd waited for the other man to open his eyes before pulling away.

"Does the fiddler do that to you? Make you that hard, that fast?" Brian's mouth took over again and this time the rest of his body willingly gave it control. Justin had been asking things that were now too close for comfort and the nasty things that this mouth could say would ensure Brian as little damage as possible.

Justin huffed a bitter laugh and shook his head at how utterly fucked up Brian kept proving himself to be. "It could still only be about sex right?" Justin had spoken quietly to himself before addressing Brian. "Of course he doesn't do that for me Brian. You are still the undisputed king of making me hard." Justin shook his head again before turning to face the scenery or the road ahead of them as the light changed. He was looking anywhere but in Brian's direction because Brian, it seemed, was determined to make a fool out of him.

The rest of the distance covered in silence, Brian had pulled up where Justin told him to stop. He'd taken in the somewhat dilapidated low-rises before turning to face Justin again. "When you go up, ask him to play you something nice and...romantic. It'll help you to remember why you're with him and help you forget about everything else."

Justin had smiled a little before rolling his lips into his mouth to moisten them. He could still taste Brian on his skin. He'd taken a deep breath that sounded too much like defeat to Brian, before pushing open the door and closing it behind him. Justin had waved a goodbye to Gus in the back seat before taking another look at Brian's profile. "You make it too hard Brian. That's something I have to try harder to remember so that I'll be able to get through this."

Justin looked away as the other man turned to face him.

Part 5

Ethan pushed his hands into the pockets of his jacket as he rounded the last corner before his apartment building. His head was still swimming from his visit to the diner and he wasn't sure which part of their discussion Debbie had actually considered beneficial to his cause. Ethan was focused on what he would say to Justin when the other man finally came back and he'd been counting on his legs to find their own way home. If not for the sound of a car backfiring down the side street to his left, he would never have turned to see the Jeep parked on that street or witnessed the seemingly intense conversation between its occupant and the man standing outside. He'd watched as both Brian and Justin turned toward the sound before slowly focusing their attention on each other once again. They hadn't said much of anything as far as Ethan could tell from this distance, but they also hadn't taken their eyes off each other either.

A few moments before Ethan had happened along, Brian had been tracing his fingers over the edge of the steering wheel as he listened to Justin undo his seatbelt. He'd watched out of the corner of his eye as the other man got out and pulled his backpack out behind him before turning to wave goodbye to Gus. Having done as much as he thought he could do to lash out at Justin and to hurt him, now Brian felt tired. He'd been thinking about how he was going to keep up with an overly energetic two-year old for the rest of the day and he'd felt sick to his stomach as he listened to Justin's parting shot.

"You make it too hard Brian. That's something I have to try harder to remember so that I'll be able to get through this."

A car close by had backfired just then and both men had thought it the perfect punctuation to a completely draining experience. Brian turned to look to his left to find the source of the sound and he met Justin's eyes as they eventually

returned to the task at hand. A few moments passed and neither man made any effort to leave or to end the stand off. Brian looked at Justin and Justin looked at Brian. Neither man said anything or did anything and Ethan observed it all.

He stood at the intersection not fifty feet from the Jeep and in full view of either one of them if they dared to break their eye contact, and yet neither one saw him. Ethan waited like that for some identification of his presence and when none came he made his feet move again to finish the journey home. Some part of him reasoned that there had to be a perfectly good explanation for why his lover was now standing one block away in deep thought and silent conversation with a man who was supposed to be part of his past.

"Go home Justin." Brian spoke up sometime after Ethan had walked away and Justin nodded in agreement.

"Later." Justin took a step back on the curb and pushed hands into his pockets.

Justin watched as Brian threw the Jeep into gear and pulled away. He waited until Brian rounded the corner before walking away. Justin thought about the fact that Brian had told him to go 'home' and he smiled a little to himself. It had taken a while to make the loft feel like home and Justin figured it would take just as long to find home anywhere else.

"Speak of the devil and the devil appears." Debbie whispered as she jabbed another of the waitresses in the ribs and both women turned to look at the door. Brian cursed under his breath as two idiots almost bowled he and Gus over in their haste to leave the place. Debbie watched as Brian took small steps behind his son who toddled along quite contently, stopping to inspect the legs of the counter stools as he went along. Gus was oblivious to the fact that he was seriously impairing his father's ability to make his normally cool and arrogant 'entrance' into the place and Brian was oblivious to the fact that entrance or no entrance, every guy he passed was cruising him nonetheless.

Brian let his eyes pan around the room quickly and pushed his hair out of his eyes less for effect, than practicality. He was still feeling tired and drained from his conversation with Justin but that fact hadn't seemed to impair his attractiveness to these men. Even though he'd lost weight, Brian Kinney in tight blue jeans, a fitted wife-beater and a crumpled white dress shirt still did the trick and then some.

"There's my precious baby." Debbie rushed towards Gus as the baby neared her at the counter. She'd taken mild offense to the fact that Gus's immediate reaction was to retreat and grab hold of one of Brian's legs.

"It's the fright wig Deb." Brian smiled a little before reaching down and pulling Gus up from his hiding spot. He took a seat on one of the counter stools before arranging Gus in his lap. Gus's prompt and expected reaction was to reach for the paper napkin dispenser in hopes of setting all the trapped little napkins free. "Coffee, to go." Brian addressed his words to the other waitress as Debbie continued her attempts to cover Gus in her lipstick kisses. Brian had pushed the napkin dispenser just out Gus's reach and the baby, in true Kinney fashion, let his outrage be known.

"Shh, Gus. Here you go honey." Debbie pulled the napkin dispenser closer to a sniffing Gus before lifting her eyes to address Brian. "Daddy doesn't mean to spoil all your fun."

"Fun? You'll be the one cleaning them up, not me." Brian scoffed and watched as Gus promptly started depositing napkins on the floor next to where he and Brian sat. The man shook his head a little before turning to remind the younger blonde woman behind the counter that he'd ordered coffee to go all of twenty-five seconds earlier and had no intention of waiting any longer for it.

"Hold your fucking horses, and you're having more than coffee for breakfast." Debbie slapped Brian's arm slightly and moved away to join the other woman behind the counter. "Get his bitchiness some eggs and toast too."

"I'm not going to eat it Debbie so don't bother." Brian snapped at her. He'd been everything nasty and then some when addressing the other waitress and Debbie had gotten the tail end of his sniping tone.

"Don't mess with me Mister. You're like a fucking rail so you're gonna eat. And bring some cereal for Gus here." Debbie wagged a finger at Brian and the man rolled his tongue in his cheek before huffing a small laugh.

"You try to kiss my son with that foul mouth?" Brian let his voice soften a little. "Besides, I'm just trying to keep my girlish figure." Brian didn't laugh or even pay attention to his own joke, instead turning to make a sidelong glance at the man who'd taken a seat next to him at the counter. The brown haired man had turned to smile at Brian and Debbie interrupted the eye fucking to slide a coffee cup across the counter to the newcomer.

"Eat first. Fuck later." She'd filled the other man's cup up before turning to face Brian again. "I think you're too thin but it doesn't seem to have affected your popularity any."

Brian offered the stranger one more glance before turning his attention to Gus again. He'd pushed the napkin dispenser out of Gus's reach again and this time the baby didn't notice. He'd freed enough tissues already by dropping them on the floor and now he was wrestling with Brian to be set down so that he could play with them.

"So what did you and Justin talk about?" Debbie leaned across the counter to address Brian quietly.

The man raised his eyes slowly and tried to make out what she was up to. "How do you know that I saw Justin?"

"Because Lindsay called me looking for you and wanted me to sit with Gus. I know Justin went over there and since you're here now with Gus..." The woman let her words trail off as she waited for Brian to answer her question.

"Mind your own business Deb." Brian emptied the contents of a fourth packet of sweetener into his coffee. Debbie had taken the liberty of pouring his take out order into a mug and setting it in front of him.

"Well in case you haven't noticed, you and Justin are my business and you two are morons when it comes to doing this right." Debbie had gotten a little louder somewhere in the middle of her words and she looked around as she finished speaking.

"Leave it alone Debbie. Volunteer some more hours at PFLAG, buy some new buttons, I don't know, but find something else to occupy your time. The Sunshine is gone, so just let it die already."

Debbie took note of the whistful tone she would never have thought to find in Brian's voice. She watched as the man turned on his stool to put Gus down on the floor behind him. He had taken this opportunity to turn his attention away from Debbie until his food came along.

The trick to Brian's left had reached down to run a hand across Brian's thigh and up to his pocket to push a piece of paper under the tight denim. Brian turned to watch the man walk away and gave him a quick once over. Having found him acceptable, Brian decided to keep the number for later.

His attempt at ordering take-out from the diner had failed miserably, but tomorrow after Gus went home to his Mommies, Brian intended to eat in.

"Ethan?" Justin called as he came into the small apartment. Having left the man to his practice, he'd expected to hear Ethan playing the minute he entered the building. Justin dropped his backpack by the door and moved into the room,

pulling off his jean jacket as he moved. After leaving Brian, he'd taken one of his pills and walked around the block a couple of times in hopes clearing his head. Now that he felt sleepy from the medication, all he wanted to do was to go back to bed.

Justin let his eyes float over the space around him and followed the trail of clothes from the door to the bathroom. He'd spotted Ethan's violin laid carefully on the table so he knew the man was there somewhere.

"Ethan?" Justin pushed the door to the little room open as he called again. The other man had been standing in front of the face basin and from the steam on the mirror and the water on his skin; it was obvious that he'd just finished his shower. "Hey." Justin smiled. "Look who came back earlier than he thought he would." His headache hadn't really subsided but Justin was trying to make a good show of looking forward to doing whatever Ethan had in mind.

"You spent all this time out there with him?" Ethan hadn't turned around and the fog on the mirror made it so that Justin couldn't see his face.

"What are you talking about?" Justin leaned against the doorframe.

"Brian. I'm talking about Brian." Ethan reached for a towel and pulled it around himself before turning to face Justin. "I saw you."

"We were just talking. He gave me a ride back when he came and got Gus." Justin folded his arms across his body. He was feeling defensive all of a sudden and part of him didn't like it.

The two stood in silence for a few moments and Ethan was the first to speak up again. "Why didn't he drop you off here? Why make it so that he drops you off down the street and around the block?"

"It's nothing as shady as you're making it sound." Justin shook his head. "I didn't want...I didn't want for you to see and think..."

"Think what? Think exactly what I'm thinking right now?" Ethan tightened the towel around his waist before scrubbing his fingers through his hair.

"I don't know what you're thinking right now but I know that it was nothing. I'm getting a headache and he offered the ride...more like he made me take a ride from him..." Justin's voice trailed off as he thought about the fact that Brian had practically ordered him into the car and he wouldn't take no for an answer.

"And it's not like you have a mind of your own when it comes to Brian, right?"

"Fuck you. Why are you talking to me like this?" Justin spoke sternly but softly as he wound his arms tighter around his body. His head was pounding again and he truly did not want to be fighting with Ethan at all, much less now.

"You should go." Ethan spoke resolutely and dropped his eyes to look at the fraying on the legs of Justin's jeans. "We both knew this would happen sooner or later, so let it be sooner and we'll get it over with."

"What are you talking about?" Justin took a step forward and was enveloped by the heat and moisture in the room. It felt oppressive and uncomfortable and he didn't like the fact that this conversation with Ethan had taken on a similar tone.

"I want you to leave before you do the same thing to me." Ethan still hadn't looked up at Justin and he spoke very softly.

"What are you talking about?" Justin had moved the full distance into the bathroom now and he reached forward to let both arms close around Ethan's waist. He spoke his words to the man's face while trying to gauge what was going on.

"You're going to leave Justin. You're going to go back to him and I don't want to let that sneak up on me. I see it clearly now, so you might as well do it now." Ethan fought the reflex that wanted him to reach up and touch the body that was holding him close.

"That's not gonna happen." Justin managed to get Ethan to look at him and he struggled to keep the man's attention.

"Bullshit." Ethan pushed back and out of Justin's hold and stepped out of the room.

"I had a headache so he gave me a ride home. That's all. We didn't fuck, we didn't touch, we didn't do anything like that. I'm not keeping anything from you." Justin lied and it sickened him. He didn't think this was the time to share the fact that he'd confessed his unhappiness to Brian or let the man kiss him.

"I thought I could do this. I thought if enough time passed you'd get him out of your system and the same thing would happen with him. I thought you'd be tired of his game and all of it but I was obviously wrong. You couldn't get out of here fast enough this morning and now I realize that was only because you knew for a fact that Brian would come get his son eventually and you would get to see him."

"That's not true. I went over there to help." Justin was getting more and more angry and the tightness in his temples was building more and more. He tried to keep both of these out of his voice as he reasoned with Ethan. "Look, I know how things must have looked but I'm telling you it wasn't like that at all..."

"You're not happy here Justin so I think you should go. You've got a million and one people that you could stay with so you don't have to feel obligated to stay here." Ethan had been pulling clothes on as he spoke to Justin and he finished his words by pulling a t-shirt over his head.

Justin stood silently and waited for the other man to calm down a bit. He'd gotten used to Ethan's passion in so many other areas and his overly dramatic anger was just another of the passions that Justin thought he'd observed. He crossed the room slowly and pulled Ethan close to him.

"Things are changing around me and I have to get used to it. But I want this...I want you...and you don't have to worry about Brian. He doesn't want me and I don't..."

"He doesn't want you? Is that why you're still here?" Ethan pushed away from Justin and pulled on his sneakers. "You know Justin. I went and paid a visit to the diner after you left. That's how come I saw you two parked on Edwards Street. You think he doesn't want you and that's why you're just biding your time here. But the fact is that he does want you and one day when you both figure that out, where will that leave me?" Ethan pulled on an over shirt and crossed the room to retrieve his violin case and violin. "I have other things to think about and I don't want to stick around to watch how it all plays out."

"Stop. Stop for a minute and listen to me. I don't want Brian. That's why I'm here. I'm trying to sort myself out but I know what I need in my life and Brian can't give it to me. I don't want him...". Justin tried to move closer to Ethan again and the other man backed off.

"Is that why you call his name in your sleep? Is that why you keep waking up in time to make your curfew and then getting out of bed and just sitting there?" Ethan eyed the sofa before turning to face Justin again. "You're not happy with me, so what the fuck am I supposed to think?"

"Ethan." Justin watched the anger with which Ethan had packed his violin and he watched the man grab his bag from the bed. "Ethan, where are you going?" Justin followed Ethan to the door and held it open when Ethan tried to slam it behind him.

"Find somewhere else to stay." Ethan turned to bite his words out quickly before turning and fleeing down the stairs.

"No." Justin called after him. "I'm going to be right here when you come back and I'm not going anywhere." He pushed away the pain in his head as he yelled his words after the other man. "Do you hear me?" Justin listened as Ethan slammed the door behind him several floors below.

He and Brian had made their choices and as difficult as they were, neither of them could give up on his choice after only one month of living with it.

Three hours after leaving the diner, Brian had succeeded in destroying the cleanliness and order in his loft and he liked it. Gus's two little bags and the stocked toy chest Brian kept in his closet had exploded to cover the loft in a mess Justin himself would have been proud of. Brian surveyed the carnage after setting Gus down to sleep in the center of his bed. He'd been deciding where to settle down for a nap of his own when the buzzer sounded. Brian turned to make sure Gus was still asleep before sprinting to the door to quiet the noise.

"Who is it?" Brian huffed into the intercom. He'd barely had time to finish his words when the nervous person on the other end of the line spoke up.

"It's Ethan Gold. Can I come up?"

"What? Does every fag in Pittsburgh know where I live?" Brian shot out a reply and waited. Ethan didn't respond but Brian could still hear the sound of the street downstairs as it echoed through the speaker. "You know the building, so I'm guessing you know the number too."

"Yeah. I need to talk to you." Ethan spoke quickly.

"Come on up." Brian released the intercom button and thought through what was happening. He'd turned to pull the door open on its tracks before settling in a chair that sat directly in front of the door. A minute or two later, Ethan rounded the last flight of stairs and Brian watched as his head came into view. The younger man found Brian through the open door and walked towards him slowly.

Brian sat back silently and watched him come inside and drop his violin case and bag on the floor beside where he stood. Ethan hadn't bothered to close the door and Brian found a familiar reference in his nervousness and posture.

"What do you want?" Brian finally spoke up.

"Do you want him back?" Ethan's whispered words answered his challenge.

Brian thought about answering this question with a question and then thought better of it. He smiled a little and rolled his lips into his mouth as he thought of how best to injure this man who'd had the balls to come to this place to stake his claim. He sat up slowly from the chair and walked toward Ethan. He watched the younger man flinch as he reached over his shoulder to close the door and Brian settled back to stand within a foot of him as they continued their stand off.

At six foot two, Brian towered over this man who had to be even shorter than Justin. Having never stood this close to him for this long, Brian took the opportunity to make some assessments that he hadn't before. He took in the man's features and settled his attention on the overtly expressive brown eyes. Justin was a sucker for displayed emotion and Brian thought this kid had that in spades. He turned his attention to Ethan's nose and lips and fought himself not to imagine the things those lips had done to Justin's body. Brian swore he could smell Justin on this man and for one second and just one second alone, he'd actually entertained the thought of kissing him to see whether he'd taste the same mix that he tasted on Justin all those nights ago.

"Do you want a beer?" Brian pushed his breath against Ethan's face and the other man shook his head. Brian paused a little and watched him some more. He'd taken in the way the kid's pupils kept dilating till his brown eyes looked almost black. Ethan's skin had started to blush, and Brian could honestly not decide whether he saw lust or just anger in the other man's eyes.

"Is this the part where we arm wrestle to see who gets him?" Brian huffed a little laugh before moving off to the kitchen to retrieve a beer for himself.

"No, because I don't think I want him." Ethan stated flatly and watched for Brian's reaction. He'd been very sure that if Brian Kinney paid any interest whatsoever, that he would lose Justin and he'd been hoping to find the man as disinterested as he claimed to be.

"What, you got tired of fucking him already?" Brian twisted the cap off his beer and smiled bitterly.

Ethan looked away and scrubbed his hands through his hair, messing it up even more. "You fucking have everything." Ethan's words came out with a shout and it took Brian by surprise. "Everything anybody would ever want. Justin told me you were good at what you did and so you have success at your craft. You have money. I haven't met a lot of your friends but I've met enough of them to know that you have people who are loyal to you. You have a great place to live, surrounded by nice things." Ethan let his eyes sweep over the lines of the space. "You could have almost any man you wanted...and you don't deserve shit." The last of his words came out in a whisper and it was in stark contrast to the power with which he'd started his words. Ethan's energy seemed to be sapped completely by making that one statement.

Brian swallowed another swig of beer and the cool nonchalance of his face did not betray any of the rage he felt for this man/boy who stood in front of him. This person who thought he had it all figured out. "Justin tells you a few things during pillow talk and you think you know me? Enough so that you can come here and...what? What the fuck is the point of this drama?" Brian set the bottle down on the counter and moved around it to stand in front of Ethan once again. He'd consciously been using his relative size for intimidation and he watched Ethan straighten up slightly, determined to take him on.

"Justin deserves better than you. Unfortunately he hasn't figured that out yet. He thinks he has, but it's not true for him yet. Until he gets rid of you, he's just playing games with his own head." Ethan kept his eyes firmly fixed on Brian's face and he didn't flinch when Brian took a step toward him.

"This is all fun and good but I think you have something backward. Justin doesn't live here. He lives at your place. You spout enough bullshit sentiment to qualify you to write Hallmark cards and he fucking laps it up like honey. So I don't get why you're here now." Brian turned and walked toward the sofa. He sat down before looking at Ethan again. "You know if you two had a fight, I can give you some sex tips that I know he'll like." Brian gave him his most fraudulent smile and watched as the other man's skin turned a deeper shade of red.

"You're a fucking asshole. I know enough about you to know that. I don't want Justin this way but you shouldn't have him either. If you ever felt anything for him, you'll leave him alone."

There was a long pause during which Brian considered tossing this man out. He'd been thinking about this when one thought crossed his mind more clearly than the others. Not only was there obvious trouble in paradise on Justin's end, but it also seemed that this musical genius was starting to feel the pressures of not quite trusting their 'monogamous' relationship.

"What I find completely hilarious about you is this. You don't trust him not to fuck me if I offered. You don't even believe your own bullshit but you still managed to convince him that things were all carpet picnics and violin music." Brian pulled his legs up to flatten the soles of his feet on the edge of the coffee table and watched Ethan closely. He'd watched the other man's discomfort increase by the second.

Ethan grabbed his bag and slung it over his shoulder before picking up his case. "I came here to find out one thing and that was whether or not you still wanted him. Now that I know the answer to that, like I said, you're a fucking asshole and since you do give a shit, you'll leave him alone."

"Get the fuck out of here and let me give you a tip that might add a few more days to your short lived little love affair. Don't tell Justin that you stopped by." Brian offered him calm simple words and a cold hard look.

He watched and waited as Ethan pulled the heavy door open and disappeared behind it with a harsh slam. Brian had stiffened a little at the rustling of the sheets in the other room and he'd only moved off the sofa to lock the door once he heard Gus settle down again. He'd sat stock still on the sofa and waited a full five minutes for the noise of that visit and the utterance of Justin's name to stop reverberating off the walls of the loft and ringing in his ears.

Part 6

Justin's cell phone rang a little after eleven and he jumped from the noise. "Ethan? Where are you?" Justin reached for the lamp next to him and flicked on the switch.

"They make caller ID so that you can avoid these embarrassing mix-ups." Brian spoke coolly into the receiver as he paced in front of the large window at the loft. He'd set the empty bottle of Beam down on the windowsill on his last pass before the window. The last eight hours of watching Gus play and quietly contemplating the events of Ethan's earlier visit, had given Brian a taste for blood and there were a few things that he wanted to know from Justin's own mouth.

"Brian. Why are you calling me?"

"I'll give you a hint. I've been keeping company with Jack Daniels and Jim Beam and now I want some company from you. The three J's or something like that." Brian crossed the room slowly and let himself sink into an armchair.

"You're drunk. Where's Gus?" Justin rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and looked around for any sign that Ethan had come back.

"I'm not drunk and Gus is out like a light. Never doubt the power of cold medicine on a two-year old. Now like I said, we need to talk."

"You've never once said that sequence of words to me so you should just go to bed and sleep it off." Justin made a groggy attempt to hang up the phone but Brian's next words froze him stiff.

"You asked me a question today. Don't you want to hear what I have to say?" On his end of the line was Brian sober enough to know exactly how to bait Justin and he'd fully expected that this would be enough to pique the other man's interest.

"I shouldn't have said any of what I said today. It didn't mean anything. Like you said..."

"Justin. Call a cab and come over. I'll give you back the money for it when you get here." Brian hung up as soon as he'd finished these words.

"Bri..." Justin sighed deeply as he let the steady dial tone drown out the last bit of protest he'd planned to offer. He looked around slowly, allowing his eyes to adjust to the new light in the room. His watch told him that it was close to eleven o'clock and by the looks of things his earlier fight with Ethan hadn't been an unfortunate dream.

Justin swung his legs over the edge of the little sofa as he sat up. He'd dropped his cell phone on top of the rumpled pile of sheets next to him and now he pushed the sleeves of his pullover up his arms. Every nerve in his body told him not to go anywhere near Brian tonight and warned him that things could only get worse from this point on.

"What am I going to do?" Justin asked the empty apartment and the tenants sleeping on the other side of the paper-thin walls.

Almost in answer to his question, he'd heard the entry door slam shut a few floors below. The decision seemingly having been made for him, Justin stood and turned to face the door when he heard the key turning in the lock.

"You're still here." Ethan drew his brows together as he eyed Justin across the room.

"I told you that I would be." Justin stated matter-of-factly. It had suddenly and uncomfortably dawned on him that had he followed Brian's summons, he wouldn't have been here when Ethan got back. It had also dawned on him that he hadn't even listed this promise to stay as a reason not to go and see Brian tonight.

"Well...I'm kind of glad that you are here. Gives me a chance to finish what I started." Ethan's bag had been slung over his chest and he pulled the strap over his head as he moved toward Justin. Having deposited the bag and his violin case next to the still warm sheets on the sofa, Ethan came to stand directly in front of the other man. He was trying to think straight as he attempted to empty his mind of images of Justin's life before him. He'd been in Brian's presence and Brian's world for only a few minutes but it had been enough to mark him with some essence of Justin's life there. Ethan could see them together in that loft...on the sofa, in the bedroom. He could still remember Brian's height and Brian's size and all he could seem to see was a much smaller Justin disappearing into the strength of Brian's arms.

"There's nothing that you need to finish." Justin took one tentative step closer and hoped that it looked more natural than it felt.

"Yes there is. I've been thinking about how things really are, not just how I want them to be. We did this too soon and we did it all wrong Justin." Ethan focused on a spot on Justin's cheek as he spoke, not quite having the strength to meet his eyes. "You're with me to forget about him and I can't stop thinking about that. I'm a fucking distraction and I don't want to be. I don't want to feel like that." Ethan let out bitter half-smile as he spoke and he finally met Justin's stare when he finished his words. "He didn't make you feel good, so you left. You don't make me feel good, so I'm asking you to leave."

"I don't want to leave." Justin stepped in close and grabbed for Ethan's face as he spoke. He'd held the other man's face in his hands and tried to make Ethan see him and hear him. "I don't want to leave."

Ethan stepped back and away and held his hand up in warning to Justin, not to come any closer. "He probably won't bother you so you can use the time to figure yourself out. Figure out what you want and who you want it from." Ethan pushed his hair out of his eyes as he turned to move away.

"What are you talking about?" Justin followed and Ethan headed toward the bathroom.

"I went to see him. Told him this was all bullshit. He probably won't bother you for a while and so this'll give you a chance to..." Ethan had kept his back to Justin as he went rifling through the small medicine cabinet in the bathroom. He'd stopped speaking when he had found what he was looking for. Gravol in hand, he hadn't even noticed that Justin, who had been hot on his heels, had now stopped dead in his tracks.

Ethan slid the mirrored door to the cabinet shut and took in Justin's reflection.

"You went to see Brian. To tell him what?" Justin's brow had furrowed and part of him couldn't identify why the simple fact that Ethan had gone to see Brian made his face feel so hot.

"To tell him to give you a chance. No bullshit games, no using you against yourself. Just to give you a chance to figure things out for yourself and to leave you alone."

"Why the fuck would you do that? I told you what I wanted. Why isn't that good enough?" Justin pulled his hands out of his pockets and braced them against the frame of the door.

"It doesn't matter what you say. You've got to see that if Brian wants it that way, you'll go back. No matter how many reasons there are for you to stay away. If he wants it, you'll go back. I don't even know him and I can see that, why can't you?"

"I'm not a child so don't treat me like one. You don't have to take care of me or look out for me where my non-relationship with Brian is concerned. I'm telling you what I want and that should damned well be good enough for you." Justin slammed a palm against the doorframe as he turned to walk away. He'd felt Ethan following him and had turned around when he felt the other man's hand on his shoulder.

"I don't know what it is, but you can't seem to see what's going on here. I don't want to be second best Justin. I don't want to be your distraction. It won't last. You'll get tired of it and I'll get tired of it and all of this, everything I feel for you will have been for nothing." Ethan's breath came out hot and fast against Justin's face. "I want you to go and figure out what you want. I want him to stay the fuck away from you so that you have a chance to do that. I don't want you to stay here and pretend anymore because I can hear you when you try to turn his name into a moan while we're fucking and I can see you when you look through your sketchbook at his face." Ethan jerked his hand away from Justin's shoulder and dumped himself into the nearest chair. He hadn't meant for any of those last few words to come out and he'd been pushing himself to keep his eyes dry until Justin left.

There was no denying any of it when spoken so bluntly and Justin forced himself to sit down across from Ethan. He'd lowered his eyes a little and found his sneakers where he kicked them off before falling asleep in his clothes. Justin methodically pushed one foot and then the other into his shoes and laced them without looking up at Ethan's face.

Shoes on, Justin leaned forward to rest his elbows on his thighs as he spoke quietly. "If you had been listening to me so carefully over these last few weeks, you would have heard me tell you what I hated most about the way Brian did things. I hated that the person I was with could go through an entire conversation with both of us talking and never once hear a word that I'd said. I hated that he would underestimate the things that I felt and would decide for me what he thought best. I never once thought that two people so different from each other would have this much in common."

Justin stood up and grabbed for his backpack before heading toward the door.

Twenty-minutes later, Justin tried Daphne's intercom repeatedly before crossing the street to use the payphone. He waited for the tone to follow his friend's all too cheerful greeting before leaving his message. "Daphne? Where are you? You haven't had a date for a month and tonight is the night you pick to not be at home." Justin turned around in the telephone booth to look out at the busy street. He'd thought Daphne his best option for the night and was more than sure that she would have been there to answer his call. "Sorry. I don't mean to sound like an asshole, I just needed a place to crash tonight...As you can imagine, I've once again found myself homeless...Don't try calling my cell if you get this, I forgot it at Ethan's. I'll call you tomorrow since I might need to use your couch tomorrow night anyway." Justin replaced the receiver and dropped his head against the back of the booth as he thought out his next move. A third taxi had passed him in as many minutes and he gave some thought to going to the loft. His better judgment still told him to stay away from Brian and the fact that his own feelings confirmed Ethan's suspicions about Brian, somehow made Justin all the more angry with Ethan.

Justin thought about going to Debbie's and then thought against it as well. The last thing he wanted was for Debbie, his mother or Brian to find out what had happened with Ethan. His turning up on her doorstep at close to midnight would ensure that Debbie would update each person on that short list about the details of this failure within hours. Having decided that an open studio at school was his best bet for shelter tonight, Justin hailed the fourth cab he spotted.

He planned to pretend he was working on a project if he ran into anyone there and find a quiet spot to tuck in for the night when he was sure he was alone in the place. He'd been thinking hard about what he would do from this point on and he'd given the driver the address that he wanted to go to.

The last time any student or faculty at P.I.F.A. checked, the address of the campus wasn't, "...six Tremont."

"Justin, where are you?" Brian huffed into the receiver as soon as he heard the line open on the other end. He had cut off the other voice that had spoken up and made an "embarrassing mix-up" of his own. He'd been steady enough on his legs and in his head to process the fact that it had been an hour since he'd spoken to Justin, but he'd been blurry enough to miss the fact that it wasn't Justin on the other end of the line.

"I'll bet you that hundred dollar bill that you dropped in my case that he's on his way." Ethan spoke flatly before snapping the little phone shut and tossing it back atop the pile of sheets.

Several blocks away, Brian hung up and dropped the portable beside his outstretched legs. He'd been sitting in one of the armchairs in front of his muted television and he stroked a hand over his lips as he replayed Ethan's words and tone.

The bastard had been stupid enough to tell Justin they had spoken and now Brian wondered what he had started in calling Justin to the loft tonight.

Justin closed his eyes and let his thoughts fade away as the cab glided through the dark streets. He'd come alive only when the driver announced that they were there and he immediately wished himself dead when he realized what he'd done.

He had enough money for a ride from Daphne's to the campus and had he been more alert, he would have realized that the ride was taking much longer than usual. Now Justin had only enough to cover this ride, but not enough to pay the driver to take him back to where he'd been picked up, let alone to P.I.F.A. Resigned to his fate, he paid the man quickly and got out. Staring up at the lighted windows on the top floor, Justin swallowed hard and convinced himself that he could do this.

Brian wanted to give him some answers that he wasn't sure he wanted and if he were lucky, their discussion would eat up some of the night and leave only a few hours in which he'd have to sleep in the park.

Justin fished his key to the building out of his pocket and then put it back. He walked over to the intercom and dialed the numbers slowly. He hadn't had to use this method of entry in a long while and he'd actually had to think hard to remember the code that rang in Brian's loft.

Four floors up, Brian had watched the cab pull away and then crossed the space to the door. He'd listened to Justin announcing himself and had unlocked the entry door without so much as a word of his own.

Brian had gone back to check on Gus before returning to the living area and pacing small circles in front of the couch. It had taken the sound of the elevator reaching his floor, to make him settle down and sit down.

"It's open." Brian called out and watched Justin quietly slide the door back on its tracks and step inside. "Why didn't you use your keys?"

"Because I don't live here anymore." Justin answered brashly as he reached into his pocket, pulled some keys off his key ring and deposited them on the table in front of Brian. He raised his eyes to meet Brian's stare only after he was done.

"You gonna sit down?" Brian had watched him with a slight detachment before he spoke up again. He could feel his heart hardening just that extra bit more as Justin complied.

The younger man had lifted his bag off his shoulder and set it on the floor between his knees as he sat down in a chair facing Brian. The distance between them was occupied by a coffee table, two keys that represented the past and a silence that had cost them so much already.

Justin tried not to take in too much of the place and kept his attention narrowed on Brian. He'd felt nostalgia and genuine homesickness from the minute he entered the creaky freight elevator. Instead of looking around, Justin focused on the look of Brian's face in this slightly dimmed light and noticed details that seemed new to him even though he'd last seen the man only that morning. Brian had put one foot on the coffee table in front of them and Justin took in the way the fabric of the black pants Brian wore stretched over his thigh and leg; the unbuttoned black of Brian's shirt providing its own sharp contrast to the warm coloring of the man's chest and the exposed nipple that Justin could see.

"Did you leave for good?" Brian spoke and Justin took in the deep gray tone that Brian's eyes had absorbed in this lighting.

Justin's thoughts had wandered back to the last time he'd made note of this gray and he could see Brian and he together in the bedroom that he refused to look at. He could see Brian holding him in the doorway and he could feel the man's lips touching down on the bare skin on his neck and back. He could see himself backing away from Brian and laying himself out on the bed naked and open for anything Brian wanted. He could see Brian watching him and

smiling while unbuttoning a gray shirt that matched this exact shade and Justin remembered thinking himself luckier than even Brian. He was luckier than Brian because Brian didn't get to see how beautiful he looked in moments like these.

"That's none of your business Brian." Justin responded softly. Not even a second had passed since Brian had asked his question and Justin still managed to process the fact that the man knew about the state of affairs with Ethan. Justin had answered without giving away any of his thoughts.

Justin watched Brian roll his lips into his mouth before taking a breath. Brian had been running slow circles across the fabric of the sofa under the pads of his fingers and Justin recognized the slow and deliberate movements for what they were. If Brian Kinney ever did 'nervous' or 'uncertain', this is what they would look like.

The two sat in silence again and Brian considered his options. He'd had to regroup after calling Justin's cell and now he didn't quite know what the plan was. Having called Justin over here initially in a half drunk hope to punish him some more, punish them both some more, a slightly more sober Brian didn't know where to go from here.

"Don't you want to know what I said to him earlier when he was here?" Brian offered. His tone had taken on a slight teasing. He'd hoped to get some insight into exactly how much more trouble had developed in paradise over the last few hours.

"No. It doesn't matter." Justin wanted to silence Brian's train of thought. He'd also been well versed on how Brian reacted whenever he was nervous or uncertain about something. Brian would bite back and Justin was familiar with the fact that Brian's bite could be a million times worse than his bark.

"I told him not to tell you that he came here. The little fucker obviously didn't listen."

"You deciding what's best for me again?" Justin replied hotly and more loudly and Brian tried to gauge which nerve he'd hit.

"Keep your voice down or Gus'll wanna join the party." Brian dropped his foot away from the coffee table and stood up. He crossed the room to turn off a light on his desk and room grew a little dimmer around them.

"Brian, what did you want me here for? It's after midnight and you didn't give me a chance to say no. Not that you ever do but..." Justin spoke pointedly again and let the last of his words hang in the air.

Brian had been moving back to his place on the sofa and on hearing that last comment, he stopped as he passed close to Justin. "I always gave you choices. You did with them what you wanted. Stay or go. Do or not to do. It was always your choice." Brian spoke slowly as he pushed a hand through his hair. He hadn't turned to face Justin as he spoke.

The other man raised his head to see Brian's face and disregarded the genuine discomfort that seemed to be written there. "You didn't give me a choice. Or at least not the ones you thought." Justin dropped his eyes away from Brian's face and leaned back in the chair.

Brian turned and studied Justin for a moment before raising his own eyes and looking across the room. Justin wasn't leaving much room for Brian to be kind tonight and the man felt his own pain lurking somewhere below the surface; that same pain that had been following him all these weeks and that Brian had been reacting so badly to.

"You had no choice huh?" Brian laughed a little. "This is starting to sound familiar. Fucking blame it all on Brian, right?"

"I'm not blaming anything on you. I apologized for what I did even though I know that means shit to you. I'm just telling you how I felt."

"Brian wasn't nice to me so I had to find someone else to play with. The fiddler was nice to me so I had no choice but to play with him." Brian teased out his words in a singsong tone as he crossed the room to kitchen. He occupied his hands with locating the remains of his Jack Daniels friend and pouring himself some cool comfort.

"Fuck you." Justin lowered his eyes and shook his head slightly. This condemnation of Brian didn't have any power behind it or any of the hotness with which Justin had spoken just before. He hadn't even really been addressing his words to Brian. It was more of same that he'd already experienced tonight. Someone else identifying and categorizing his motivations even though he'd told them how dead wrong the assessment was.

"You know Sunshine, I just couldn't get to sleep tonight without asking you one thing about what you said this morning." Brian was aware that this was the one and only time he'd made any admission that he was having trouble sleeping because of something relating to Justin. "The fiddler said everything you wanted him to and more. Fucked you every which way to Sunday and then some...Correction...Made love to you every which way to Sunday." Brian eyed Justin wickedly as he pushed off from the counter. He took a deep swallow from his glass before speaking up again. "I'm sure he fucking stuffed your face full of carpet picnics and gave you roses whenever he could beg, borrow or steal them. So why aren't you giddy with joy? Why the fuck did you say you weren't happy?"

Brian was walking toward Justin again and his movements were slow and even. There was nothing betraying that seething rage that many had come to recognize in the last little while. Justin hadn't had the benefit of seeing that flash of fire go off behind the man's eyes when he'd uttered his 'fuck you' a few moments before. He'd been looking down and he'd missed it when Brian gave in to the demon that had been haunting him. Not having received any warning about the increased tension of this situation, Justin would now plow on blindly through this conversation.

"I told you that what I said before was bullshit. Call it a moment of weakness. A moment of fucking stupidity and leave it at that." Justin stood up and pulled his backpack up on his shoulder. "You obviously called me over here to stick some more pins into my eyes so I'm gonna go now." He'd had to move toward Brian to get around to the other side of the chair and get to the door and the other man intercepted him easily.

Brian had reached out to close a hand around the strap on Justin's shoulder. "Stay." He'd maneuvered Justin backward to the chair before pushing him slowly to sit down.

"What do you want from me Brian?" Justin watched as Brian dropped his backpack beside the coffee table and turned to face him again. Brian had set his glass down there as well and Justin folded his palms together as Brian approached again. Justin watched as Brian stood in front of him before bending over to rest both his hands on the arms of the chair. He had further trapped Justin into place.

Justin could feel goose bumps rising on his arms and he could feel a ghost of a touch reeking havoc with the fine hairs on the back of his neck. The temperature in this room had increased by several degrees in these last few seconds since the heat and liquor on Brian's breath started to be the only things he could feel or smell. Justin swallowed a little as Brian bent himself to eye-level with the seated man before kneeling down in front of where Justin sat. Justin had asked his question of Brian again and watched in his peripheral vision as the man's hands trailed up his arms to come to rest on his shoulders. Justin could feel the weight of Brian's hands on him and he'd been struck in that moment by the fact that he wouldn't be able to move from this spot until Brian was finished with him.

Now Justin was fighting the urge to break eye contact with Brian. One of Brian's hands was on his chest while the fingertips of Brian's other hand grazed over the skin on Justin's neck. "Let me get up Brian." Justin managed weakly and Brian only blinked.

He stopped his movement over Justin's chest for only a second or two before closing his finger around the zipper at the neck of Justin's pullover. Dragging it slowly down its track, Brian tightened his grip on Justin's shoulder and intensified his focus on the other man's eyes. Brian pushed a hand into the space the zipper had revealed and stroked his fingers over the thin fabric of Justin's t-shirt. He could feel Justin's heartbeat drum-rolling in this proximity and now he remembered what he had wanted to do to Justin with this visit. Now Brian remembered why it had required the change of wardrobe, the grooming and the soft lighting.

Brian moved both hands up to Justin's face and pushed back to get Justin to lean all the way back in the chair. Justin's body offered no protest but the level of alarm in Justin's eyes had risen significantly as Brian reached down to pull Justin's hips forward.

On the other end of this turn of events, Justin watched from ten miles away as his knees fell open with the change of position and Brian shifted so that he knelt between them. For a long minute or two, neither man moved and the frozen scene would have surprised anyone who knew them. The loft was dim and stark and there was no noise from Gus asleep in the other room. There was no movement but the shallow breathing from the both of them. Justin, with his arms lying languidly on the arms of the white chair, his smaller body pinned and unmoving by Brian's black-clad body pressed flush against him.

Brian between his legs and inches from his face. Neither man said a word but Ethan would have recognized the fullness of this silence, having witnessed it only hours before.

Brian shifted a little and pressed his erection against Justin's groin. He felt the thick push of air escape Justin's throat as he lowered his face even closer to Justin's.

"One question." There could be no mistaking the choices in this situation. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No." The word teased against Brian's skin and the man looked down from Justin's eyes to see the place where they'd come from. There was a thin layer of sweat across Justin's upper lip and Brian let his eyes settle into that little dip between Justin's nose and lip. He could see so many times before when he'd licked over that place just to taste Justin and tease him. Justin closed his lips to swallow just then and Brian moved in quickly, forcing them open again with the movement of his tongue. Brian pushed over the soft flesh and into the liquid heat of Justin's mouth. The kiss in the Jeep earlier had turned into something very similar to this one after a few seconds, but this kiss hadn't had to build to that intensity. Heat and the electricity had been moving through this kiss long before their skin touched.

Brian dove in deep and Justin did the same. Their tongues played over the wetness of the other's mouth and Brian moaned a little. Justin tasted sweet and salty and Brian charted every aspect of that taste.

Justin could feel Brian's hands on his sides and he pushed down to press closer to Brian's hardness between his legs. He could smell Brian's aftershave and that scent mixed up with the heat from Brian's skin, the liquor and cigarettes on his breath and the feel of Brian's hands on his body, almost made Justin come. He'd gasped suddenly and Brian pulled back to look at him, having recognized the urgency of that sound.

Pushed by Justin's reaction, Brian sat back and moved his hands to Justin's crotch. He undid the top button of Justin's jeans quickly and ran his fingers down the length of Justin's hard-on as he opened the zipper.

Justin watched as Brian's now gray green eyes changed their focus as the older man pushed the denim down and over his hips. Justin could feel the coolness of the air-conditioned room across his exposed skin and he had to close his eyes tight as the cool was replaced by Brian's warm breath and then Brian's hot mouth. Justin was reduced to shaking and moaning as he felt Brian's hand close on the base of his cock and felt Brian lips and tongue teasing over the head. Brian had swallowed him completely just then and Justin felt himself slip to the back of the man's throat.

"Oh God." Justin whispered and moaned to the space that was now filling all conscious thought in his head. He felt warm and liquid and he was more than sure that he couldn't stand on his own two legs again even if his life depended on it. Justin pushed small hits of air out of his lungs as Brian's deep-throating went shallow and then even deeper than before. The man had pushed Justin's shirt up over his ribs and now Justin couldn't feel the cool of the air conditioning anymore. All he felt was the bubble of heat that filled his head and made him forget all the reasons why this shouldn't been happening.

Brian pulled back a little and let Justin slip from his lips. He'd taken a moment to catch his breath and clear his head of the taste, touch and feel of the skin below his face. Justin had been stroking at Brian's head and hair for the last several minutes and Brian waited until Justin came back to the present and realized that he had stopped sucking. He sat back on his heels and watched as Justin's eyes opened slowly and focused first on the raging redness of his own hard-on before looking up to find Brian's face.

Suddenly back to reality, Justin thought he knew why Brian had stopped. He could feel the pain behind his eyes and he figured this to be Brian's last "pin in the eye" of the night. Brian had brought him to this point of nonsensical babbling before and then just stopped. Brian had stopped to show him once again what he used to have and what he could never have again.

"Please don't do this to me." Justin felt the words leave his body and he regretted every one as it was uttered. It was fruitless to beg for mercy before a determined executioner.

Brian replaced his hands on Justin's thighs as he leaned his weight over the other man's body once again. He kept his face and lips level with Justin's body as he licked and touched his way back up Justin's stomach and chest to his face. "Don't do what?" Brian stopped to stare hard at Justin's eyes. Justin had been partially right about what was going on here and Brian's cool look had confirmed that instantly. Heaving a breath, Justin closed his eyes and tried to sit up. Brian stopped him. "Don't move." Brian's breathy words found Justin's ear and the man's tongue followed shortly thereafter.

"Please stop fucking with me and let me go." Justin could feel the length of Brian's torso pressed against his and he could feel the softness and heat of the taut fabric over Brian's thighs against his own. He tried hard not to concentrate on the fact that Brian's shirt had fallen open and now the skin of the man's belly was also pressed against that of his own.

Brian pulled back to place his lips within a hair's breadth of Justin's before speaking slowly. "Why leave now Sunshine? The fucking hasn't even begun." Licking that little depression above Justin's upper lip, Brian felt all ability to struggle seep out through the tips of Justin's fingers and from the tips of his toes.

Justin opened his eyes just then and Brian felt a little bit of his cruelty seep away too. Justin looked defeated and betrayed. He'd been defeated by his own need to see how far Brian would take this and he'd been betrayed by how easily his feelings for this man could be brought to the surface. Brian watched the resignation fall over Justin's eyes and he didn't think he liked it. He pulled back a little further and studied Justin's face before standing and looking down at Justin. Eyes never leaving the other; Brian slowly shrugged off his shirt and dropped it to the floor as he rethought his plan. He let his jaw slacken and parted his lips a little before licking over the bottom lip absently. His hands at his waist now, Brian opened a first and then a second button as he watched Justin closely.

Brian planned to finish this and he wanted for Justin to want this, not just to resign himself to surviving it.

Still watching Justin closely, Brian undid all the buttons at his fly before pushing the snug fitting pants slowly over his hips and down his thighs. He watched as Justin's eyes found his hardness and he watched the coloring of Justin's lips deepen several shades.

Brian stepped out of his pants and stood naked in front of Justin, his eyes still never leaving Justin's face.

He'd reached a hand out for Justin and then waited for the other man to take it and let himself be pulled up. His face now inches from Justin's; Brian pushed Justin's loose jeans down his thighs and reached around to pull him closer. Not bothering to disentangle Justin's legs from his jeans, Brian pulled him in close and kissed him...eyes wide open.

A minute or two later, Brian held Justin as he stepped out of his jeans and underwear before pulling both t-shirt and pull-over over Justin's head in one movement.

Both naked and harder now, they swapped their previous clothed position in the chair for similar position on the couch. Justin had moved away from Brian and sat down there before reclining and waiting for Brian to come to him; so many things about these movements seeming entirely familiar and entirely new to Justin at the same time. Hands in hair and lips covering skin, Justin had let himself slip away again. As far as he knew Brian could and would stop this at any moment and he had no control of that and no desire to stop it first. He would let his happen and then reap whatever consequences came with it.

Justin exhaled sharply as he felt Brian settle all his weight atop him and bite into the skin of his neck. He fought himself not to break the skin on Brian's back with the intensity of his need to hold on to this man as tight as he could. Thrashing and moaning, Justin could taste blood in his mouth from the force with which Brian was kissing him and holding him down. They couldn't get close enough to each other and the bite marks and bruises were a cheap price to pay for that fact.

This wasn't about being rough or being punishing. For Brian, this was now strictly about the need that he'd denied for every waking minute of the last eternity since he and Justin had been in this place. He could feel Justin beneath him kissing and licking over his nipples and he pushed Justin back on the sofa to find his mouth with his own again. They had long since passed the point of no return and Brian reached down to find the undersides of Justin's thighs and pushed them up and then out. He settled against Justin's body and winced from the lack of control he felt. The sweat between them coated both hardness and softness in complete wetness and Brian had to catch himself before he pushed into that softness raw.

Eyes shut tight, Justin opened and then closed around Brian's body and Brian closed his own eyes as Justin's breath filled his face.

Part 7

Justin exhaled into the trimmed hairs that curled against Brian's forehead.

The man was pushing into him again and as they rocked and bucked together, Justin turned his head to let his lips skim over the straining muscles of Brian's forearm. They'd been tangled together in heat and sweat for the last long while and the muscles of Brian's back and arms were running on sheer will as he battled to keep some of the weight of his upper body off Justin's chest. The seat cushions of the couch under them felt wet and soft against Justin's back and a simple thought about staining them came and went from Justin's mind as Brian turned his face to rest his forehead against Justin's again. Justin could feel Brian's eyelashes trailing against his nose and the combination of that sensation and the feel of Brian's hand in his own, pushed out the moan that had been resting at the back of Justin's throat.

Brian pressed into him hard again and Justin tightened his legs around Brian's back as he held on for dear life. He'd felt life and pain and hurt and regret slipping out of his pores and dripping off Brian's skin to pool in the depression of his own stomach and the hollow of his neck. Every reality forgotten, nothing else existed for Justin but the tongue that was gliding over his lips, the velvet covered steel of the back under his fingers and the naked skin that felt hard against and under his own.

Justin opened his eyes just then and found Brian's now hazel ones looking back at him. Justin could feel the man's hand on his face and he turned toward the heated touch. Brian's fingers traced over Justin's chin and lips as his cock slipped deep again and Justin gasped involuntarily as his eyes closed out the intensity of the scene.

Eyes opened again, Justin watched as Brian leaned in close to his cheek to brush his lips there before returning his hand to Justin's face. The heat alone left an imprint on Justin's skin as Brian ran his scalding thumb along the outline of the younger man's lips. Brian traced out the now bruised and reddened pout and Justin opened his mouth to what he knew Brian wanted him to do. A thumb pushed over his lips and teeth and Justin further opened the way for Brian to rub over his tongue. The man's thumb now wet with his sweat and saliva, Justin closed his lips around it and sucked it in deeply as he watched Brian's gaze narrow and focus on what this mouth was doing to him.

Justin watched Brian's lips fall open and trace out the shape of his name even though no sound materialized. He watched as Brian's pupils dilated impossibly and he thought he could see the reflection of his all too red mouth tight around Brian's finger. Brian moaned then and Justin echoed the sound causing a vibration that Brian felt through his hand, down his spine and at the base of his cock. He showed his appreciation for this sensation by thrusting into Justin so deep and so hard that the other man would have gagged on his own tongue if not for the thumb holding it down.

Some minutes later, the headlights from a passing car filled the dim room with diffused light and Justin watched the light play through Brian's hair and over his skin. He watched large veins stand out and relax against the cords of muscle in Brian's neck and shoulder and he pushed up to lick over them as Brian's thumb slipped from his mouth. Crushing kisses again, Justin held his breath as Brian reached between them to find his hardness. Brian didn't squeeze or tug, he just held his hot hand in place and Justin forced the air to return to his lungs as the other man sliced into him again. There was something very illicit about this entire interlude and for as long as it lasted neither man could hold anything back or restrain anything. Brian pumped and circled his hips, pressing the cushions under his thighs and knees impossibly out of shape. He was on the verge of tearing through the stuffing of the pillows that had been unfortunate enough to be located under his hands.

A single thought entered Brian's mind whereas only need and blind desire had ruled before. If and when Justin went back to his lover boy, he would have to tell the man the origins of his pressure cut lip, the bruises and bites on his neck and the deep crimson finger welts all over his wrists. Ethan wouldn't have just vague hints of sex on Justin's body and breath to wonder about. He'd be able to see and taste Brian Kinney all over Justin's skin and deep inside him for days to come.

This thought dissipated as the first streak of light passed behind Brian's eyes. Justin was tight around him and the impossible pressure and impossible wetness wasn't masked by anything.

Brian was well aware that his thrusts were getting more and more shallow while his breathing became more and more strained. He was well aware that the intensity of these sensations was different and deeper than before and he was also suddenly and consciously aware of why. Justin's eyes were closed and his mouth hung open as Brian

pushed up on his forearms just then to look down between their bodies to the place where they were joined. Brian could feel Justin loosening the grip of his legs and he tried to clear his head as he reached down to run his hands over Justin's thighs.

That diffused light filled the room again and Brian looked down to see himself disappearing and reappearing from within the body beneath his. For all his sudden awareness, he'd been only vaguely aware that he was still pumping madly into Justin's body and that the light pulses before his eyes were more than late night traffic. He could see wetness and redness and although it couldn't be undone, he wanted out before all sense left him again.

Brian reached down to find Justin's waist and the other man opened his eyes. Justin watched Brian meet his gaze and shake his head slightly. To clear his head or to offer his very last minute regrets, Justin didn't know. He watched as Brian shifted slightly and he felt the man pulling out of him. He was on the verge of all oblivion but Justin forced himself to hold tight to Brian's body.

"No." Justin breathed out his word. He'd taken hold of Brian's hands on his hips and forced Brian to look at him again. "Stay inside me...come inside me."

Brian pulled his hands from Justin's grip and Justin dropped his hands to his side as he waited for Brian's next move. Justin watched as Brian dropped a hand to rest on his stomach before looking down to touch the base of his own cock. Brian held himself inside of Justin, seemingly deciding how to finish this. He had closed his eyes now and though it had slowed, Brian's rhythm had yet to stop completely.

Justin watched as the muscles of Brian's forehead tightened his brows into a deep knot and he watched the man's mouth fall open.

Now Justin could hear Brian's breathing changing and he could see the fight disappearing from Brian's body as his orgasm continued to build.

Justin felt the first spasm pull through his stomach and he squeezed tight around Brian, pushing Brian to double over. Though one hand remained at the base of his cock, Brian again transferred the weight of his upper body to the forearm and palm that he'd flattened beside Justin's head. He could feel Justin shaking around him and he could feel the tremors starting in Justin's thighs from straining muscles begging for release. He'd opened his eyes to find Justin looking at him and he'd felt the man close both hands around his waist urging him on.

One kiss given and one kiss received, Brian touched his fingers to Justin's hole to feel the push and pull between their bodies. Fingers moving lightly and purposefully, he replaced his hold on Justin's hardness and he closed his eyes to ride this out.

It started ten days after Justin's birthday. If Brian had kept a journal, he would have been able to chart the development of Justin's relationship with Ethan and the demise of their own. Ten days after Justin's birthday, the central topic of discussion, for a person who hadn't previously worshipped classical music, had become the influences of Verdi and Bach and how modern musicians were developing on the theme. Justin had spoken tirelessly on the subject to anyone who would listen. He had that same wide-eyed excitement that Brian remembered all too well and the intensity of the reference for where Brian had previously seen this passion, made it all the more difficult for him to be willfully blind when it came to what was going on. Very few things surprised him, very few things snuck up on him, and on some level or another, Michael's revelation had only been confirmation of what Brian had known since only ten days after Justin's birthday.

Long before a fuck sweaty body had become the norm for when Justin came home at night, Brian had seen changes that he did his best to un-see. He retreated to sex, drinking and drugging and he rebelled against any activity that Justin suggested that seemed like a duplication of something Justin had done with this someone else. No carpet-picnics and no candle-lit quiet evenings at home. He'd run to his desk or from the loft on many an occasion with the sheer need not to see what Justin was doing.

Now, lying here still inside Justin and half in the present and half in the past, for some reason, one of the memories that wouldn't leave Brian's head was what had been one of the first nails in Justin's coffin.

Brian could remember himself claiming that Lindsay had summoned him because Gus had been asking for him and he could see why. He'd needed an escape because it was too early for Woody's or a club and because Justin had been in the kind of mood that would have made a trip to any one of those places high on his list. Brian had watched Justin slip in the earpieces to his CD player before he slid the door to the loft shut and braced his forehead against it for a good long while. He'd hoped a visit with his son, all be it an unannounced visit, would be enough to clear his head. Nine hours later and one tank of gas later, he'd been too tired to loop on his previous thoughts and for this reason he considered his excursion a success.

"Where've you been?" Justin turned on to his back and eyed Brian as he climbed the steps into the bedroom. Justin had called Lindsay earlier only to find out that Brian had left her hours before. While Justin figured there were only a few places and things the man could have been doing with his missing hours, he'd honestly been curious.

"Lindsay's" Brian shrugged out of his jacket as he crossed the room to the closet. He'd made a detour on the way in order to find and kiss Justin's lips in the dim light. They'd made this kissing on first sight thing a bit of a ritual and even though they both noticed it when they did, it hadn't scared Brian into putting an end to the practice.

"I called you, your cell was off. Lindsay said you left a while ago." Justin scrubbed his face with his hands as Brian walked away from him. His words made it sound as though he'd fallen asleep after worriedly watching the time and waiting for Brian's return. In plain fact he hadn't. He'd finished up an assignment, listened to music, one CD in particular, and called to find Brian only when he figured he'd better stop thinking more about the musician than the music.

"It's one-thirty. I'm home way before curfew." Brian tossed his words over his shoulder.

"You don't smell like you've been out fucking and you don't smell like a club." Justin turned his head to follow Brian's progress on the other side of the room.

"I went for a drive." Brian looked at the other man. "What's with the third-degree?"

"Just wanted to know." The two shared a look before Justin pulled back the sheet to swing his legs over the side of the bed. He crossed the room on somewhat wobbly legs as Brian watched.

"Were you worried I wouldn't come back?" Brian sounded like he was teasing but in truth part of him actually wanted Justin to say he had finally clued in to Brian's mood and was smart enough to stop what had caused it.

"Yeah right. You'd never leave your loft behind. If anyone's gonna leave first, it'll be me." Justin had laughed a little before limping off to the bathroom on his still sleeping legs.

It had been just a joke and nothing more. No veiled meanings and no hidden threats. Meaningless to Justin but prophetic to Brian.

Those words had been prophetic and Brian the psychic, or at least the kid who'd developed a sixth sense for knowing when trouble or fists were brewing, knew how true the words were. Most people would always assume that given his temperament and fuck'em all attitude, that Brian would be the first to walk away from a failing relationship. They would always be wrong in this regard because of the one variable they would most often overlook.

Brian Kinney didn't know how to leave things behind.

The most he could do was close his mind to something until it didn't hurt as much anymore and then make it leave him.

Still part way into the past but now mostly in the present, Brian turned his face away from the waves of breath that were flowing over his face. Justin's eyes were still closed and Brian could feel the man's heartbeat hammering into his chest. This part had always been the part that defined them and set them apart from the others. This part was where they were so lost in each other that cooling sweat and sticky come didn't mean discomfort or give a reason to flee. This part where shared breaths and interlaced fingers reminded each of them of what had happened and what was still happening.

Brian identified the fact that he had pressed Justin's palm into the cushions with his own and he pushed up on his other hand before pulling his fingers from Justin's. The other man opened his eyes just then and Brian closed his own so that he wouldn't have to see what he already knew would be there.

He didn't want to be looked at with longing or regret and he didn't want to face the fact that he might find something more familiar there either. Brian pulled back so that first the skin of his chest and then that of his stomach pulled away from Justin's and he fought back the shiver that pushed through him as the cooled air of the loft hugged him instead.

That done, this was the part that Brian had been dreading ever since he realized what they had done...what he had done to Justin. He bit into his jaw and he tried hard not to visualize Justin doing the same thing as he pulled himself completely from the body beneath his. Brian had averted his eyes as if afraid to look at something terrible and stood quickly before moving away.

"I'll get you something to clean yourself up." Brian reached out for the back of the sofa to steady himself because in that moment he felt stirred, shaken and entirely ripped apart. He'd taken everything that he'd intended to inflict on Justin and suffered ten-times worse a fate. A deep breath wouldn't clear his head and as Brian saw it, a million showers wouldn't clean Justin of what he had just done to him.

Turning his head to make sure Gus was still asleep, Brian crossed the space to the bathroom and flicked on the switch. He grabbed for a washcloth before turning on the faucet and wetting it with warm water. Raising his head to meet his reflection, Brian looked at his own eyes while turning the cloth over and over under the stream of water. Losing himself in the undulating flecks of color in his own irises, he couldn't hear anything but the drips and splashes of the water, his own heartbeat and his own pronouncement that Justin was part of his past.

Part of his past...part of the past...part of the...future...part of his fu... part of his...part of him...

"Brian."

The man turned and stopped in mid-movement.

"Can I take a shower? I mean I'd rather..." Justin glanced down his body and Brian followed him to look at the dried streaks on Justin's stomach and inner thighs. Brian had moved his eyes back to the faucet as Justin looked up at him again. He couldn't meet those eyes and he turned off the water as he nodded. Discarding the washcloth on the side of the basin, he'd stood his ground as Justin passed him to step into the shower enclosure.

"Justin." One word and then nothing. What was it that he wanted to say? What was it that seemed so important when he was forming that one word in his mind, but now when it was show time had disappeared? Brian dropped his head a little and Justin thought he knew that what was coming couldn't be good.

"Don't say it Bri. I haven't been here in a while but I remember the drill." It was true that Justin hadn't been in the loft in a month but it was also true that he hadn't been the "get out as soon as you get dressed" trick in a long, long while, if ever. He pulled the door shut behind him and stood aside as he turned up the spray.

"That's not what I was going to say." Brian whispered and Justin didn't hear him. Justin had watched the other man turn and walk back into the bedroom after a little while.

Filled up with Brian and empty of Brian at the same time, Justin turned his face into the spray and let it take away any of the outward signs of his turmoil and confusion.

"Can you stay at the fiddler's tonight if you two are fighting?" Brian spoke up when he heard Justin coming down the steps from the bedroom. He'd been sitting beside the telltale stain on his expensive sofa and was absently deciding whether to leave it there or to try to get it out.

"Ethan. His name is Ethan." Justin spoke to Brian's back as he let the towel slip from around his waist to step into his jeans. Brian had pulled back on his pants and Justin let his eyes wander to the man's seated frame. One bare foot on the coffee table, a bare chest and some sex-tussled hair, Justin took inventory before turning his attention back to getting dressed. "If I don't go home, I'll find somewhere else." He'd made a point of emphasizing the word home and Brian winced.

"It's after two. You can sleep here." The man got up from his seat and walked toward the kitchen. He'd suddenly decided to do his best to get the stain out and he reached for a bowl before filling it with warm water.

"I don't...I don't need to...". Justin dropped his hands at his side before letting his eyes take in the pillows scattered about the floor in front of the sofa and the bruising on his wrists.

"No need to worry about me sullyng your virtue. We've already gotten that part out of the way tonight." Brian's words slashed through the air as he knelt down in front of the sofa, bowl and dishtowel in hand and Justin let his eyes settle on the slightly off-colored patch of fabric for the first time.

He hadn't noticed it when he got up to go into the bathroom, but now he could see it because Brian had gone around and turned on almost every light in this area of the loft. Whatever spell had been woven here tonight had long since been broken and part of Justin needed to know whether the damage and the stain had been worth it to the mastermind behind it all.

"You wouldn't do that with me before. Why now?" Justin pulled on his t-shirt and tossed his pullover on to the back of the sofa. Brian had glanced up from his cleaning to find his eyes, but the man had said nothing. "I realize it's not your style Bri, but it wouldn't force the earth off its axis if you answered me for once." Justin walked over to stand directly in front of Brian and he watched as Brian stilled the movement of the towel.

Justin had known that nothing good would come of this question, like so many of his others, when Brian smiled his most angelic and most cruel smile. "Everybody makes mistakes Sunshine, even me."

"You brought me here with every intention of fucking me Brian, so I don't buy that." Enough experience with cruelty made for a very thick callus and a very quick retort.

"Fucking you, intentional. Sticking my cock up you without a condom, not intentional. No great meaning, just a mistake. One that if you were thinking straight, you'd be more pissed about."

"We're negative Brian and I'm not gonna get pregnant, so it doesn't matter." Justin shrugged his shoulders a little but kept his eyes on Brian face.

The man furrowed his brows and tried to prevent the sarcasm from entering his tone before he spoke. "It's that attitude that makes me very concerned for myself in this situation and very concerned for the future of our nation." Brian feigned superior disappointment as he forced his hand to continue rubbing over the spot.

"Right, 'Mr. Fucking Thirty Guys A Month Is A Slow Period For Me' is worried that I'll make him sick?" Justin shoved his hands into his pockets as he looked away.

"What did you say to me the last time we talked about this?" Brian looked over Justin's shoulder to clarify his memory. "I wasn't just 'anyone'. Isn't that right?" He'd refocused on Justin's face before continuing. "Well now I am 'anyone' and if you're fucking your fiddler raw and then fucking your tricks raw," Brian gestured towards himself as he spoke, "then it's all the more reason for me to be concerned, don't you think?"

"Fuck off Brian. You are not just anyone and once again, you're the first. Leave it to you to turn all the lights on and make me wonder what the fuck I was doing." Justin grabbed for his pullover and moved off to retrieve his backpack.

"Why so angry Sunshine? Would you rather I left all the lights low and turned on some violin music so that we could stay caught up in the moment?" Brian huffed a laugh before getting up from where he knelt in front of the sofa and dumping the water from the bowl into the kitchen sink. "The stain didn't come out. That should fucking mean something to you." Brian looked over to where Justin stood.

"Why? What does it mean to you Brian?" Justin asked sarcastically as he pulled his backpack on to his shoulder.

The other man had watched him move around gathering up his things and stuffing his feet into his shoes before answering. "That in some fucked up way, you've gotten what you used to want. Now you'll never be quite rid of me and I'll never be rid of you." Brian smiled again and Justin thought it looked familiar. It was the same unaffected or unreadable expression that Brian had given him before he left the Rage bash and Justin searched behind the lump in his throat and the pain at his temples for some quick rebuttal.

None came and Justin raised his eyes to find Brian's face again. "You might be right." His voice was wistful and Brian watched him walk toward the door and pull it open. "But when you're done thinking about this so clinically and crisply, ask yourself this for me. No regrets, no apologies and mostly no mistakes, that's usually true for you isn't it?" He watched as Brian didn't react to his words. "That said, in all honesty, do you really regret this, are you sorry it happened and down deep where nobody can see, is it really a mistake?" He stood stock still not expecting an answer and watched as Brian walked toward him.

"Stop being such a drama princess and close the door. We've given the neighbors enough of a show tonight already." Brian reached over Justin's shoulder to pull the door shut. The fact that he had to answer all of Justin's questions

with a "no" didn't mean that this meant anything more than it did. "We fucked...". Brian rocked back on his heels as Justin looked up into his eyes. The blue and the proximity did it to Brian every time and from the base of his cock to the tips of his fingers, every part of him knew that Justin was nearby. "...and it was good. Now let's just play nice and go to sleep." He'd reached for Justin's bag for the second time tonight but this time Justin held on to it.

"You're used to getting whatever you want Brian, but I hope you realize that you didn't pull a fast one on me tonight." Justin pulled his bag from Brian's grip as the man let his hand fall back to his side. "This happened because I wanted you too. You didn't slip up and forget the condom. I was there too and I let it happen that way. You always seem to forget that it takes two."

"Play nice sonny boy." Brian reached up to touch Justin's face before turning and walking away. He'd been urging Justin to be quiet for however much longer they had together and he disappeared into the darkness of the bedroom before returning with his pillow and a sheet. "The couch is still wet, so you can sleep in the bedroom with Gus."

"I don't want to sleep in there."

Brian stopped in mid-step as Justin's words filled his ears. He sighed heavily before asking his question. "Where are you gonna sleep then?"

"It's your bed, I can crash on the floor." Justin dumped his bag into the chair beside him and waited for Brian's next move. He had no way of knowing that the same history that kept him from settling in under blue lights these days, also kept his former lover from that room as well.

"Stop being a martyr Justin. You'll be whining about your stiff neck all day if you sleep on the floor." Brian didn't think he could keep up this refusal without it becoming suspicious or even obvious and he hoped that Justin would give in. He should have known better.

"Why don't you want to sleep in there?" Justin had taken on his Young Sherlock Holmes look as Brian looked away and scratched an imaginary itch on his back, further confirming Justin's suspicions. Having decided to let Brian off the hook, Justin took another step forward before speaking. "If you're gonna sleep out here, I'll stay out here too. Like you said, we've already gotten the fucking out of the way tonight." Justin spoke humorlessly and waited for Brian to agree.

He watched the man pull the coffee table off the rug before dumping his pillow, sheet and the dry cushions from the sofa on to the floor. Returning to the bedroom for the duvet, Justin watched as a large makeshift bed appeared before him. He'd silenced the single thought that skimmed through his mind. 'If Brian hadn't seen the romance of a carpet picnic, he would no doubt miss the romance of sleeping on a shaggy rug with the person you lo...!'

"Settle in. I'm gonna take a shower." Brian was half way out of the room when Justin came back to reality. He took a seat in the chair where he'd dropped his backpack and turned his attention to the `nest' Brian had just built for them on the floor. They'd run almost the full gambit of emotion tonight from passion, to rage, to sarcasm and then back to rage again and now they were going to go to sleep together on a hardwood floor because neither of them could stand what it meant to sleep in their bed.

"...their bed..." Justin had missed the significance of his thought.

Of all the harsh words and ecstasy induced utterances of this evening, Justin thought this sleeping arrangement was the most revealing of where they both were and he wondered if Brian saw the absurdity of it too.

Justin settled back in the chair and made no attempt to "settle in" as Brian had instructed. He glanced down at his wrists and let his thoughts wander back in time as he traced out the pattern of Brian's fingers. He could still feel Brian's hands tight around his arms and wrists and he could still feel the man inside him. Brian had managed to push the most intense orgasm of his life out of Justin's body, but Justin didn't think he would remember his own orgasm when all was said and done. What he would remember until the day he died was how it felt when Brian erupted inside him and all that scalding liquid ran down out of him. He would remember Brian pushing into him long after the climax and he would remember the smell and the sounds they made together. Raw didn't just mean potential disease or a death sentence. Much more than this clinical assessment, he thought Brian had been right about them never quite being rid of each other.

Part 8

Brian walked into his bathroom and let his eyes fall on the beads of water on the glass of the shower enclosure. He took in the red washcloth that had now been wrung out and hung to dry on the towel rack and he took in the single footprint that Justin had missed when he dried the rest of them from the slate floor. Brian could smell the faint scent of his own moisturizer and he turned to look at the hand blown glass bottle on the shelf across the room. Now he knew that even after weeks apart and an unbridgeable gap between them, Justin still hadn't been able to resist his habit of putting that moisturizer on when he saw it.

Turning away from the sight of the bottle, which like so many other things in the loft had seemed so innocuous before, Brian pushed a loud breath out of his nose in a vain attempt at purging himself of the smell and the history. He crossed the room to the shower and turned the water up before standing back and unbuttoning his pants. Brian was well aware that it wasn't that Justin at nineteen thought he had use for a French anti-aging serum. He remembered exactly what Justin had let slip the last time he'd accused him of wasting the expensive cream. Try as Brian did to ignore this memory, it didn't disappear and the smell seemed to get stronger than it had any right to be.

Eyes fixed on the tile work on the wall across the room; Brian remembered Justin's confession to a more sentimental reason for wanting to use the cream. This thought and the smell continued to crowd Brian's senses as he forced himself to concentrate on pushing his pants over his hips and stepping under the spray.

The reality was that tonight Justin had wanted to smell this smell for old time's sake because he hadn't been able to find a trace of it on Brian's skin earlier. He'd let a single drop of cream land on his fingers before looking at it and then washing it away down the sink. He had no way of knowing that Brian would even take notice of the slight smell and he had no way of knowing that Brian had given up this particular vanity because of its association with a detail that his sanity demanded he forget.

Brian let the water beat over his face and then the crown of his head before soaping his cock and balls. He didn't want to think about the fact somebody who could be so desperate to have some scent of his around when he wasn't, could also be the same person to rip him to shreds. He closed his eyes to the water and to the light and concentrated on the sounds around his head. Thoughts of the closeness and constancy he'd just finished living were fast approaching and Brian banished those as well. He'd let Justin into a place he never had any right seeing much less setting up camp in and the strongest part of Brian was running on sheer will as he tried to evict him.

"Brian, I'm gonna leave." Justin spoke up from somewhere behind him and Brian's eyes jerked open at the intrusion. The reflective beads of water on the marble in front of his eyes were the only witnesses to the turmoil and the flashed fire that they revealed.

"Why?" Nothing but calm in his voice but Brian felt as though he might burst out of his own skin.

"We're fucking with ourselves by doing this and I don't want to play anymore." Justin reached up to his face to rub his eyes in order to avoid looking at Brian's body through the glass.

"Like I said, we've finished fucking and now we're just gonna go to sleep." Brian stared hard at the wall and kept his back to Justin. He hoped that his words had managed to sound like his cool sarcastic self because he was already too busy not thinking about why it was now so important that Justin stay.

"Why are you doing this to me? To punish me? To make me sorry? To show me that you still don't feel shit while I'm barely keeping it together?" Justin pushed his fingers through his hair roughly before releasing a heavy sigh. "Well like I did before, I fucking give up. You win. You played better than me and once again you showed me that you were right when you said this wouldn't work." Justin turned in the doorway to walk away and Brian turned to watch him through the glass.

"Stay."

A glance over his shoulder, Justin shook his head 'no'. "What for?" He'd sounded more dejected than Brian gave him credit for.

"We don't need to talk everything to death Justin."

"Talk everything to death?" Justin huffed a bitter laugh. "This plant didn't die because you talked to it too much."

Pausing to listen before speaking, Brian still didn't react. "You need a place to stay tonight, so just stay." He flipped off the water and pushed the door to the enclosure open. Brian had made no attempt get out, instead just standing there and waiting for Justin's next move. Blinking the water out of his eyes, he watched as Justin turned away and walked back into the bedroom.

Not wanting to give chase and almost sure that he had no intention of begging, Brian made footprints of his own as he walked to the face basin and turned up the water. Now he couldn't hear what Justin was doing outside this room and he wouldn't have to hear the door to the loft closing him in if he didn't want to. Brian grabbed for his toothbrush and ran it under the stream of water before flattening his palms against the counter. He couldn't even rely on something as automatic or repetitive as brushing his teeth and he realized that he was listening for some sign that Justin hadn't left.

No sounds could be heard in the other room and Brian found himself measuring and re-measuring the time in his mind. Did he stay standing by the shower for a second or a minute after Justin left the room? Had he been running his hand and his toothbrush under the water long enough for his fingers to prune or did that happen from the shower? He wasn't sure of whether he'd already drowned out the sound of Justin's departure or whether that sound was still to come.

Suddenly thoughts of Justin leaving brought on one irrational thought after the other. Brian couldn't shake the image of Justin standing before him after 'earning' his promotion from Sapperstein and telling him that "he could take care of himself" and Brian couldn't shake the sudden desperation to make sure that Justin had at least the twenty he'd laid out to reimburse him for the taxi fare. The fragrance from the cream was stronger here by the sink and Brian would be able to tell himself that this was why he'd dropped his toothbrush unused and gone out into his bedroom.

The funny thing was and always is that if a person plays it cool enough, at least some of the time they can manage to fool even the people who should know them best. They can play things so close to their chest that even they think they're in control and no one else has a chance of calling their bluff. He could walk into this room and as nonchalantly as possible check on his son, grab a pair of sweats from his dresser and all the while tell himself that

his ears weren't straining to hear even breathing coming from the rest of the loft. He could tell himself that he actually felt the heat on his back and neck from Justin's eyes watching him and that the sensation wasn't the blush that something bordering on panic had managed to break out on his skin.

Slinging the gray sweatpants over his shoulder and rubbing a hand against his towel-clad thigh, Brian made several slow steps to the doorway of the room. He hadn't let his eyes stray any higher than what would have been eye-level for Gus and he sort of wished he hadn't turned on all these lights after all. Having to move through this empty space to turn them all off wasn't an adventure Brian was looking forward to.

"How are we going to do this?"

Brian lifted his eyes to find the skin of Justin's shoulders first and then to see the light playing off the highlights and lowlights in his hair. Brian had managed to roll his lips into his mouth quickly enough to stifle the short stab of air that threatened to escape his throat. What was this feeling that had suddenly overwhelmed him and why in hell should he feel like a man who'd just escaped an axe-wielding executioner with his head still his own?

"Well...we're gonna pull back the duvet, get in and then go to sleep for the next two or three hours before Gus wakes up." Brian's voice was steady and his movements were even as he closed the gap between himself and where Justin sat in the chair overlooking their 'bed'.

Moments earlier, Justin had undressed to his underwear before collapsing first on to the arm of the chair and then giving in all the way and sitting down. Now elbows planted against his thighs and his head resting in his hands, Justin lifted his eyes to find Brian's face. "No. I mean this. This, 'we couldn't survive a relationship but we're still fucking', none-thing that we're doing."

Suddenly serious, Brian took in the expression on Justin's face. "Guess we just won't make a habit of it." He tossed his towel aside and kept his eyes firmly on Justin's as he stepped into the sweatpants. Gesturing toward the fact that he wasn't planning on sleeping naked he'd added, "See it's not all like old times."

The half-smile that Brian offered didn't reach his eyes and after watching Justin close his eyes and then look away, Brian turned away as well. It was time to throw some darkness on this situation and allow some of this rawness to go back into hiding.

Moving around from place to place to turn out lights, Brian could hear Justin pulling the door to the refrigerator open and then he could hear him walking back to the living area. He'd waited until he was sure that Justin had his fill of water and was bedded down before turning off the last light and moving back toward that general vicinity

himself. The shape of Justin's body under the covers was familiar and Brian realized that it was this image that kept him from sleeping in his bed.

Following his own instructions to Justin on 'how they would do this', he pulled back the duvet, knelt down and got in. Justin didn't move from where he lay and Brian tried to make light of the fact that the other man hadn't opted to turn his back to where he knew Brian would be. Ignoring Justin's eyes, Brian settled back against his pillow and that same heat that was either born of panic or proximity, flashed over his skin. Blinking slowly and never more aware of another human body than at this moment, Brian took in the drawn out shadows the windowpanes and heavy curtains were throwing on the ceiling of the loft. He took in the changing shapes in the same way that Justin had sometimes just sat and stared at something. He realized then that he'd spent the last two minutes thinking about the very presence he was trying to ignore.

Turning his head ever so slightly, Brian found Justin's eyes in the dim light and just looked at him. Suddenly another irrational thought floated through his mind and he felt like they were characters in a cartoon and that all that was visible of them were their eyes glowing in the dark. Knowing Justin's appreciation for animation, he'd almost thought to break the ice of this moment by asking Justin to close his eyes to turn out those lights. Deciding against saying anything, silence instead of comedy filled the moment as Brian turned slowly on to his side to face Justin.

They'd done this a lot toward the end but this was the first time that both sets of eyes glowed in the direction of the other. Usually it would happen that both would lie like spoons, staring at some spot across the room, seemingly oblivious to the fact that the other was doing the same.

Minutes later, Brian swallowed a little and Justin made a move to place a hand on his shoulder. Whether to welcome him or ward him off, Brian wasn't sure so he stayed put. They were in uncharted territory and there was a lot to be said for knowing where you wanted to be but not being at all sure of how to get yourself there.

Feeling Justin's fingers tracing over his shoulder and barely touching his throat, Brian kept his eyes firmly fixed on the set that was watching him.

"Tomorrow I'm gonna go to Ethan's and pack. Right now he doesn't want me there so I won't force him to live with me like that...I'm gonna stay with Debbie or maybe Daph, wherever I can find a place...and figure out some stuff...for myself." The younger man was quiet for a minute or two before continuing. "I don't want to talk to you for a little while, okay?" Justin looked away from Brian's face and then back again. "It's 'cause I don't know how to deal with all that's happened and I don't think this is the healthiest way." Justin plaintively searched the man's face for some reaction and found nothing.

Brian was quiet for a long while and his jaw clenched and relaxed before he finally spoke up. He'd been thinking about how easy it had been to lose sight of his plan tonight and to lose control. "Enough with the speeches. Rollover." Noting the narrowing of Justin's eyes, Brian added. "We're not gonna fuck."

He'd waited for Justin to roll on to his back and then turn on to his other side before moving in closer to his body and pulling the duvet over both their shoulders. His face in Justin's hair, Brian closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. He passed a hand between Justin's arm and hip and slung his own arm around Justin's waist. In spite of the fact that his lips were now grazing over the back of Justin's neck and the fact that he'd been holding so tight to this body, Brian still let his next few words escape his throat before settling in to the most comfort he'd ever felt sleeping a floor.

"You shouldn't be here when I wake up."

For the next three hours or so, Brian would be able to sleep. The ultimate drug to ease his way. Whether or not he would respect Justin's wishes...he would cross that bridge when he came to it.

The soft knocking on the door was the first to pierce his nothingness and then came the light. Whoever it was that was on the other side of the door was doing their best to wake him without kicking up too much Sunday morning noise in the process. Brian squinted at the clock on his desk as he sat up with the cracking accompaniment of his own back. It was just after nine and according to this record, he'd slept a lot longer than three hours. Eyes sweeping immediately to the bedroom, he'd suddenly remembered that this knocking wasn't his anticipated wake- up call.

From what Brian could see, Gus wasn't in the bed and the man flung back the covers and stood up quickly. Still grimacing from the light, it had taken the sound of Gus dropping the remote off the table in front of the television to catch Brian's attention.

"Shit. Gus what're you doing?" Brian walked toward the toddler, taking in the boy's state of undress and the fact that one of the batteries from the remote was now just an inch short of falling into the heating vent of the floor.

Gus it seemed, had gotten himself up and remedied his own wet diaper by discarding the whole thing in the middle of Brian's bed. He'd kept himself busy by pulling out every sheet of facial tissue from the box on the low shelf in the bathroom and then by pouring all the water from Justin's half-empty water bottle on to Brian's expensive hard wood floor.

The knocking persisted and just shy of sliding on the almost invisible puddle and killing himself, Brian turned his attention toward the door and called out angrily. "Who the fuck is it?"

"Keep your damned voice down and don't wake Gus." Melanie called back and Brian grimaced before plucking Gus up off the floor and walking toward the door.

"Maybe the annoying knocking was what woke him up?" Brian offered his words as he slid the door open to reveal the two travel weary women in the hallway.

"Why is he naked?" Lindsay stepped forward and pulled Gus from Brian's hold. She'd been manic about Gus wearing a hat in the slightest draught and only with great insistence from Melanie had given up her obsession that he wear socks at all times to prevent his catching cold. "And why is this place such a wreck?" Lindsay took in the destruction in the loft as she brushed passed Brian.

The man turned to discover that another of Gus' morning pursuits had been to pull out clumps of grass and dirt from the two garden trays that Brian kept on the shelf in front of the bedroom. He'd turned to take note of the dirt under Gus' fingernails and his attention went immediately to the once pristine furniture that littered the space.

"He's a fucking two-year old Brian. If you don't watch him he gets into things." Mel reached down to pick up one of the tissues that Gus had freed from the bathroom and strewn around the loft before she moved to stand behind a Lindsay, who was still surveying the damage.

"What were you doing while he did all this?" Lindsay had turned a little so that Melanie could reach Gus' hands to wipe them off. She'd been watching as Brian brushed at little patches of dirt on his sofa but she didn't notice when he turned his attention to covering the now yellowish spot on one of the seat cushions.

Brian hadn't offered any response to their statements. He was looking around to make sure that only Gus' presence was visible in the mess of the loft. Justin had obviously done as he'd asked by leaving early and besides the now empty water bottle on the floor, there wasn't anything out of place that he could attribute to Justin. The stain on the sofa was the only glowing reminder of how his plans for the previous evening had been derailed by his own lack of control.

"I'm the one who's gonna have to pick up the tab for the damage so why do you care?" Brian ran a hand through his hair as he dropped himself into an armchair.

"I care because I don't understand how one minute you can be so careful with him and the next you can totally forget to pick him up or drug yourself into stupidity while he wrecks the place around you. Jesus Brian, how drunk did you have to be to sleep through all of this?" Lindsay gestured toward the empty bottle of Beam she'd spotted on the windowsill and waited for Brian to respond to her outrage.

She'd had no idea how true her words had been on so many levels. It was true that Brian had no idea how he could be so careful with 'him' one minute and then let himself go so far as to give in to the potential havoc that one slip up could cause.

"Not drunk, just tired and...caught off guard." Brian got up from his spot in the chair and grabbed at one of Gus' now clean hands. "Isn't that right Sonny Boy?" He hadn't stayed in close proximity to the little family picture of Lindsay, Melanie and his son, instead moving off to the kitchen to start some coffee. "You ladies are back early and without calling first. Did you come by for breakfast?" Brian teased as he pulled the beans from the cupboard.

"We came back because even after all this time we don't get a very good night's sleep knowing Gus is in your care." Melanie bit out and Lindsay tried to shush her. It was one thing for Lindsay to lay into Brian, but she still couldn't sit back and watch anyone else do it to him instead.

"We decided to stay only for the bris yesterday Brian and I told you we'd be back today...I just didn't think that coming straight from the airport to give you a chance to rescue part of your weekend, we'd end up seeing this." Lindsay's eyes swept around the place again and this time, a very small detail stuck out where it should have blurred in with the rest of the chaos. The makeshift bed on the floor had been attributed to Gus making a mess of the sheets in the bedroom, the two pillows could be explained by Gus and Brian sleeping in the living room, but Lindsay couldn't account for the familiar pullover that she'd so often returned to Debbie's or the diner when her sitter forgot it after a shift. Not calling any attention to this fact, Lindsay turned to Mel and handed her their son. "Why don't you get his stuff together and dress him then we can get out of here. I wanna have a word with Brian." Realizing that Melanie preferred her own methods as opposed to Lindsay's reasoning or trying to understand Brian, Lindsay held her gaze firmly on the other woman's face until she moved away. Melanie and Brian had made strides over the last little while, but it was happenings like this that kept them less than best buds.

"Remind me to kiss you later for getting rid of her." Brian drawled as he set the coffeepot in place.

"Shut the fuck up asshole." Melanie called over her shoulder.

"Such a fine example for my impressionable young son." Brian met Mel's venom with a sneer as the woman turned to look back at him.

"You know you could try a little harder not to goad her for something that you did wrong." Lindsay made a point of walking around the coffee table in order to make her way toward the kitchen and toward Brian. "We didn't call on the off chance that we might wake Gus." Brian had rolled his eyes at both of her comments and Lindsay waited until she was out of earshot of Melanie before continuing in a whisper. "So did you start drinking before or after Justin left last night? I'm assuming you brought both he and Gus back here yesterday."

Brian looked up at her a little too quickly and Lindsay thought she saw something in his eyes.

"Who says he left last night?" Brian offered her a more steady look before turning away and pulling the door to the refrigerator open.

"Judging by the keys on the table, I wouldn't have guessed it was that kind of visit...But, I guess with you, it's always that kind of visit."

"So the plan is for you and your wife to get Gus packed and then get of here so that I can enjoy some peace and quiet, right?" Brian pulled a box of milk from the fridge and shut it behind him as he came back to stand across from Lindsay.

Ignoring him, Lindsay continued her inquisition. "So was this the first time that you two have been together since, or...?" She watched as the man poured out most of the milk into a bowl in front of him.

"Since when do I answer questions like that from you or anyone else?" Opting to have some cereal with his milk, Brian dropped a handful into the bowl and eyed Lindsay with a half smile.

"Since you didn't have to tell me that he stayed here last night, but you did."

Brian huffed a very small laugh before finding Lindsay's face again. "Well before your imagination runs wild with romance and sentiment, I fucked him to within an inch of his life right there on the couch. It's a wonder we didn't wake Gus and it's a wonder the neighbors didn't call the cops. He didn't have anyplace to sleep last night since lover boy turfed him and I let him crash on my floor."

Brian had conveniently failed to mention the fact that he'd been the one to feel more dead than alive when he and Justin were done, he'd failed to mention that he'd all but begged Justin to stay the night and he'd failed to mention that they had both spent the night on the floor, him curled around Justin in his sleep in a way he couldn't let himself live when awake.

"Just a fuck, huh?" Lindsay leaned against the counter and stole a flake from Brian's bowl. She made a mental note to talk to Justin about the root of his problems with Ethan. "So will you two be 'just a fucking' very often from now on?" The woman smiled as Brian offered her the finger and part of her was relieved to at least have this part of the man back. She'd been one of those not so blind few who'd watched him retreat into an even more emotionless state and now seeing him eating, and cursing and smiling was almost enough to erase the thoughts of child endangerment that had leapt to mind when she'd seen the state of the loft.

Brian turned his back to her as Justin's goodnight speech rang through his ears and having now come to this bridge, Brian couldn't quite put his finger on what it was he was feeling. "Why don't you 'just a fuck' off?" He'd turned to drop another handful of flakes into the bowl before turning back to put the container atop the refrigerator.

"Seems like I've heard you say something like that about him before." Lindsay spoke up. Melanie had come down the steps just then and the blonde woman turned her attention away from Brian without noticing how suddenly serious the man had become. "Come for dinner tomorrow Brian. We can talk some more." Lindsay gathered Gus into her arms and followed Melanie to the door.

"That's not a reason for me to say yes. It's a reason for me to say no." Brian watched the little group's departure and threw his most angelic smile at Melanie as she pulled the door shut behind them. He'd half-heartedly turned his attention back to preparing his breakfast and ended up dropping the bowl on the counter when he realized that the getting of the food was more for show than for sustenance.

Eyes now turned in the direction of living room, Brian couldn't not see all the things that had happened there the night before. He couldn't not see that Justin had been serious when he said that he wanted Brian to stay away and despite asking Justin to be gone by morning, he couldn't not see that he had no intention of allowing Justin to step away so easily.

Now he spotted the pullover on the back of the sofa and how the keys on the coffee table glinted and seemed to glow in the light streaming through the window. Brian found himself traveling in slow motion as he crossed the room to look at where he'd slept the night before. Reaching for the pullover and a pack of cigarettes from the desk, Brian pushed back the duvet on Justin's side and got in. He'd laid the shirt over the pillow as he lay down. Whatever urge had demanded that he strip this loft of everything that Justin owned or touched was silenced as Brian leaned his head back against the fabric and closed his eyes. Feeling the lump in the fabric under his head, Brian reached up to pull the little packets from the space of Justin's pocket.

Prepared for what was to come and vowing to keep a tight grip on his self-control, Brian turned the condoms over in his fingers.

He slipped a cigarette between his lips and pulled the lighter from the box as he soaked up the smell from Justin's shirt. Opening his eyes again and taking a deep drag from the now lit cigarette, Brian discarded the lighter and the condoms as he laid his hand across his bare chest. The look of the stretched out shadows on the ceiling last night and the look of Justin's eyes came back to him and Brian gritted his teeth and waited for the emotion to pass.

As far as he was concerned, neither of them had suffered enough for their transgressions and as the tendrils of smoke filled the air around him, Brian reached a conscious realization of why he'd wanted Justin to stay the night. No more avoidance and no more letting it all go away in time. Justin didn't get to ask for a time out when things got too hot and Brian figured that even if self destruction was what it took, he'd finish what he'd intended when he first called Justin to the loft the night before.

Despite the personal cost and despite the part of him that had wanted to let Justin go and find something better or easier, there was another part that knew there was a lot more bloodletting to be had before he didn't feel this anymore.

Justin knocked hard on the door and waited for Ethan to answer. He couldn't hear Ethan playing and he was pretty sure that he could hear Ethan on the phone inside. It didn't occur to Justin right away that the fact that Ethan didn't have a landline or a cell meant that he could only have been using his forgotten cell phone.

"I think he's at the door so why don't you fucking tell him yourself."

Justin could hear Ethan's footfalls coming closer to the door and he could hear the anger in the other man's voice. It was just about this time that it occurred to him that Ethan was using his phone and that the only person he could be talking to was the one person Justin was willing the Fates to have stay away from him.

The door flew open just then and Ethan practically pelted Justin with the small phone before grabbing the door and slamming it shut. "He says you forgot your anorak at his place."

Justin grabbed for the phone as it bounced off his chest and landed on the floor. Having just managed to save the thing from falling down the stairs, Justin brought it to his ear and listened to Brian's breathing. "Why did you do that Brian?"

There was no answer as Brian hung up.

Justin stood in the hallway for a few minutes and took in the measured silence. He'd run a hand over his face before knocking on the door again.

"Get the fuck out of here." Ethan yelled through the door and Justin was treated to two doors in the hallway around him opening to reveal angry neighbors.

"I need to get my stuff and then I won't bother you any more." He could hear Ethan coming back towards him and he waited for the man to open the door again.

"You certainly don't waste a fucking minute, do you? Leave here in the middle of the night and by ten o'clock the next morning you're well-fucked and shacked up with your boyfriend again." Ethan spat his words bitterly as he stood aside in the doorway. He watched as Justin pulled his portfolio and his duffel bag out of the corner before going into the bathroom to get some more of his things. "You fucking deserve each other and you fucking deserve every piece of shit thing he does to you." Ethan stood beside the still open door and yelled toward Justin in the other room. He'd greeted his neighbors with a few more choice comments when they stuck their heads out again.

Having seen Justin come back into the room, Ethan kicked the door shut and came to stand in front of the man who was silently stuffing his bag with clothes. Ethan could see Justin's arms and hands and given that there was no pullover to hide the marks, he'd had more than enough ammunition to set off his anger again.

"Look at your skin. Look at what you let him do to you." He reached down to grab at Justin's face and pull him to stand up. "Look at your fucking face...and your neck...Jesus Christ Justin, did he force you or what?" The man had taken in the bruising around Justin's mouth and the clear as day handprint on the side of Justin's neck.

Still silent, Justin pulled away.

"Again you and Brian could be twins. Apparently nothing comes by my choice, it has to be that somebody else wanted it and that I just went along for the ride. You wanted me out of here so I'm going. At least this fits into the little theory you have about me not thinking for myself so you should be happy." Justin had tears in his eyes as he pulled the zipper on the bag roughly and pulled it up on his shoulder.

Still laying flat on his back in the middle of a mess Brian dropped the phone on to the floor next to him. He'd been fiddling with the antenna on the thing while he waited for the events set off by his last two phone calls to play out.

In a shithole of an apartment across town, Justin was getting his head torn off by the type of lover that he'd claimed to want: the kind of man who was quick to profess his emotions and display his 'love' and his 'passion'. Judging by the heat Brian had managed to stoke out of Ethan with just a couple of well-placed words, Brian figured Justin would have to seriously revise his ideas about the levels of emotional stability he would want in a lover. Not that he could fault Ethan for his anger and not that he had any greater claim to stability, Brian figured Ethan had a lot to learn about not applying the shit you said when your dick was being crushed in tight heat, to the rest of your life.

A minute or two later, Brian heard the knock on the iron door behind him and he called out for the man to come in. He smiled a little since he was glad for not having had to let the trick into the entry door downstairs. Brian didn't get up or turn around to greet his guest, instead inching his hips up to slide his sweats down before kicking them off his feet.

Reaching his hand over to the pillow next to him, Brian retrieved another cigarette and lit it as the trick from the diner closed the door and walked around the coffee table to stand by his feet.

Brian's face was emotionless and his body glorious as the other man took in the view. He'd let his eyes trail over Brian's chest and arms before settling on the tightness of his stomach and the thin line of hair that ran there. Brian had pulled one leg up and bent his knee and the trick took in the length and thickness that he'd wanted to confirm for himself.

"I'd ask if you got robbed but I figure 'no' since they left a lot of good shit behind." The dark haired man turned to look around the place a little before once again settling his eyes on the naked body laid out in front of him. Brian's skin was a little flushed and the man thought he could make out hickeys on Brian's neck and a bite mark on his shoulder.

"You here to case the place or to fuck?" Brian took a deep drag from the filter before blowing smoke in the man's direction. He watched as his guest dropped off his jacket, peeled off his tight shirt and undid his belt buckle. A well-defined torso and arms came into view and Brian tapped the ashes from his cigarette into an empty glass that he'd left on the floor much earlier.

More seconds later and more skin revealed, Brian reached down to stroke at his cock while the other man knelt down on the floor between his legs. He'd fed the trick's mouth inch by inch before closing his eyes and taking another drag from the cigarette. He could feel strong hands on his hips and Brian let his hand drop to the man's shoulder to pull him closer. He'd opened his eyes to the ceiling again as lips touched down in his pubic hair and his cock pushed down the man's throat. Well past the point of gagging, the trick squeezed at Brian with his lips before bathing over his skin with his tongue.

Listening as the man moaned and grunted around his length, an image flashed behind Brian's eyelids and he could see Justin standing in front of him raging about wanting more. He could see Justin laid out in front of him and begging for more and he could feel his skin getting warmer as the mouth on his cock went to work. Having decided that despite all that was said, Justin did owe him something, Brian decided to collect. He closed a hand in the man's hair and pushed himself deeper, finally exhaling the thick smoke that he'd trapped in his lungs.

His blood still heating, Brian leaned over to drop the rest of his cigarette into the glass by his head before reaching down with both hands to pull the man off his cock. Within an instant, he'd pulled this man up his body to his face before getting on top of him and pushing a thigh between his legs. Writhing against each other, Brian pushed his hard on against the muscle beneath him and locked his fingers into the man's hair.

Teeth grazed over tongue as Brian kissed this stranger with every bit of anger, desperation and resigned vengeance as had been nourished in the hour since he'd laid his head to rest on the pullover that now lay somewhere under their bodies.

Part 9

What if I told you a story about a man who couldn't feel anything any more?

He had lived so fast and so hard and felt so much in such a short time that he was almost positive that he could not and would never feel anything again.

You might say he was calling way too much drama to the situation and that people had relationships end around them every minute of every day. You might say it was the narcissist in him that made him think what he did in fact 'feel' was different from any emotion that any human being had ever experienced since the dawn of time. You might say all this, but I can vouch for him.

I've seen it in his eyes and if he chooses to tell you his story, he'll be telling you the God's honest truth.

He does not feel anything any more and he is almost positive that he will never feel any of the things he thought natural before.

So I'll tell you what he told me...

He used to love somebody...somebody he was sure loved him back. He used to be stupid enough to think love could only be good for you and he used to be stupid enough to think kindness and second chances could make the most heartless bastard change his stripes. He doesn't think that anymore. All he's sure of is that people come pre-packaged with all their own shit and all their own demons and that no hammer or no series of sweet kisses can do anything to strip them of their identity.

Justin is nothing like he was when I first met him...

"Sunshine, you gonna have breakfast here or wait until we get to the diner." Debbie's voice bellowed from somewhere downstairs and Justin smoothed his hair as he imagined her in his mind's eye. He saw her standing at the foot of the stairs, one hand resting on the banister and the other firmly rooted on her hip. She'd be wearing something too bright and with too many sparkles for this early hour of the morning but she'd be in all her regal glory under a crown of red curls.

"At the diner." Justin called back as he leaned in to the mirror to take a closer look at his face. He'd showered, dressed already and shaved the few hairs that covered his chin and neck. Running a hand over his cheek, he let himself remember a joke somebody liked to make of him. A joke about him being smooth on both ends...that was a long time ago and the fact that this memory did nothing to him, made that time seem even more remote.

Checking out the redness at the corners of his eyes and taking note of the slight scratchy feeling at the back of his throat, he'd decided that he was getting Daphne's cold. He could fight off this feeling for another few days but by Friday, the chills would be here and he anticipated being just as pathetic as his friend had seemed...begging him to bring her some soup...read her a book...or rub her feet.

Justin pushed away from the sink as Vic came through the door and two had an abbreviated dance as they each misread the direction that the other had planned to go in. Finally getting passed the man, Justin smiled a little.

"Checking to see whether you've gotten more good looking today, huh?" Vic teased as Justin crossed the threshold out of the room. He'd wanted to get something more than the hollow smile Justin had just offered him and had to settle for just that when the younger man turned to look at him again.

Going back into his bedroom, Justin grabbed for his backpack and headed downstairs toward the sound of Debbie's voice. He didn't have classes this morning and an extra shift at the diner would mean that he'd finally have enough in tips to pick up some stuff that he'd been needing.

"It's nice out, so my vote is that we walk." Debbie was pinning her nametag into place as Justin made his way down the stairs. Her vote had also been to meddle a little and ask him why his baby blues looked so moody blue, but she'd fought the urge for the time being. After a month at her place, he'd pretty much kept to himself and besides Daphne, they were all lucky if he revealed much of what was going on with him. Not used to not knowing, Debbie was more than close to the end of her rope.

"If you want." Justin headed toward the door and stepped outside into the brisk morning air. Five o'clock in the morning meant that not many people were up and it also meant not many people were around.

No one to ask questions and no one to expect you to look them in the eye when you passed them by on the street.

Debbie's keys sounded in the lock behind him and before pulling the door shut, the woman made one last minute call for Vic to go straight back to bed when he was finished in the can. Justin wasn't sure that the neighbors or Vic had needed that instruction and the things that would have brought a smile to his lips way back when, didn't anymore.

"Well, we're off then." Debbie came to join him on the sidewalk and Justin turned wordlessly in the direction of the diner. As could be expected, wordlessly didn't last very long and Debbie piped up after a few minutes. "Is that jacket warm enough, because it's pretty cool out here and the last thing I would want is for you to catch cold?"

Considering Vic's health, Justin turned to look at her. "Daph had a cold last week and I think I might be getting it. Vic...".

"I'm not saying it just 'cause I'm worried about Vic. I'm saying it 'cause I'm also worried about you." Debbie turned to look at him again. "You barely eat and don't think I don't notice that you put off breakfast till the diner, grab one piece of bacon and maybe some juice and then call that a meal." She'd taken to wagging a finger before continuing. "As much as you're gonna want to roll your eyes, you're a growing boy and you need to feed your body."

Justin lowered his eyes to the ground and wondered how he'd managed to forget his CD player and headphones on his dresser. For him, having to come back to Debbie's had been less about a roof over his head than about living in fast rewind.

Having decided that living like a twelve year old at his mother's would be too difficult, and deciding that Daphne and three other women was out of the question, Justin had settled for the one place where he figured being treated like a seventeen year old wouldn't be too bad. He'd been wrong about his tolerance in that regard since, having lived more freely than he ever wanted to, any going back seemed the failure and the regression that it was.

Brian opened his eyes to the room around him and turned his face into the pillow to block out some of the light. The heat next to his body was not made of sheet or pillow and Brian opened his eyes again to take in the shape of the shoulder that was butted up next to his. He couldn't see this man's face and wandered again when it was that this trick had arrived and why it was that he hadn't left long before the light of day. Men rarely slept over here and then again next to never on a weeknight.

Brian lifted himself on to his elbows before leaning over the back of the man's head to see his profile. He remembered his companion as a bartender from Babylon and now he remembered that the man had met him at the loft after closing. Not having bedded down until closer to four that morning, oversleeping his usual demand that a trick get dressed and get out, had been expected.

"What time is it?" The man stirred under Brian and Brian moved his mouth to his ear.

"Time for you to go." He'd spoken his words above the man's ear before rolling over and swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

The bed that he still couldn't just sleep in, but over the last month had taken great pleasure in defiling with the hardest dirtiest fucks, threesomes and orgies that any of the men he brought here had ever experienced.

"Right. I remember this part." The trick who Brian would've talked civilly to and even been friendly with had they had a bar counter between them, was expecting the brush off in these circumstances. He was one of Brian's few repeats and in the few months since the last time they'd gotten together, this man hadn't forgotten the routine.

Brian stood up from the bed and reached for a cigarette from the pack on the table by his bed before crossing the room to his closet. In the time that he'd spent sitting at his bedside and listening to the man behind him he'd been mentally selecting a suit for the day.

"Hey, can you give Michael this for me?" The man spoke up over the rustling of clothing somewhere on the other side of the room and Brian turned to look at him. He watched the man pull a twenty from his wallet and drop it on the bed sheets. "I was in his shop the other day and still owed him some money for something I got. I had it for him last night but I haven't seen him the last couple of nights."

Brian huffed a little laugh around his cigarette before turning to look at his closet again. "Mikey is too busy planning his wedding to come out and play. Either way, I don't make deliveries or pass along messages."

The man watched Brian's back for a little while before stepping into his jeans and returning the money to his pocket. "So when are we gonna fuck again?" The now nameless man, that Brian knew as Mark in any other venue, spoke up again and Brian turned to look back at him before tossing his suit jacket on the bed.

"Are you still here?"

Mark laughed a little and flung his t-shirt over his shoulder before reaching for his jacket. "See you later Brian." He'd turned and picked up his boots before leaving the bedroom and eventually leaving the loft.

Brian for his part followed his lead and left the bedroom soon after. Certain ghosts seemed afraid to come out if he had company here, but came on full force as soon as his company left.

"Sunshine, your order's up." Debbie called across the busy diner to shake Justin out of his trance. She'd watched him stealing worried glances at the door for the last five minutes and frankly was getting annoyed with carrying her section and Justin's section alone. This even though she knew exactly what was at the root of his behavior.

"Got it." Justin muttered under his breath and Debbie shook her head. She'd ignored Emmett's question as to whether Justin would be okay and instead moved off to the back to have a word with him herself.

With Justin distracted from his post, this left Michael, Emmett and Ted to watch as both walked away and left no one to keep watch for the storm that was sure to blow through that door promptly at eight o'clock...although...it would be about five or ten minutes late this morning because it had been up late fucking the night before.

...Every morning in the month since that fateful Saturday night and Sunday morning between them, Brian, who had barely stopped into the diner during the month prior, now arrived for breakfast in the back booth come rain or shine. Whether alone or with the rest of the guys, Brian sat in his usual spot and was waited on by the usual waiter who had that section. If he had the pleasure of being on shift, Justin would take his order without looking at his face and all the while Brian would do every thing in his power to make sure Justin knew he was being tracked and observed for every minute that Brian was in the place.

It made for quite the scene for those who didn't know the circumstances and made for quite the show for those who should have known better than to watch.

This morning would be no different and Brian pushed the door to the diner open before shrugging out of his suit jacket. He'd let his eyes move around the space to find Justin and not seeing him immediately, had removed his sunglasses before walking to the back booth. All eyes met his entrance and all who saw got ready for today's events.

"Let the games begin." Ted leaned in toward Emmett and spoke in a whisper before ducking his eyes back to his food.

Glancing up, Emmett in turn leaned across the table to grab at Michael's arm. "Can't you talk to him...make him stop?"

"Right. Like I told Justin a long time ago, next we'll take on Starbucks and make them stop."

"Howdy boys." Brian threw himself into the booth next to Michael and folded his jacket on the seat next to him. "See any cute twinkles today?" He'd smiled humorlessly before turning to scan the place one more time.

"I was just asking Michael, how much longer you plan on torturing him. I mean, you don't talk to him for a month and now that he's depressed and alone with this thing with his friend on the rocks, you take great pleasure in flaunting your new found happiness in his face?" Emmett leaned back in his seat and eyed Brian for a reaction.

"Well never let it be said that I don't believe in spreading the wealth." His mind on spreading both happiness and sadness generously, Brian scoffed a little before offering Emmett and then Michael a sweet smile. Michael had yet to speak up and in Brian's opinion, would do as a fine target until Justin showed his face. "Hey Mikey, what's with the furrowed brows. Ben didn't fuck you hard enough last night?"

"Would you just stop it?" Michael had turned to grab Brian's arm before whispering his words for the man to hear. "Justin is a fucking fall down mess since you started your little campaign of word warfare and it's not funny anymore. No matter how much I used to think he deserved to feel like shit for a while, I think you've actually gone too far."

"Since when does the fact that he works here mean that I can't come in and have breakfast, maybe strike up some friendly conversation with the help. If that help happens to be Justin..."

"Jesus Brian, just leave him alone today okay?" Michael watched as Brian bit at his bottom lip a little before turning to smile at him again. Nothing of what Michael saw in his friend's eyes suggested that Justin would be spared his emotional skinning today.

It was then that Debbie came out of the back and it was then that the half smile on her lips faded away. She'd made a beeline for the table and her eyes never left Brian's face in all that time.

"Leave him the fuck alone."

"Debbie I know that you'd wipe Mikey's ass for him if you didn't think he did a good enough job of it but really, I was just talking to him. After all these years, I think he's used to me already." The smile never reached Brian's eyes.

"You know who I mean. That kid has lost weight and he hasn't cracked a real smile in I don't know how long. You comin' in here everyday looking for him is meaner than anything I've ever seen you do and I want you to stop." Most of the patrons had already turned to look by this point and Brian managed to look beyond the woman to see when Justin came out of the back.

"Whether or not he eats or sleeps is of no concern to me. Tell him to take it up with his fiddler, he's the one who dumped him." Brian had addressed all his words to a Justin who now stood a few feet away and he watched as Justin's eyes closed a little. He'd seen the tension come over the younger man's body.

Brian it seemed was offering Justin the same prescription that he'd started using over the last month. Not eating or sleeping were now behind him and he'd achieved this new phase of peace (through anger) by focusing his issues directly on the source.

"What do you want for breakfast Brian?" Justin brought his pad of paper into view and got ready to take the order.

"Your head on a platter." Ted quipped sardonically and suffered the wrath of at least three sets of angry eyes around him.

Justin for his sake showed no wrath, no surprise and no emotional reaction whatsoever. There was only so much torture that could be inflicted before it became redundant in its intended effect.

"Whole-wheat toast and black coffee." Brian smiled at him and the smile was all beauty and all innocence. "See why he gets better tips than you Deb?" Brian offered his words dryly before settling his eyes on his hands. He'd waited for Justin to move only a few feet away before calling after him again. "Before I forget, I have something for you." He reached into the breast pocket of his jacket before withdrawing the folded cheque and tossing it on the table. "It's about that time of year again isn't it, time to pay in on my investment?" Brian's eyes never leaving Justin's face, he dared him to not take it.

Stripped raw by the circumstances under which Brian was doing this, Justin stepped forward and took the cheque from the table. He'd glanced at it absently and looked up at Brian's face when he noticed the amount was wrong. "It's too much."

"We've been through this already Justin. I can afford it."

"No, I mean, for tuition and books, it's too much money...I think you made a mistake."

"No mistake. I figure with a little extra you can help Mozart pay the rent. You know, feel like a contributing member of your relationship...you were always worried about not being able to do that...before." Brian smiled again and this time 'wicked' was the only word to describe his smile.

"You know fucking well that they're not together any more." Debbie piped up again and shushed a patron who'd had the nerve to interrupt her by asking for his order.

"I know no such thing. That true Justin? The fiddler take his last curtain call so soon?"

"Write me another cheque Brian. This one's too much." Justin placed the cheque on the table and turned around slowly before he went to get Brian's breakfast order.

From what Brian could see, whatever weight Justin had lost in pounds he'd gained in burdens within just a few minutes of talking to him. Seeing Justin this way made sense to Brian...if he didn't think further than the way he'd felt in the minute when Justin had taken someone else's hand and walked away.

"Come by the loft later and pick it up Justin." Smiling innocently, Brian watched Justin turn to look at him before turning away again.

"If you want to fuck him so bad then do it. Do it fast and stop fucking him over as your idea of foreplay." Debbie offered him this advice before moving away from the table and in the direction that Justin had gone.

For some reason those words stung and Brian closed his eyes slowly.

Somewhere under a foot of ice, a part of him thought about what it would be like to touch Justin again.

Thirty feet away and thirty seconds later, Justin pushed the door to the locker room open and stepped inside. He'd locked it behind him before Debbie could intrude.

His emotions had held up their end of the bargain and they'd let him leave the room without incident and without cracking. Now in this semi-privacy, he'd hold up his end of the bargain and let himself collapse under the weight of nothingness.

He felt scraped and bloody and he smiled ruefully at what he must have done to Brian for him to do this now. Running a hand over his face, Justin wiped away the slow silent tears as they made their way down his cheeks to wet his face.

He looked at them on his fingers and in the palms of his hands and only one thing came to mind.

...red.

They might as well have been red because he felt like he was losing energy as fast as he'd lost blood so long ago. He was losing energy for every tear that he shed in the name of Brian Kinney...and for everything that had happened to get them to this point.

...there was red on his hands.

Some part of this man who felt so little that he couldn't tell he was crying but for the red on his fingers and some part of that man outside in the diner who thought his smile covered the deep cut, were the same on the inside.

For the time being, each one truly didn't 'feel' anything remotely familiar and each one would keep this up for only so long as they could hold on.

Part 10

"Open the door Brian. I'm dripping wet and I'd like to dry off." Lindsay called through the closed iron door.

"And you fucking brought my son out in this weather." Brian pulled the door back on its tracks harshly and turned an eye on the hallway for some confirmation of his statement.

"No I didn't bring 'your' son out in this weather." Lindsay pushed pass him roughly and went inside. She was perfectly aware that climbing six flights of stairs hadn't dried the soles of her shoes fully and she was intentionally dripping puddles all over Brian's floor. "The way you talk about 'your' son sometimes makes you sound like the Today's Parent poster father and me sound like the irresponsible airhead that you sometimes leave him with." Lindsay finished her comment by shrugging out of her jacket and shaking it out, further dampening the floor. The acrid smell of cigarette smoke and just plain 'burnt', hung on the air and she made a mental note to talk to Brian about that too.

"You didn't pay for it so you better be damned sure that you're wiping all that up." Brian gestured towards the footprints and turned to get back to what he'd been doing when the pounding on his door began. He didn't stick around to watch Lindsay kick off her loafers or move to the kitchen to find something to help dry her hair and also satisfy his directive.

"You're in a perfectly assholeish mood today and the way everyone tells it, you've been sharing your good cheer with Justin." Lindsay called toward the bedroom as she eventually bent to wipe up the mess on the floor.

"You're already at the door so save us both the headache of this conversation." Brian called out from where he sat on the edge of the bed facing the bathroom. He'd been huddled over this project for the last twenty minutes and before leaving the room to answer the door, had seriously battled the urge to hide this from potentially prying eyes. The sense that he was doing something illicit and down right wrong came and went as quickly as he could make it go. Now that Lindsay was only twenty feet away, the need to hide was back in full force.

"You know that means nothing to me Brian." By this point the woman had finished her wiping and had found a perch at the kitchen counter to wait out what she assumed the man had been doing. Blue shirt un-tucked, tie gone and sleeves rolled up, she'd assumed Brian was undressing and this mistaken assumption would have given him plenty of time to hide his 'sins' without her knowing...if not for...

"Shit!" Brian dropped the box cutter and the heavy-duty tape dispenser on the floor beside the bed. He'd barely managed to keep his hold on the box he was carrying and it served him right for thinking he could carry the open blade of the cutter and tape in one hand, while trying to balance the box between that occupied hand and his other.

Wincing a little, he set the still open box down beside his foot and opened his right hand slowly. A small red eruption quickly filled his palm with blood and Brian watched it reflect the light in the room for a full two seconds before thinking to do anything about it.

Something about the imagery rang true to him and it felt almost right to see.

Watching the pool crest and start to overflow the edges of his hand, Brian thought first about the box and then about the floor. Kicking the box closer to the bed, he let the edge of the suit jacket that had been lying there fall halfway over the top of the box before grabbing the ash filled iron garbage can and going into his bathroom. For the time being, this camouflage was the best that he could do without getting blood all over his clothes and the floor.

...For some reason or the other, he'd also been concerned about getting blood on the contents of the box.

"What'd you do to yourself?" Lindsay crossed the threshold of the bathroom and then moved closer to get a better look.

Glancing over his shoulder at her, Brian quickly turned his attention back to the stream of water from the faucet and the place in the middle of his palm where it turned from clear to red before pooling and running down the drain.

"Quick, run back and tell the others that I tried to off myself. Maybe then you would have an excuse for that intervention I know you've all been itching to have." A tone laced with biting sarcasm and then nothing as Brian continued to study his hand.

"How did you do that to yourself?" The caretaker in Lindsay instinctively moved to retrieve the gauze from the medicine chest that she'd helped to stock just in case Gus had an accident while visiting the loft.

"I told you. I cut too low and then changed my mind before doing the other arm." Brian pushed at his sleeve and sneered at her as he shut off the faucet. He'd sidestepped her Florence Nightingale efforts and gone back to the bedroom, this time on a mission to hide his activities more carefully.

Pulling the still "Mark" rumpled duvet off the bed, Brian dropped it in a pile on the floor and managed to cover the presence of a medium sized cardboard box that no one knew existed. "I got blood all over this fucking thing." Brian lied as Lindsay glanced at the duvet on the floor. He'd taken a seat at the side of the bed and waited to see whether she'd question his explanation.

"I see a box-cutter and I see tape. Where's the box?" The woman bent down to pick both objects up from the floor and Brian got up again, deciding it was best to lead her out of the room.

Twenty minutes of sitting in that bedroom before Lindsay had come...being there alone in the quiet had started to wear on him and if not for wanting to finish what he'd started, he would never have lingered there at all.

"Why did you come over here again?" Brian reached up to run his left hand over his face, all the while checking to see how much more blood had pooled in his right palm since the time he came out of the bathroom moments before.

Deciding to sacrifice the 'box' curiosity for her overall mission tonight, Lindsay dropped the tape and the now closed blade of the box cutter on the table beside Brian's bed. She'd been thinking about the last time she'd seen the man and the invitation to dinner that she'd extended almost a month before...almost a month before when seeing Brian smiling, eating...cursing...and hearing that he and Justin had been together again, had made her think the worse was behind them.

Letting the tips of her fingers skim the surface of the sheets that were still on the bed, Lindsay mentally regrouped and replaced her doting attempt to see that Brian wasn't cut too badly, with the raw attitude that she'd intended to challenge him with tonight. That raw attitude had seen her send Melanie and Gus home ahead of her after leaving the diner and had seen her determined to make Brian stop where Debbie and the rest had failed.

Watching her friend through the panes of the glass dividers, Lindsay noticed his fascination with his palm and the doting side of her held tight to the gauze again. After all was said and done, just because she intended to perform her one-woman intervention tonight, didn't mean that she had to watch him bleed all over himself while she did it.

One foot in front of the other, Lindsay took three steps along the edge of the bed and Brian held his breath as he listened to the sounds of her footfalls on the floor. In another second or two the trick step would creak and tell him that Lindsay had finally left the bedroom without any discoveries and without any information that he would just as rather went unnoticed.

...But.

Instead of the creak that he'd been waiting for, Brian heard the muffled thud and he closed his eyes a little before screwing off the cap on the bottle of Absolut that had been sitting on the kitchen counter in front of him. Lindsay, it seemed, had found the box that she'd deduced was the missing third of the scene of objects on Brian's floor.

Shoulders tensed and green gray eyes focused on the glass cabinetry on the wall in front of him, Brian mechanically filled his glass as he listened to the deafening silence from the other room.

He'd given himself an equally mechanical shave that morning after Mark finally left and by now he'd managed to grow his usual five o'clock shadow, or more accurately according to the clock on the back of the stove, his seven o'clock shadow. He'd survived another day at work without once reliving the things he'd said to Justin at the diner that morning and without actually planning the interlude he'd begun as soon as he entered the loft tonight. Grabbing a beer from the fridge and bringing his bunch of keys with him to the bedroom, his next stop after getting home had been to unlock one of the cabinets that ran along the wall under the glass dividers and retrieve the box that he'd been keeping there.

He'd removed the box, gotten out the heavy iron trashcan...his lighter...and of course, the box cutter. Given the fact that he'd now been discovered, Brian wondered why it was that he hadn't just tossed the entire box into a dumpster somewhere. Part of him also wondered what it was that he'd planned on keeping and using the tape to seal up in that box again...once he was done.

Looking down into his glass, Brian waited...and...

...Looking down at the duvet beside her foot, Lindsay pulled back the cloth to see what it was that her foot had clipped. Brian offered her no protest and no sound came from the kitchen besides the hollow clang of his now empty glass. Lindsay brought a hand to her mouth as the contents of the box came into view.

Seconds later, Brian tossed back his second double and waited for the preaching or the pity to begin. Neither one of which was welcome, but at this point that man realized that one or both was inevitable. "I asked you why you came here?" He spoke up again and waited for Lindsay to digest what it was that she was seeing the bedroom.

Reams of uncolored comic pages showing Rage and J.T. on some adventure or another...some pages crumpled and soiled, others still crisp...half done pencil drawings showing Brian eating, sleeping, showering, his face, his eyes...his hands...the edges of paper napkins that by the looks of things depicted more of the same...movie ticket stubs...receipts...flyers...sticks of Big Red gum...something that used to be white but even though it was now partly reddish brown and unrecognizable, was hauntingly familiar at the same time...a Wiffle ball...Justin's pullover...

"I want to know if it helps any." Lindsay pulled her eyes away from the box and spoke softly. She'd come to stand in the doorway of the bedroom and she let her gaze fall on the model for the many drawings she'd just seen. Brian had his back to her and she took in the set of his shoulders, his un-tucked shirt, the line of his pants and finally, his bare feet.

"If what helps any?" The man turned his head a little and now Lindsay could see his profile.

"This thing that you're doing Brian. This purge...this very literal controlled burn that you're doing to both you and Justin." Still speaking softly and slowly, Lindsay turned to gesture toward the room behind her. Standing in there after Brian left, she'd managed to separate and identify the distinct smell of cigarette smoke and the more raw acrid scent of burnt paper.

Brian set the glass on the counter and turned to face her. He could feel the edge of the counter in the small of his back and he lifted his eyes to find her searching face. "We're not gonna talk about that so you might as well go home." The fingers of his left hand dancing nervously on the countertop beside him, Brian waited for her to start.

"Justin was in tears when he left. Debbie says he asked to leave as soon as he heard you'd left the diner for the office." Taking one step and then the second, Lindsay ignored the creaking and came to stand a few feet from Brian.

"What does any of that have to do with me?" Brian let a false smirk play over his lips.

"Everything." Lindsay took a breath before continuing. "It has to do with regret and his sense that he deserves any of the shit that you dish out to him and his not being able to take this anymore." The woman had put both hands into her pockets now and she unconsciously played with the little packet of gauze that was still balled up in her hand.

"Justin is a big boy. He can take care of himself. He even told me so." Brian let his voice trail off as he turned to retrieve his glass once again.

"Can you take care of yourself?" Lindsay moved in to interrupt his refill and snatched the glass away. "Is this what big boys do when something feels too real for comfort?"

"Fuck. Off." Brian spoke slowly and enunciated every syllable as he leaned in toward Lindsay's face.

"You still love him and burning everything that you've kept of him won't get rid of that fact. It stinks in here from the smell and even though some of the paper is already gone the smell more than reminds you that it was here." She'd been pleading with him and Brian turned away having seen something closer to pity in her eyes.

"I hope you don't plan on telling anyone what you saw." Brian swaggered and staggered toward the sofa, all the while taking in the ugly red clot that was forming in his right palm.

"You know I wouldn't do that." Lindsay dropped her eyes a little to acknowledge the fact that many a thing that had passed between them would never be repeated for anyone else to hear. Not even Melanie knew some of the things that she knew about this man and over the years, not even his much older friendship with Michael, had managed to convince her to share those confidences with Brian's 'best-friend'.

"That's right. 'I won't tell if you won't tell'." Brian smiled as he dropped himself on to the sofa and turned his head to look at her while he spoke. His eyes were glassy and remote and based on the familiar words he'd just spoken, Lindsay heard the echo of the alcohol and she saw some of the things that had happened between them in another lifetime.

She met his eyes but didn't reciprocate the smile Brian had just offered her. "I thought you were the one who told me that you can't live in the past." Lindsay scrubbed a sock covered toe over the hardwood at her foot before moving off to stand behind the sofa.

Leaning his head back so that he could see her above him, Brian met her eyes before scoffing a little. "I also said that those who forget are doomed to repeat their courses." He closed his eyes on the end of his words and let that same half smile continue to play over his lips.

"So this routine is to make sure that you don't forget...that Justin doesn't forget?"

"I don't give a fuck about Justin."

"The hell you don't. Is that why you've kept all that stuff up there and why you're sitting here half in the dark going through it and burning it?" Lindsay tossed the lighter over Brian's shoulder and let it land in his lap. She'd found it on Brian's bed and had it in her pocket since leaving the bedroom.

"You know how I feel about clutter." Brian teased. "Call it fall cleaning or very early spring cleaning." He opened his eyes again to look at the lighter in his lap.

"I know that you were the one who called Ethan to tell him that Justin had been with you. I managed to get Justin to tell me about that." Lindsay came to kneel on the floor behind where Brian sat and she let her hands find his shoulders as she brought her face next to his ear.

"I figured he should know. Based on Justin's track record he certainly wasn't gonna do the honors himself." Brian leaned forward to put the lighter on the table before turning his attention back to his hand.

"Let me see that." Reaching for the gauze packet, Lindsay opened it and pressed it into Brian's palm despite the fact that the man winced at the sting of the alcohol. "Justin screwed up where you two were concerned but he didn't get there by himself Bri." She'd continued press at his hand as she whispered over Brian's shoulder. "You know that. I know you do."

"You're right, he didn't do it by himself. The fiddler helped out by fucking him." Brian's jaw tensed at the end of the sentence and Lindsay felt it against the side of her face.

"No. You helped by not listening and if by chance you were listening, you helped by not doing what you needed to."

Brian snatched his hand away at that and stood up abruptly. "Time for you to go. Like I said, we're not talking about this." He'd crossed the room to the door and pulled it open before turning to look back in Lindsay's direction.

"I don't mean that you didn't show him Brian. I know you and even though I've let things slip sometimes and overlooked the times where you were hurting as clear as day, this isn't one of those times that I've missed something. I saw it in the way that you looked at him, the way you touched him. Jesus Christ Bri, I heard in everything that you said to him and I still hear it in those cruel words that you're saying to him now."

"Get the fuck out."

"No."

"Fine. You stay and I'll leave." Brian pulled at the door fiercely and sent it flying along the tracks to a deafening slam into the other side of the frame. He'd immediately turned to cross the space to his bedroom and retrieved his keys, his jacket and his shoes.

"Brian." Lindsay tried to intercept him as he came back out into the living room and she put herself directly on his path to the door. "You don't run away from anything. Ask yourself why you have such a need to run away from this now."

Brian let his eyes meet hers and all the fire and fury that had been hiding before was now out in full view. "You ask yourself what it felt like when you found out that Mel was munching carpet on the side. Ask yourself why it took so long for you to welcome her back between your loving thighs again." Brian brought his face close to Lindsay's and she could smell the alcohol and feel the heat as he spoke. She listened to his words and then released the hold she had on his arm before letting her own arms hang at her side. When cornered, a wounded Brian gave off all the warning and bit with all the venom of a rattlesnake.

Lindsay kept her back to him as he walked passed her toward the door. She kept silent for only a few seconds. "It hurt me so much because I knew it was partly my fault. Why would you push away the person you love?" Lindsay turned to look at Brian now and she watched him stop dead in his tracks. "I asked you that before, remember? Why would I ever make it so that the person who makes me the most complete would have reason to doubt their place in my life...have reason to believe that I didn't love them the way they wanted me to...needed me to...you didn't have any answers for me when I asked you that Brian, but I figured some out for myself. It was because I was afraid. What if I loved Mel more than anything else and she didn't really feel the same...pushing her away on my terms was bound to hurt a lot less than when she eventually walked away."

Brian said nothing and Lindsay watched him slowly take one more step before reaching for the door and gripping the handle weakly. She couldn't see his face but she could see that she'd struck a nerve. She'd forgotten how thick Brian's armor could be at times and tonight she had been reminded that the loudest voice and the most abrasive manner did nothing but strengthen his resolve. Like Justin had discovered by simply being himself, real emotion...honest emotion...talking to him from a place of kindness and empathy, was the only way to get Brian to listen.

She couldn't see his face and in the minute since she'd finished speaking, she hadn't been able to see the pained expression that Justin would have recognized. It was the same look that had settled on Brian's face as he relived that night in the parking garage for the benefit of kick starting Justin's memory. Now in the loft, he'd leaned the bulk of his weight on the handle of the door and let his eyes find and study the etch marks in the iron.

Lindsay knew better than saying anything else and she stood quietly as Brian turned to look back at her.

"Has he been up there all day?" Jennifer Taylor stood in the middle of Debbie's kitchen and wrung her hands a little as the other woman turned to look at her. Jennifer looked down to wipe the raindrops from her watch and she could see that it was now just after nine. She would have to pick Molly up from the neighbor's very soon.

Debbie had been chopping vegetables and she set her knife down and wiped her hands in her apron to avoid performing the same hand wringing that had occupied Jennifer's hands. "He asked me to get someone else to cover his shift and Vic says he's been in his room since he got back."

"Has he at least eaten something?"

"Who knows?" Debbie turned to drop the chopped vegetables into the pot on the stove. "You know what's at the root of all this, don't you?" She would continue their conversation while she busied her hands.

"Yes I do. He's really taken this thing with Ethan hard. It can't be good for him to be going off on his tour so soon after they started." Jennifer sat down at the table and let her voice trail off as she thought about her son.

"Ethan?" Debbie turned to look back at her. "Sure he's going away now since he won and all but that's not why Sunshine's like this. Didn't he tell you?"

"Debbie you tell me that Justin doesn't even talk to you and he lives here. What makes you think I would have any better information than you do?" Jennifer shook her head a little and waited for Debbie to correct her.

"Oh. It's not 'cause he told me or anything, but from the little we've all been able to piece together, he and Ethan were falling apart long before...and...he'd apparently been with Brian again...the kid found out."

"What?"

"And now, Brian is taking it upon himself to pour salt into Justin's wounds by tormenting him about all this on nearly a daily basis. He comes to see Sunshine at the diner and today it got particularly ugly. That's why Justin left."

"Why didn't you tell me this was going on?"

"Talking about me again? Well here's a tip, the walls in this house are paper thin." Justin walked into the room to drop a glass into the sink. He'd turned to look at his mother and then Debbie.

"Debbie was telling me that you were seeing Brian again." Jennifer sat back in her chair.

"Don't believe the gossip Mom because that's not true." Justin turned to glance at Debbie before finding his mother's face again. "Brian and I fucked but it certainly didn't mean anything at the time and it means nothing now." Justin folded his arms across his chest and waited for the barrage to continue.

"Did something happen between you and Ethan because of it." Jennifer asked her next question, ignoring her son's language and the significance of his comment.

"I'm here aren't I?" Justin responded tersely before pushing away from the sink. "I don't want to talk about this okay. I just came down because I'm going out."

"Where are you going? Dinner'll be ready in twenty minutes." Debbie turned to rejoin the conversation.

"I'll get something while I'm out." Justin strolled through the living room and grabbed his backpack from the landing in front of the stairs.

"I already told you that I know that you're not eating." Hands on her hips, Debbie followed him out of the kitchen.

"Debbie, I'm not a fucking child." Justin bristled. "I said I'll get something and I will." Dropping down to tie up his laces, Justin grabbed for his bag again as his mother came to stand in front of him.

"Sweetheart I'm worried about you. Maybe you want to come home for a little while? Take a break from the diner and just concentrate on your art...get better...get over things?"

Justin huffed a half laugh under his breath. "Going back is the last thing that I want right now." He'd turned toward the door and left the two women in varying degrees of shock in the middle of the living room. His own shock would match theirs when he opened the door to find Brian standing on the other side.

"Is Brian who you're going out with? After all that shit this morning, he's picking you up?" Debbie came forward and glowered at Brian. The man had remained silent and unreadable in the doorway and Debbie's eyes darted between his face and Justin's as she waited for an answer.

"I didn't know he was coming here, and I didn't ask him..." Justin turned to answer Debbie's very vocal outrage and also to answer his mother's silent question. He'd dismissed them both in order to get an answer to a question of his own. "What the fuck are you doing here Brian? I'm on shift tomorrow morning again if you wanna come by then for another pound of flesh."

Brian remained silent and held up the small sheet of paper for Justin to see. The street light behind him cast a deep shadow over Brian's face and Justin pushed the door open a little wider so that some of the light from the house would fall on whatever it was that Brian was holding.

A cheque.

"You said to come to the loft for that and besides, why not give it to me in public tomorrow?" Justin looked up at Brian's face and took in the features that were now fully illuminated.

The older man dropped his eyes to Justin's chest before reaching forward and stuffing the cheque into the hip pocket of Justin's jeans. "It's the same one from this morning, but I wanted to talk to you before I left." Brian's voice was a whisper.

"Left? And where the hell are you running away to this time?" Debbie stepped forward again and Brian winced. It had taken Vic appearing from somewhere inside of the house to make her back off and leave Justin to talk to his unexpected visitor.

Hearing Debbie's voice become muffled behind him, Brian took a few more steps across the porch as Justin closed the door completely. Just over the sound of the rain on the roof, Brian could swear that Jennifer had joined in on the outrage as well as soon as he was out of view.

"What do you want Brian?" Justin finally spoke up.

"Don't you wanna know where I'm going?" Brian turned so that Justin could see his profile in the cool light. It was just as cool as it had been when he and Debbie had left for the diner that morning and Justin pulled his jacket up around him. He'd been doing his best not to consider Brian's form under the smooth wet leather of his jacket, not to consider the hard set of the man's shoulders and certainly not to consider the icy clarity of Brian's eyes when they'd been face to face in the doorway.

"I don't care where you're going."

"Liar." The word punched out from Brian's lips along with an explosion of smoky looking air as the warm mixed with the cool.

Justin shook his head a little and turned to look down the street at where the Jeep was parked. "You know what? I don't even care why you're here. Forget that I asked." Justin pulled his backpack up on his shoulder and walked toward the steps to the street.

Brian turned around just then and Justin stopped as he watched him bring the lighter up from his pocket to light the cigarette that had been pressed at the corners of his lips. Justin watched the cool ice of the night melt away for a second or two as the fire cast a warm glow on anything its light could reach. For a second or two, Brian's eyes didn't look icy anymore and for a second or two Justin actually wanted to know whether a cheque and a mysterious goodbye were the only reasons why Brian had come.

"I'm gonna take a little trip. Mostly business. Not that you should care or anything, but this isn't one of those dramatic 'I need to get out town so that I can forget' jaunts. I'll be back in a week, two tops..." Brian paused as he waited to see if anything would change about Justin's eyes. "I just wanted to tell you that I wouldn't be coming for my pound of flesh anymore."

Justin silently considered the unreadable stranger that wore the face of a one-time lover. "I know that you've sat down and crafted this little scenario down to a tee. You don't do anything without planning it all out before. So right now it'll have to be enough that you understand what you're doing here and what all this is supposed to mean, because I certainly don't and I'm really too tired to care." Justin whispered his words and kept his eyes on Brian's as he spoke. He swallowed hard when he was done.

Taking a deep drag from his cigarette and rolling his lips into his mouth, Brian took a few steps toward Justin before tilting his head down to meet Justin's face. A kiss over unwilling lips and eventually an opening and a warm tongue, Brian exhaled into Justin's mouth and pulled away slightly only after the smoke began to move around their heads. "Tonight I figured something out. Burning it makes it disappear, but it takes a lot longer for the smell to clear out of the air." His cheek still touching Justin's, Brian closed his eyes a little as the scent of Justin's hair confirmed his revelation. He'd turned and walked away a moment or two later and Justin bit back his tears as he watched him go.

Part 11

Brian pulled the door back and walked straight to the kitchen. Drink, drug and sex. The routine was old and he was well versed with how this night would play out. He heard the sound of his keys on the counter and it all sounded so far off somehow. Like when you knew exactly what would happen in the next ten seconds or so and you just stood

off on the sidelines in your own head and let it all play out. He felt the arms close around his waist next and he felt his body rock forward slightly as the weight melded itself to his back, the backs of his thighs, his neck.

Reaching out to the bottle that Lindsay had stopped him from finishing earlier, Brian unscrewed the cap and pushed back against the weight of the lips at the base of his neck. He'd managed to lift his head and take a deep swallow and now he watched the next ten seconds play out with the bottle moving his hand back down to the counter and slowly pulling itself from the grip of his fingers. He'd moved a little then to push the man off him, if only to get some air or some space before the rest of the night unfolded. Despite the fact that the dick pressing into his ass was hard, none of it involved him...he didn't need to be there for it to happen.

"Let's go to the bedroom." A man's voice demanded as the trick that Brian vaguely remembered picking up spoke from somewhere behind him.

This proximity was starting to grate on his nerves and Brian found himself leaning forward again just to give the burnt air of the loft some space to flow between their bodies. He'd driven the entire way back with this man's eyes piercing into the side of his head and he'd ridden the elevator up six floors with this trick's hand down the front of his pants. Eager didn't begin to describe his guest and unfortunately for Brian, he wasn't anywhere near as wasted as he needed to be, to appreciate the situation.

The man was at his ear now and this time Brian pushed him back roughly. He'd pulled the bottle back to his face and all he wanted was for this man to give him a chance to catch up. They'd get to the bedroom, but first...he'd have to let him catch up.

"Go lock the door." Brian turned his head more to get the trick away from his ear and less to make sure that he was heard. He bent forward at the counter again, once again needing to get that air on his neck and just plain needing the space. He felt the instant relief of the man peeling himself off his back and he brought a hand up to his ear to wipe some of the spit away.

This had seemed like a good idea when he made the turn onto Liberty and in truth it still did. There was no sense in passing this night alone and there was no sense in coming back here with nothing to aid in the pretense that his loft didn't stink or that his life didn't stink. Rubbing a hand over the stubble at his chin, a second or two passed as Brian listened from somewhere else as the door closed behind him. Shrugging out of his jacket, Brian let the leather lie where he tossed it and he brought the bottle back to his lips again. He'd need the distraction tonight to help him figure out the next few hours of his life and to figure out what account would be the likely cover for his disappearance from the agency over the next week or so. Distractions and disappearances...on top of the misery he'd been creating for himself, just by seeing Justin tonight, the loft...the office...the Pitts...this place he'd been occupying for the last couple of months was fucking unbearable and he needed to get away and...

...That hand was back down the front of his pants and Brian took another deep swallow as the fingers did their work. Just another third or so of what was left in this bottle and then maybe his dick might start to respond.

"Troy told me you were hot. Shit, everyone did." The trick was talking to himself or maybe to Brian as he reached for the buttons at Brian's fly. Now Brian could remember the circumstances of the pick up and that this trick was somebody's friend from L.A...he was a model... somebody's gay cousin that they'd brought out for a night of fun and fucking on Liberty...somebody who thought himself lucky as hell that Brian Kinney had settled on him in the minute or so he'd spent sifting through the crowd in Woody's.

Brian pushed an elbow into the man's rib cage and leveraged himself from the body behind him. "Just fucking cool it okay, there's no reason to act like you haven't had cock in a year." Brian spat his words while he reached up to unbutton his shirt. He'd moved toward the bedroom, bottle still in hand and despite his acerbic tone, he could hear the trick close at his heels.

Leaving the bottle on the nightstand, Brian ignored the images of the box cutter and the tape and he ignored the innocuous shape under the wadded up duvet on the floor. Lindsay had the good sense to recover his shit after accidentally digging it up and he found another reason to love her just that much more...good sense...the things she said made good sense...but not everything she did or said made him love her for it.

"I wanna fuck you." The trick was naked and stretched out on his stomach in the middle of the bed when Brian turned back to look at him. He'd been gone down 'haunting lane' for the last few minutes and had been jarred out of it by that sequence of words.

"Obviously when Troy and everyone else were telling you all about me, they left out one key detail." Brian dropped his words as he dropped his pants. His tone wasn't angry or pissy...the most accurate description would have been 'unaffected'. There was no use reacting to some bullshit thing that a man who would be gone before his cum dried on the sheets, had said.

"Kinney is a top." Trick smiled and Brian thought he remembered his name. He wouldn't use it, but he thought he remembered it. He watched as the man turned over to lie on his back and he tried not to find familiarity in the fearless manner. Maybe being from outside of Liberty made him more irreverent in the way he acted around Brian, but something had to account for the fact that this man had been grinding his cock into Brian's ass from the minute they got into the loft. "I've fucked a lot of tops," Trick continued, "and I can tell you it all ends the same. We get off."

"You talk too much and you're not fucking me?" A familiar request rebuffed, Brian reached for the black box he kept by his bed. He removed a joint and slipped it between his lips as he watched Trick watching him carefully. This man had gone from barely managing to keep his hands off Brian's cock the entire time since they'd met, to reserved

and quiet because of Brian's scraping words over the last few seconds. In another time, he'd had that same effect on someone else.

Lighting the joint and discarding the lighter, Brian took a step up on to the platform that ran around the bed before stepping on to the mattress and towering above the naked body below him. He'd taken in the rigid redness between the man's legs and decided to let it inspire his own hard on. Willing himself to enjoy this and letting the booze and the pot relax him, he sank slowly to his knees and straddled the other man's thighs. Trick reached for Brian's penis again and Brian blew out a breath of smoke as the fingers closed around him.

Higher thoughts disabled for the time being...things would play out without much need for concentration or stage direction for this role. Now that he'd had a chance to regroup and a chance to catch up, Brian felt himself hardening in the man's hands.

Somewhere between leaving the porch back at Debbie's and getting here, Justin had changed his mind. He'd changed it a couple of times already and now it wasn't so much that he'd changed his mind as the fact that he'd chickened out. Somehow just seeing the street signs for this particular corner confirmed Brian's presence and now he wanted to run.

...Justin was back at the loft.

This was the place he told himself that he wouldn't let himself come back to come hell or high water and yet he'd let Brian bait him into coming here anyway.

How the fuck did he always manage to do that?

As far as Justin was concerned, he was the one who'd told Brian to stay the fuck away from him, but somehow Brian had managed to corner him, say something undecipherable and then walk away...leaving him... leaving him to feel as though he'd been the one who'd had cold water thrown into his face...again.

Justin looked above him to the top floor windows. He'd been trying to make out whether or not the lights were on and he realized that from all the surrounding street lights and glare, he wouldn't be able to see the lights if just the dim ones were on. He hadn't known what he should expect in coming here but somehow he'd expected Brian to stand there and listen while he bit back for all the shit that he'd done to him in the last month...for being just plain cruel...for showing up the way he had tonight and saying nothing...leaving him with ten thousand dollars but...leaving him with nothing.

No keys to help him get in, Justin stood in the shallow alcove of the doorway to get out of the blowing rain. The cold he thought he was catching would probably turn into pneumonia by morning and again he wondered if finally saying something to Brian was worth it.

"Yeah." Justin whispered to himself. Brian didn't get to torment him and then call 'game over' and disappear without him getting a word in. Not stopping to acknowledge the fact that he just needed Brian to tell him why he came all the way to Deb's to deliver a cheque that wasn't due for another month and where it was that he was going, Justin settled on his anger instead. No matter how much fault Justin thought he was willing to accept, if he didn't talk to Brian before he left, the man would act like none of his visit tonight or the last month had happened, and yet another sequence of events would go unchallenged.

A car whizzed by just then and a huge wave of water splashed up on the driver's side of the Jeep parked just down the road from Justin. It shook him out of his thoughts. He turned to look at the intercom next to him and took a deep breath as he hit the entry code. He could use the code to get in downstairs or he could call and warn Brian that he was coming up.

Going straight up seemed more appropriate to blowing in with fury and Justin followed his legs up the stairs.

"Jesus..." Brian lifted his head from the man's neck. The steady knocking at the iron door had replaced the rhythmic pulses of blood he could feel through Trick's cock in his hand.

They had reversed their earlier position and Brian barely opened his eyes as Trick pushed back toward his condom-clad length. Brian, for his part, had been dragging his own cock back and forth over the man's opening and this interruption couldn't have come at a more inopportune time given that he'd finally decided that teasing was over. It sounded like someone was kicking at his door and Brian turned his face away from the sound to let his lips graze over the other man's shoulder again.

Trick gasped a little and bucked beneath him and Brian dropped his hands to the man's hips. That kicking could provide a drumming accompaniment to what he was about to do to this man and Brian closed his eyes again as if to squeeze out the temporary distraction.

Thud...Thud...Thud...was what Brian heard and...Thrust...Thrust...Thrust was what Brian thought.

Bending the man deeper at the waist, Brian leaned over his body and pushed in with one merciless stroke. He exhaled only after he'd completely staked his claim and whomever it was that was on the other side of the door, had to have heard Trick scream out his pleased surprise.

"Can we leave tomorrow?" Justin pressed his face to the side of Brian's neck and asked his question through his grin. The events of the last few minutes had yet to fully sink in but in this moment he was sure that birthday wishes did come true. Even the ones you didn't realize you were making around some stranger's cock in your mouth while the man you'd previously thought was the best gift giver on earth, smiled at his unknown fuck up.

A week alone with Brian...a week with Brian alone...a whole fucking week of them...going away together...alone. Justin was pretty sure that Brian called this payback for his first attempt at a present but this was the kind of payback that Justin would lap up like warm honey...drizzled over some even warmer Brian Kinney.

"No we cannot leave tomorrow." Brian tried for an even unaffected tone but he was already way down the road of overt actions and his own grin was way too wide to pull it off. "I've gotta square everything away with work, finish a few things up, give Cynthia her marching orders for the week..." Brian trailed off and halfheartedly tried to peel Justin off his side as they reached the Jeep. "I've gotta pack, you've gotta finish all your homework, we've gotta find someone to water all the plants..." The man would have continued to rattle off a laundry list of "errands" and "items" just to insure maximum irritation on Justin's part.

"Brian, stop!" Justin pulled the older man even closer to his body and forced him to make eye contact again. He'd slipped both his hands into Brian's and he shook him a little. "You don't have any plants at the loft so stop teasing me. Be serious, when are we going?"

Biting his cheek, Brian smiled. Justin's hands were warm and he squeezed them in his own to feel Justin increase his own pressure. Their plane tickets were for Thursday, two days from then, their reservation at the hotel had been confirmed for Thursday night and the car would be at the loft to pick them up by 2:30 that afternoon. Making Justin suffer hadn't always been part of this plan but right then it seemed the most fun in the world...that was until Justin pushed up against his body again and a week at a place called Sugarbush began to top his current fascination with torture.

"Thursday afternoon. We leave on Thursday and we're back next Thursday night." Brian spoke up and then watched the light reflected in Justin's eyes double then triple in intensity as the plans sunk in. There was something to be said for making someone else happy...it seemed it wasn't always as detrimental to your own personal health and well being as he'd previously thought.

...Not always.

"Shit." Justin's gaze narrowed as he whispered the word almost to himself. He squeezed Brian's fingers a little tighter. He would have kissed him then if not for the fact that he wanted to keep his eyes on the man to make sure this was all as real as it seemed.

"That your way of saying thanks?" Brian pulled Justin against his chest and huffed a laugh. He watched and waited while the light did that same glowing thing it continued to do, this time across Justin's entire face.

"That's my way of saying a lot of things." Justin spoke just as quietly as before and he'd hoped that Brian heard the volumes that were spoken in the one word. He'd swallowed a little and Brian watched him blink back a barely veiled surge of...emotion...that caused a blush to break over his skin. This time he did lean up to find Brian's lips and this was one of the last times that Brian could recall seeing Justin really...happy.

Pushing his full weight into Justin's body in front of him, Brian locked his arms around the other man's waist and exhaled into the kiss. That stranger he'd just made his indecent proposal to back there in the alleyway had definitely missed his chance because for the next week, he belonged only to the man he was holding. A bed and breakfast in Vermont was bound to attract its share of fags along with the heteros, but Brian had no intention of taking the "Brian and Justin: Tricking Together Is Fun" show on the road.

Alone...they'd do this alone...and like Justin, he was actually looking forward to it.

Dropping the used condom over the edge of the bed, Brian opened his eyes. Enter a long series of fuck ups and cue the violin player. As far as Brian saw things, any story involving him, even in a small role, had to be worthy of a Greek tragedy. Some part of him must have known how fleeting and how crippling moments like those would have ended up being.

He pushed up on to his elbows and reached for his cigarettes on the nightstand. Somewhere next to him, Trick sat up as well and unrolled the legs of his jeans. Brian could remember with photo clarity exactly the way that he and Justin had pounced on each other in the elevator on the way up to the loft that night and how they'd fucked on the floor on the semi-private side of a half-open door to the loft. He remembered joking about the trip with the guys the next night and he remembered the perma-sealed smile on Justin's face when he went to bed and while he slept. He could remember Justin and the surrounding events and people with crystal clarity but for some reason or another he couldn't remember himself as clearly then. He could remember doing certain things, saying certain things and he could remember that he'd actually wanted to go...but for some reason, he couldn't remember whether or not he'd actually been as happy as Justin had been.

He couldn't remember whether he'd actually let himself believe that he could give in to being happy with him...again.

"Tell me again why I can't stay the night. It's fucking shitting rain outside." Trick protested to the last man on earth who would hear his plea.

"Ask Troy and he'll tell you that too." Brian lit the cigarette before swinging his legs over the side of the bed. The sheets were soaked with sweat and he actually felt like he'd traded a little of his burden tonight to the now wet sheets. His mind flashed on Troy for a split second and his first thought had been to when it was that he'd stopped fucking him all together. Sometime last year Brian figured...sometime when even casual repeats became outlawed. "Lock the door when you leave and tell Troy that I said thanks." Brian got to his feet and stalked toward the bathroom. He'd opted for a shower and left his guest alone to get dressed...and to eventually let in his third visitor of the evening as well.

His first visitor had told him to shit or get off the pot. No one would believe she could be so brash, but Brian knew things that would surprise even Ally Macbitchiness herself.

He reached the bathroom sink and opened his palm to take a look at the crust that had formed there. Picking it away or rubbing it away, even under the water, would probably make it start bleeding again and Brian dismissed the thought of cleaning it any further. Growing up he'd been used to his own share of waiting for bruises or cuts to heal up, but even at thirty-one, he still had that same impatience for wanting the evidence, and the memory, long gone.

He turned up the shower as soon as he heard the door to the loft close and standing naked behind the glass, he was far from alone. Lindsay's words had him reliving shit all night and after watching the last ten years of his life play out...and then zooming in for a close up of the last two, he was still a firm believer in letting dry bones rest. There was something to be said for not reliving by choice that which you'd had no choice in living before.

He reached for the soap with his good hand and laughed a little to himself when he realized what he was doing. For a weakness that had been with him for only a few hours, his defenses had been activated in full force.

'...shit or get off the pot...'

Fix it or not, it was his choice and tonight, he'd gone to see Justin in order to stop the train...it may have been a long ways past the derailment and the resulting smoking wreck...but they'd finally reached his stop and he was getting off. The secret that he'd told Lindsay tonight could be trusted to someone who'd shown time and time again that she could keep a secret...keep a secret so well that even she sometimes forgot what truths she'd seen. It couldn't be trusted to a man...boy...who saw and didn't see at the same time.

'...shit or get off the pot...'

He'd been exposing things he would never have thought possible and it was high time to close ranks and assess the damage. Assess the damage and wait patiently for the crust to form into a beautiful... strong...impenetrable scab.

Shutting off the water, Brian reached for a towel on the warmer. He ran it over his face first and then his arms. His eyes were closed the entire time and the entire time he thought about the look on Justin's face earlier. Justin hadn't had a clue as to what was going on and for once Brian could credit him with a reason for missing the subtext. Lindsay had asked him for his sake and for Justin's to either take him back or walk away for a while until...how did she put it?

'...Until you think you can recognize yourself again...'

When had it been that he'd changed so much that he couldn't recognize any of the things he was feeling or any of the ways in which he reacted? He had spent so much of the last month dipping Justin's blond locks into the ink well because...what? He thought blond boys were yucky?

'...shit or get off the pot...'

Wiping his crotch, Brian used his left hand to pat at his pubes before tossing the towel over his shoulder. He'd made a royal fool of himself and what Lindsay had said made good sense. It was high time that he stopped. Going to see Justin had been part of that and as much as he'd wanted to say 'sorry' for...everything...that didn't or couldn't pass his throat and so...he'd decided it was time to stop straining and...get off the...

"Brian." Justin was standing on the other side of the bedroom when Brian lifted his eyes and he almost ignored the presence. Yet another reason to disappear for a while. It seemed his spirits had become so potent that they now had the power to conjure themselves into reality. Justin sniffled a little and waited for some of the vacancy to clear from Brian's eyes. He could smell the pot in the room and he could see the bottle by the bed. He'd expected much of the same in the way of these accessories after running into the underwear model in the stairwell, but he hadn't expected the burnt smell that was bothering his already congested sinuses. "What's burning?"

"Not burning, burnt." A thought floated through Brian's philosopher's mind as he crossed the room and reached for the bottle again. Good hand steadying the flow to his lips, he turned to address Justin as some of the liquid spilled down his chin. "Why are you here?"

"I saw your friend," Justin trailed off, "was that part of the plan, for me to see him?"

"What?"

"You come by and drop this on me," Justin tossed the envelope on the bed. "Say something I don't get, until maybe now," He lifted his nose to the air before continuing. "and then walk away. Part of the time that I was coming over, I almost thought that was what you were going for, getting me to follow you here."

"As much as you seem convinced otherwise, I don't give a fuck about..."

"Don't say it okay. I've heard it and you don't need to say it again." Justin pushed both hands into his pockets. He'd taken two steps before sinking down on the platform of the bed. "So where're you going?" He didn't look up.

"I'm fucking off like you wanted and plus you don't care. Remember?" Brian offered a toast to Justin's profile with the now empty bottle.

"You're a bastard when you're drunk."

"I'm high too but I'm a bastard all the time so what does it matter?"

"It matters when you spend so much fucking time hiding behind it that you forget what you were trying to avoid in the first place." Justin finally turned on some of the speech that he'd planned while he listened from the stairwell as Trick got fucked. The bottle hit the wall somewhere to his left but Justin didn't turn to look at it. He'd felt a shard of something hit his cheek and instead, he reached up to find the place instead.

"I'm fucking tired of the analysis. I'm a shit and you're a saint. We'll make that the official story and that'll be that." The man had missed Justin's reaction to the breaking glass, having turned his attention back toward the shape under the duvet.

'...shit or get off the pot...I'm fucking trying...'

"I'm bleeding." Justin announced in the midst of Brian's thoughts and somewhere inside his own head Brian responded.

'So am I.'

Justin had brushed passed him to get to the bathroom and Brian saw the blood on his face. There wasn't anything else to do but to rewind the last few seconds and try to figure out what had happened. "The bottle Brian, the glass from the fucking bottle." Justin tossed his words over his shoulder as he scrambled to the bathroom sink.

There was something sick about doing this again and Brian walked out into the living room instead of following Justin into the bathroom.

Saint Justin and his holy trials and tribulations. He'd lived through the fire that was Brian Kinney and now he deserved to be safe and for it to be easy from this point on. Brian made him bleed and there was far too much blood spilt between them already.

He heard Justin's footsteps behind him a few minutes later and he held his breath waiting for when Justin would cast the first stone.

"I saw bloodstains on the counter when I went in there. Where are you hurt?"

There he went again. Saint Justin watching and worrying for someone else...a comfort to the lonely and a willing refuge to all who showed a need...he deserved to be strung up for all this kindness. "It's nothing that you can kiss and make better." Brian teased before adding, "Do you have a death wish Justin? Why do you keep on coming back for more?"

"Same reason you can't stay away."

"I am staying away, from now on."

"I really wanted it to work out with Ethan."

"Shit." Brian reached around to find something to hold on to. "You don't have a death wish, you are a death wish."

"I wanted to prove that what I wanted could happen between two queers. I wanted you to see it and realize that I was telling the truth. But..." Justin smiled ruefully, "...you got to watch it crash and burn instead, so now there's no way for you to believe me." He was silent for a good long while before speaking up again. "I know that you told Ethan not to tell me about that time when he came to see you. That somewhere along the way, even you wanted it to have a chance. Maybe you even wanted me to have something you thought you couldn't give me. Maybe you let me go to find something better."

Justin said these last two sentences so sarcastically that Brian felt something roll into the back of his throat and cut off his air supply for a few seconds.

"Romantic bullshit that got me through..." Justin walked around the counter to dump the wadded up tissue he'd brought with him from the bathroom into the garbage can there. "...but then you started to get mean." He raised his eyes to accuse Brian to his face. "I asked you for time because I had all this shit on my mind and instead you gave me so much of your time and attention that I thought...it wasn't fucking worth it anymore. All the fight to get what I thought I wanted...you, P.I.F.A., Ethan...so much of a struggle and in the end, barely what I thought it would be...it just wasn't worth it."

Justin dropped his eyes again and Brian took a break from the spearing he felt when they were on him.

"Then I talked to Lindsay and she said something to me that stuck. She asked me what things I would change if I could just paint the canvas white again. At first I thought it was just bullshit, that she wanted me to say that I wouldn't change anything...her way of telling me that what doesn't kill me makes me stronger...but, then I started thinking about it. And there were exactly two things that I would change. The first would have been to tell you that when I was in the hospital, those last few days that I was there, someone told me that you'd been to see me...a nurse said you came every night...that last time when you came into my room, I could smell you and if I could do that night again, I would have opened my eyes."

Brian swallowed and forced his gaze down to the floor. Sorry was bullshit and regret was bullshit and it seemed Lindsay had brought them both to this place.

"The second thing..."

"I don't want to hear this." Brian silenced him and walked away.

"The second thing would have been to paint out every time that I had a chance to call you on your bullshit and that I didn't. Every time that I complained to someone else instead of telling you."

"Sorry is bullshit...and I'm not going to say sorry for this. You had a wild ride and I swear to God...I thought you loved every minute of it." Brian spun around to shout his words across the loft. He'd grabbed the door with his right hand before flinging it back on its tracks and tossing Justin's wet backpack out into the hallway. All the while he'd been ignoring the cold damp air on his naked skin and the warm wet in his right palm.

"But I didn't love it." Justin stood his ground. "I just loved you so fucking much that I didn't want to rock the boat...even when you had my head under the water."

"Save the drama for the next dyke who will listen Princess, you are not a victim here." Brian was seething and Justin watched his eyes go dark. The telephone rang somewhere in the burning air around them, but both men stood motionless as the tumbleweeds rolled by.

Brian could feel the goose bumps breaking out over his skin now and he could feel his balls climb into hiding. For all his bite, Justin had no idea how bad his timing was and how literally Brian had already been stripped bare. Brian watched as Justin sniffled again and he made himself not care about the fact that Justin was shaking.

The machine clicked on and Brian heard his own voice fill the air before Debbie took over by screaming from the too loud answering machine. "Brian. Brian. Is Sunshine there with you? We went outside and you'd both taken off and I want to know what the fuck is going on." Brian and Justin could hear Vic losing his battle to get Debbie to hang up as they continued to keep their locked stares on each other's faces. The woman was getting more emotional now and they could hear the oncoming downpour in her voice. "You can't keep torturing him like this."

Somewhere in the background, Vic was a part of the scene for a little while, before his quiet voice was again overlaid with more of Debbie.

"He fucked up, I'll give you that. For all this bullshit, I'll say he brought some of this on himself, but Jesus Mary and Joseph, Brian, you can't keep toying with him like you did this morning and then showing up and taking him away for God knows what...do you hear me?"

"Hang up the phone Deb and let them work it out on their own." Vic's voice punched through Debbie's histrionics and the line finally went dead.

"Go home Justin." Brian called around the semi-permanent lump in his throat.

"Do you want me Brian? Answer me just this once."

Brian handed the ticket agent his credit card and glanced over her shoulder to check the departure time for the flight. He'd called Cynthia from the cab and it took the sleep groggy woman a few minutes to figure out what Brian was telling her. He'd been working maniacally around the clock over the last few weeks and with Vance happily counting the zeros on a new retainer cheque across the pond somewhere, Brian could feel secure in disappearing for a while. His official cover was that he had meetings with Brown Athletics in Chicago, but unofficially Cynthia was given a number where he could be reached in San Francisco.

Signing the slip that the woman had offered him, Brian pushed the pen and the white copy back across the high counter and turned to eye the crowd in the semi-thin line behind him. The airport was still bustling at two in the morning, but the bustle didn't seem as energetic considering the fact that many of these people were asleep on their feet. The urge for flight after a fight had driven him here with a very modest overnight bag and he planned on taking care of anything that he'd forgotten when they got there.

Brian accepted the travel sleeve the woman pushed across the counter and he took in the look of her red nails as she spewed on and on about the various slips and stubs that she'd stuffed inside the plastic envelope. Boarding passes on the top, the parts of her speech that Brian recorded told him the gate number and an arrival time about two and a half hours after the flight finally left Pittsburgh. Dismissing her pleasant smile, Brian pushed the credit card back into his wallet and turned to sling his bag back over his shoulder. He hadn't managed to shake the draught that he'd caught just standing naked in the loft for so long and he reached down to pull the zipper of his jacket high on his chest.

Having checked in, the first security checkpoint was just ahead and Brian made the walk without bothering to let his mind rest too heavily on anything. He wasn't running away if his mind allowed him to take all his problems along for the ride, but for some reason or another, he couldn't shake the feeling that he wanted to be as far away from the Pitts as any flight leaving at this time of night would take him. He opened the ticket sleeve to the man at the security desk and all must have been in order because the man directed him forward.

Having waited for the woman ahead of him to pass muster, Brian tossed his bag on to the conveyor belt beside him and followed the next direction to remove his jacket. The cold biting into him again, his jacket joined the bag and together the two made their way through the imaging machine guarded by a very portly and very bald man. The cell

phone in his pocket was removed and after passing through the body scanner, Brian endured the increased security vigilance and turned the thing on so that they could see that it was a functioning phone.

The person following behind him suffered a similar fate, but in the end the long line of people on their way to Gate Seven, got to quietly sip coffee in the departure lounge while watching the plane being refueled three stories below.

The man sitting next to him had gone to the washroom a few minutes before and Brian let his gaze fall across the backpack that he'd left behind. It seemed a little cliché to note that the ticket agent had warned them so vehemently not to leave their bags unattended or with anyone else...but...it was rare that people listened to all the warnings that they got along the way. He peeled his eyes away from the bag and looked outside the window again.

At the head of the rows upon rows of chairs in the waiting area, Gate Seven was coming to life with two crisply uniformed women turning on computers and get ready to do whatever it was they got paid to do in the dead of night. Brian watched the brunette pick up the microphone and he listened to the crackle of the intercom around him. In another second or two that familiar chime would sound and the little crowd would all line up again to file through yet another checkpoint. Many of those around him having already began to reload bags and parcels on to their shoulders and the eager few already starting to line up.

Brian turned away from the lighted waiting room to watch the technicians below winding down what they'd been doing for the last several minutes. He took note of the fact that he could see stewardesses already inside the plane through the places where the passenger shutters hadn't been closed. Everybody was getting ready for something to happen or to play out whatever role they'd been assigned. His role for the night was to make the great escape and he rubbed a hand over his face as he turned to greet the person who was now approaching him.

The chime sounded and the brunette asked for elderly passengers and those requiring assistance to reach their seats. Brian didn't think he had the energy to move but he didn't think she'd been addressing her words to him. He covertly dropped his eyes to his palm and watched the movement of the crowd out of the corners of his eyes as those more aptly fitting her description made their way forward.

A minute or ten thousand later, the chime sounded again and this time First Class passengers were called. The owner of the backpack stood up next to him and Brian glanced up at the sudden movement. It seemed this person held a First Class ticket and Brian looked around them to take note of the judgment that always crossed the faces of steerage passengers in moments like these. Their faces asked what business this kid had flying First Class and their mildly annoyed glances referenced the fact that they'd made the more reasonable choice by not paying an extra five hundred dollars for five more inches of seat and a little more leg room. Brian smiled a little and looked out the window again. He'd been about to take another look at his palm when Justin broke through his next thought.

"Brian, they're calling us. Are you ready to go?"

Reaching down to grab his bag...with his left hand, Brian slung it on to his shoulder and sidestepped the way too eager line-up. He could feel Justin next to him and he showed the blonde attendant both their boarding passes and flashed the required identification, before taking the walk down the gangplank.

Part 12

Stashing his shaving kit on a shelf in the bathroom, Brian tried to make out what TV show Justin had settled on in the other room in the ten minutes since they'd been in the suite. There wasn't much of a selection at close to two in the morning Pacific, but whatever it was, Brian would bet good money that it was animated.

He barely noticed when he knocked over one of the many towels on the rack next to the sink and he instead settled on checking out what a grand a night was buying him. This area of the bathroom housed a rough-cut granite sink and a dressing area and Brian took note of the black marble of the counter top. They hadn't planned out this little excursion and so he'd settled on the last hotel he'd stayed in when he was in San Francisco on business. Back then he'd been here on the agency's ticket and Ryder had demanded that he save the finery for the clients. That was then and even as spur of the moment as this trip was, as a partner, Brian didn't need permission to spread his own money around.

Somewhere between pulling his t-shirt over his head and turning up the spray in the shower, it had occurred to him that an all dressed suite for two was ten million miles away from the scene at the diner just over twenty-four hours before. Having rubbed Justin's face in his own shit while their friends and curious strangers looked on in either veiled horror or outright amusement, not even Brian who was in the proverbial driver's seat of this particular interlude, would have been able to see this coming.

He stepped into the enclosure and took note of the telephone and the bench built into the wall of the structure. For some reason or another, his thoughts had been settling on the minutia of the suite as opposed to the reality of the situation. Never mind the fact that he'd just flown clear across the country in the middle of the night with his ex...whatever he was, but now they would be shackled up together in the lap of luxury for the next...however many days until this insanity wore off or settled in depending on your vantage point.

Just above the sound of the water, Brian could hear Justin come into the bathroom and he turned ever so slightly to keep his back to the entrance of the shower enclosure. He wasn't ready to deal with Justin and as long as the other man was still out of his line of sight, he could let himself happily consider the fact that the marble tile work in this bathroom went all the way up and across the ceilings.

"Would you give it a rest already? Justin will call you when they're done." Vic made his way into the small kitchen and offered Debbie yet another suggestion that she leave well enough alone.

"What do you mean, when they're done? I don't even know if Sunshine is really with him, I didn't see them go and Brian's still not picking up." Debbie replaced the receiver on the wall-mounted phone and cursed as she tried to unwind herself from the long cord. She'd given up on calling the loft and now that Justin's cell number was feeding her a prerecorded message about the customer being out of range, her profanities were becoming more and more profane by the second. "Justin could be anywhere, I mean Daphne said he's not with her. He didn't even call her to say he wasn't coming and that's where he was supposed to be tonight." Debbie brought a hand to her mouth as she channeled visions of her unpleasant discovery earlier in the year.

"Justin is with Brian. You know that and I know that. End of story, so leave them alone." Vic had rinsed his glass and he turned away from the sink to take a seat across from where his sister stood frowning. He'd anticipated her next sequence of words even before Debbie drew the breath to utter them.

"I'm going over there." She spun on her heels and grabbed for her purse even before Vic could manage a smile for his prophetic ability.

"You're not going anywhere, the sun's gonna come up in another hour or so and you've got a shift this afternoon. You wasted the entire night keeping Daphne up and keeping the telephone ringing in the loft and no one answered. That tells me that they don't wanna talk to anyone right now." Vic folded his arms across his chest and waited for Debbie to give up her intended mission. She had yet to realize that she was still wearing bunny pajamas and a Hawaiian print robe and in this state of one-track mindedness, she hadn't yet realized that she was wigless.

"Sometin' might have happened to Sunshine. It's not like him to not call if he's gonna be out all night." Debbie stuffed her purse under her arm and reached for the telephone again. She'd just thought of Ethan and she wondered if he was still in town and if Justin might have gone there.

"Who're you calling now?" Vic spoke up as Debbie searched through her handwriting in the little phone book on the counter where she was standing.

"Ethan. Only I can't find his num...would you hand me my glasses?" Debbie turned around impatiently, she'd managed to work herself into a respectable frenzy and Vic's mild amusement was now the frosting on the cake.

"You're gonna need more than your glasses to find that number. The kid doesn't have a phone, remember? You had to call Justin on his cell when he was over there. Besides, either he's already out of town, or he wouldn't take too kindly to you calling up to say Justin may or may not be with Brian, and you're calling because you'd be that much

closer to finding him if you could cross 'Ethan's Bed' off the list of places he could be." Vic sat forward and watched Debbie's expression soften a little at the absurdity of her intentions.

"Well I wasn't gonna say it like that." She didn't see what it was that Vic thought was so funny about this situation. "Either way, the kid doesn't actually leave town for another two weeks. I picked that much up at the diner, so it's still a possibility."

"Sure it's a possibility, except the probability is that he's with Brian doing what all good boys do when they find themselves in Brian Kinney's bed."

"Knowing that doesn't comfort me. That's why I'm worried." Debbie pouted a little and turned to rifle through the phone numbers in the book again. "I had to tell his mother that he'd called and said he was with Daphne. That's why it's not her who's worried. After what I saw today, Brian's bed is the last place that Justin should be right now." Having found precisely what she'd been looking for, she reached for the telephone again.

"Who now?" Vic's question was predictable and in response, Debbie offered him one of the fingers that she wasn't using.

Turning her back toward her brother to assure some privacy, Debbie wasted that effort when she proceeded to yell at the pre-recorded message that greeted her from the other end of the line. "Brian, you are the only person I know who pays for a cell phone that is never on when a person tries to call it." She hung up the phone in outrage and Vic only laughed louder.

Frowning again but some of her steam gone, Debbie turned around aimlessly. She could go over to the loft if only to confirm that Justin was safe, but she was entirely sure that locating him physically would by no means guarantee that he was in fact safe.

Brian had succeeded in ignoring Justin for the entire time that it took him to wash his hair and in the instant that he shut off the water, he could tell that Justin was still in the room. Even though no sound betrayed his presence, there was always something to be said for Brian's second sight where a certain blonde head was concerned. Resigning himself to the fact that he couldn't camp out in the shower, sucking it up and facing the music sounded like a better plan.

Just outside of the enclosure now, the steam parted to reveal Justin on the other side of the room. The other man was wearing the blue sweatshirt he'd had in his backpack, having apparently packed for an overnight taking care of a sick

Daphne. The fact that Justin had a change of clothes had seemed a little too convenient and too perfect considering the fact that fate would dictate this little getaway.

"Why didn't you come in?" A dumb question if Brian had ever heard one, but he asked it anyway. He could think of ten reasons why he didn't want Justin to come in and ten more different ones from Justin's perspective. It was a dumb question and although he'd never really found himself saying something just to fill the silence, this situation was one of those times.

"I didn't think you wanted me to." Justin squinted a little as he tried to figure out whether the man was serious. He'd been trying to understand how he and Brian had ended up on a plane together and now every word and every gesture had to be interpreted and evaluated against what he understood to be "Brian speak".

"That never stopped you before." Brian had unintentionally made his words a dagger enclosed challenge and Justin recoiled a little at the implication and accusation woven into that word "before".

Before what?

Before you left... before Ethan... before you fucked me over...

Brian watched as Justin swallowed down whole whatever words came to his tongue. He'd only now figured out the unintended implications of his words but he still took some pleasure in knowing that they wouldn't start this interlude off with needless rebuttals of the facts. Never mind the reality that Brian's version of the facts spoke very highly to his own blamelessness, at least Justin's silence meant that only one of them would have to submit his sins for scrutiny for the time being.

Brian walked toward Justin and reached for one of the towels on the rack next to him. The fact that the taller man's nudity was being reflected in the many mirrored panels in the bathroom wasn't lost on Justin and he settled on watching Brian's hands on the towel instead.

When Justin made no effort to move away from the proximity or to break eye contact, Brian had no choice but to deal with all the thoughts that he'd been avoiding the entire way here. He had "asked" Justin to come along...why?

"Look Brian, I'm guessing that we came here so that we could talk...see what there was to say." Justin looked down for a second or two before finding his balls again. "Two in the morning might not be talking time but I don't want to fuck for fuck's sake either."

Justin had been unaware of the fact that it hadn't been fucking that crossed Brian's thoughts in those seconds. It seemed that he was wrong about the seduction that he thought was afoot. One man's "seduction" was another man's way of dealing with the things that he couldn't help but feel.

'Saved by the bell, sort of.' This thought enfolded Brian in the instant that Justin uttered his words. It was words like these from Justin that saved him from falling into any of the mental sinkholes that he'd found himself playing dangerously near to in the last little while. When Justin said things that sounded as abrasive as Brian might have said them, it gave Brian a nice reminder to make sure that nothing that he said sounded like something that the old Justin would have said...or felt.

Now it was ironic that one man's defensive stance could be interpreted as a strong offence by the other player.

"Then go take a shower and go to bed Sunshine. I won't sully what little virtue you have left. Not tonight any way." Brian offered him a cold smile to go along with the sarcasm. He pushed off and headed toward the bedroom leaving Justin and the momentary train of thought that had encouraged him to say something else, in his wake.

"Wait. Brian wait a minute." Justin found his own shell-shocked reflection in one of the mirrors before he hurried out of the bathroom after Brian. "That wasn't what you were doing was it? I thought that you were..." He gestured toward the bathroom behind them as his words trailed off. "...but that wasn't it, was it?"

"What are you talking about?" Brian answered nonchalantly as he reached down to rub the towel across his thighs.

Having seen the expression on Brian's face change to this blank mask in those last seconds in the bathroom, Justin stepped down his questioning. It had taken pushing Brian to anger at the loft in order to get any kind of answer and Justin didn't think he had the stamina to take that on again at this point in the morning. Tomorrow, or rather later today, was another day and he turned away and went back into the bathroom before Brian could look at him again. Justin's own anger at the situation was still palpable, but he had to admit to himself that the fact that he'd agreed to come along for this ride, meant that he did indeed want something more than the anger and the resentment.

It had been Brian's shoulder just below the covers that Justin saw when he emerged from the bathroom some minutes later, but it had been Brian's voice that told him that the man wasn't asleep. Something in the way that Brian had asked him to forget what he'd said when they were in the bathroom before, made Justin settle in a little deeper against his pillow. No apology uttered from either of them and each still tip-toeing around the obvious question, at least this was something that said the people who boarded a plane together some hours before, were still here and had some intention of, like Justin had put it...seeing if there was anything else to say.

"Okay." Justin spoke to the shoulder in response to Brian's request that he forget and Brian's posture seemed to relax instantly. Brian had reached up to flick off the light next to him and he'd left the rest of the things that they could say unsaid.

Back at the loft, Justin had asked whether he still wanted him and a simple yes had gotten them here. Telling the other man that it wasn't as cut and dry as all that was another story and replaying the sequence of the conversation in his head, Brian still couldn't pinpoint the moment when he stopped throwing Justin out and started to pack to go with him. All these thoughts were postponed by the need to disappear into sleep and Brian pulled the covers higher on his shoulder and closed his eyes.

Somewhere on the other side of a vast expanse of bedding, Justin decided that he wouldn't ask whether Brian wanted him to come any closer. Despite his own reservations, he'd just do what he used to do before and hope that eventually they would do whatever it was that they needed to do to come to terms with the reasons why "before" and "now" were so different. He'd slipped an arm around Brian's waist and he felt it when Brian jerked awake again. Like holding on tight to something in a sudden gust of wind, Justin held on until the muscles beneath him relaxed and Brian's breathing steadied again. He closed his eyes when Brian reached for his hand and didn't say anything at all.

Part 13

It started out with a hand in the small of his back and then the feeling of Brian's lips on his shoulder. Part of him had been sure that this was a dream brought on by the stress of the situation and well... the fact that Brian was in this bed next to him. Everything about this dream was familiar yet different somehow. This room was different from the loft, the texture of the sheets rubbing against his thighs was different, the hollow whistle of the air from the heating register across the room was different...but the sound and the feeling of those low sighs over Brian's lips and the air hitting the skin of his back was what woke Justin to the fact that this was a familiar reality.

There had always been nights when they were living together where their lovemaking started out like this. One of them waking from a dream and letting his body play out the motions while the other woke up to the attention. They'd always welcomed these informal "midnight snacks" and now Justin wondered whether Brian was really awake and if not, what he would think when he eventually was. He tried not to move at all, hoping to give Brian the chance to back out without knowing he'd woken him if and when the man decided to stop. There was something to be said for not wanting to get carried away into something he'd been wary about doing when he wasn't sure of where Brian's head was.

"I know you're not sleeping." Brian spoke up behind him and Justin turned over to look at the shape of his face in the dim light.

"What...what are..." Justin waited for the light from the window to give him a foggy echo of the look on Brian's face.

"You still don't want to?" Brian asked as he pulled away and his movement gave Justin a clear view of his profile against the light of the window.

"I didn't know if you were awake or just, you know?" Justin settled on to his back now and let his head relax against the pillow. He didn't move as Brian reached out to flatten his palm against his chest. The thumping of his heart beat and the searching look in his eyes being his only communication with Brian for the next few seconds.

Watching Justin's face as carefully as he could, Brian leaned in and brushed a kiss across his chest before glancing up to ask silent permission to do anything else. Justin's eyes were closed now and Brian sat back a little to further gauge the truthfulness of the response. He watched as Justin's eyelids fluttered and he let himself lean in again, this time to find Justin's lips. Brian inhaled deeply as Justin opened his mouth around his and he explored further. Justin's skin was warm and gave off that smell that clean skin did when heated by sleep and Brian took up as much scent as he could while the two exchanged heated breath after heated breath.

Letting himself do this, Justin pushed his tongue into Brian's mouth. He reached down to press Brian's hand against his body as the other man trailed it against the skin of his stomach. Moving a little so that Brian could come closer, Justin opened his eyes to watch the dark shadow of Brian's features relax. He could feel Brian's skin starting to heat up and Justin closed his eyes again as Brian replaced the hand on Justin's chest by pulling Justin on to his side and flush against his own body.

Like it had been so many nights before, Justin let himself reach for Brian's hair and the other man moaned into his mouth as they pulled at each other again. He couldn't help himself and as Brian rolled over on top of him, Justin opened his thighs to let the man rock against him. So much for saying no until they sat down and talked about what they were doing, Justin let his thoughts wander to something the stewardess had said to them somewhere toward the end of the flight. She'd told them that San Francisco was a great place to disappear and forget whatever problems were waiting for you at home. At the time Justin had thought the woman was just sensing the trepidation in his chattiness and Brian's stern silence, but later when she'd cornered him waiting for the washroom, he'd realized that she'd figured that they were together and that there was trouble in paradise.

"Nothing like getting out of the Pitts to get out of the pits, huh Hon?" A warm smile way too early in the morning, it made Justin realize how transparent his problems with Brian had become. Gone were the days when everyone thought that Brian and he could fuck any problem away and gone were the days where either of them dealt with things as invisibly as they could in their own way. The fact that strangers had them pegged was all the more reason why whatever would happen on this trip, had to happen somewhere without the watchful eyes of people who would interfere.

Brian pressed his erection against Justin's stomach and reached up to pin Justin's arms at his side. He had stopped yet again to see where Justin was on what they were doing and he watched as Justin opened his eyes.

"Why'd you stop?" A part of him having gotten ready for Brian to pull away, Justin wasn't surprised when the other man rolled off him after a few seconds and stepped off the bed.

Justin bit at his bottom lip as he watched the shadow move off into the bathroom and he wanted nothing more than to disappear before Brian came back. The warmed air suddenly cold, he moved to curl around himself before Brian returned.

Feeling the weight of the man on the mattress next to him and feeling Brian's hands find him again in the dark, Justin was seconds away from pulling away and telling Brian to fuck off. One or the other, he simply couldn't believe that the highs could still feel so high and the lows...that he could still let himself feel like that when Brian did something like just getting up and walking away in the middle of...Brian's lips on his shoulder again Justin furrowed his brows and it was only the sound of Brian's teeth tearing into the wrapper behind him that kick started his heart again.

Condom.

Their last time at the loft was not to be repeated and Justin turned on to his stomach as Brian melded himself to his body again. To say that they were walking the minefield around each other was an understatement and in the ten seconds or so since Brian had pulled away and left the room, Justin had relived the lowest and most painful rejections of their entire relationship. Some of the dread still lingered and Justin forced himself to let it go as he spoke to Brian from against the bedding.

"I didn't know where you were going. You didn't..."

"I didn't want to wait until I couldn't stop." Having said it all in that statement, Brian pressed his face to Justin's cheek and pressed against him below. It took all his might to not let any of the past weeks creep into the way he handled Justin's body. The shameful bruises he'd left on Justin's skin after their last visit were also not to be repeated and Justin himself recognized and remembered the varying degrees of outrage from Debbie, Daphne...and Ethan at glimpsing them. Vic and Ted had thought the 'love bites' humorous and yet another sign of weakness on Brian's part, but Michael and Emmett and even Ben had been concerned for more serious reasons. Michael thought there was something very wrong with Brian being able to do that and Emmett thought there was something to be said about a young man who could let that be done to him and then convince himself that none of it meant anything. Ben in a more quiet way had seen the desperation from both their perspectives and had been tempted to ask Brian whether tasting again had managed to stoke or silence his addiction.

Feeling the tightness give way, Brian pulled back and pulled Justin up with him. On their knees now, the sheets slipped away from Brian's back and he folded his arms around Justin's chest to seek out the warmth of his body. He listened to the pattern of breaths and words spilling over Justin's tongue and he reached down to slip a hand between Justin's legs pushing a loud moan out of the younger man's throat.

Hundreds of miles away from anyone and anything that they had been, Brian closed his mind to the lingering images and the lingering words. They had always done things best when neither one spoke and as unfortunate as that was, it was welcomed by both in this moment. The slip of hard against soft was enough answer to that stewardess's suggestion and Brian let all numbness bleed away.

He'd wanted to fuck Justin again and Debbie had seen that as clear as day in her comment about him using the torture as foreplay. Every event over the last few months had led them to this moment, and despite the fact that Justin would seldom believe that Brian hadn't crafted most of it, Brian put it all aside for the time being. The feel of Justin's hair against his mouth and the feel of Justin's every breath and movement around his length, Brian closed his mind to everything beyond those sensations.

"Hullo." The little 'spoonicopter' bringing Gus his next mouthful of cereal had stopped in mid-air as Lindsay brought the telephone to her ear.

"Lindsay? It's Debbie. Has Justin been by there this morning or last night?" Debbie didn't take a single breath as she waited hopefully for Lindsay to offer her an encouraging answer.

"No. Why? What's going on?" Lindsay pushed the spoonful into Gus's mouth and the toddler slurped it off before happily going back to arranging the blocks that had been laid out in front of him on the tray of his highchair.

"Well have you heard from Brian either?" Debbie pressed on ignoring Lindsay's question.

"No...um...not since last night. Debbie what's going on?" The woman had been absently stirring at the oatmeal in the little yellow bowl while she watched her son arranging his favorite toys of late. She'd immediately thought of the mood Brian had been in after he dropped her off back at home last night. She'd been sure that he wasn't himself after their discussion but she hadn't been sure of what he would end up doing.

"Last night? After you left the diner? What time did you talk to Brian?"

"Debbie will you tell me what's going on? It's eight o'clock in the morning and I don't think you've bothered to answer any of my questions." Lindsay blustered a little, her own worry at Brian's actions showing through.

"Sunshine is gone and hasn't called home all night. I went over to the loft this morning to see if he was there and even though the Jeep is parked outside, nobody is answering the door. You have a key to the place don't ya? I used to have one but for the life of me I can't find it...and Michael, he's on his way over here with his key but..."

"Debbie what exactly do you think is going on?"

"I don't know." The woman was displaying some classic hysteria and even for her, it was pushing the boundaries of her personality. "You didn't see Brian in action yesterday. You may have heard about it, but you didn't see it. I don't like that I can't reach either of them."

"You think Brian would hurt him?" Lindsay stopped stirring the oatmeal and she was oblivious to the fact that Gus had started sing-songing his father's name having been reminded of the giver of his favorite new toys.

"Anything is possible until I hear from Justin."

"Come' on now Debbie. They have their own stuff to work out but Brian's not capable of that and that's not where his head is at right now."

"How do you know that? Exactly when did you see Brian and what'd he say he meant to accomplish by paying Sunshine a visit last night?"

"Brian went to see Justin last night?" Lindsay looked up as Melanie came into the room and she shrugged her shoulders a little at Mel's curious expression.

"He sure as hell did and before saying anything to anybody he disappears and Justin disappears. Now if you know where they are..." Debbie was cut off by a glaring Vic and eventually by Lindsay's voice at the other end of the line.

"You don't know if Justin is even with Brian and if you say the Jeep is at the loft, I'd say that you should calm down and wait to see if Brian is home and ask him then." She'd been counseling Debbie on calmness but after seeing Brian

last night, she didn't like the idea of his car being at the place and no answer, not even a pissy one, when Debbie started pounding on his door.

"I'll be calm when someone tells me what's going on. Justin's mother is gonna call me again this morning to check up on him and I've already lied once and said everything was fine."

"Look, Debbie I'll call you if I hear anything and you do the same for me." Lindsay waited until Debbie responded before hanging up and feeding the waiting mouth with more cooling oatmeal. She figured Debbie's next step was to wait for Michael so that she could get into the loft and Lindsay was entirely sure that those two shouldn't be there before she had a chance to talk to Brian herself. Anticipating Melanie's question, she didn't bother to look up as she spoke, "I've gotta go see Brian again, can you finish giving him his breakfast and please don't ask what's going on because all I know is exactly what I told Debbie just now...nothing."

Watching Melanie sit down across from her, Lindsay waited for a stock response or a shot about Brian. Instead of saying anything as expected, Melanie simply reached for the spoon and turned their son's chair to face her.

"Thanks hon." A kiss to Mel's hair, Lindsay trotted off to pull on some clothes.

The other woman had waited until Lindsay was out of earshot before speaking to the hungry toddler in front of her. "Which trusty sidekick do you think will step in to dig him out of his own shit first? Will it be your Mom, will it be Debbie, or will it be Michael? My guess is none of them. The ultimate sidekick has already beaten them all to the punch."

Slurping the cereal off the spoon again, Gus smiled in amusement as a burst of the honey that Lindsay had stirred into the oatmeal filled his little mouth.

Waking up had been a slow process for them both and at just after eleven in San Francisco, Brian identified the tickling of air against his chest before he identified his surroundings. Justin was still further under than he was and Brian took these minutes to rejoin the wonderings that had crowded his thoughts the entire way here. Justin no longer believed in anything that Brian took as being obvious to the other man and for that reason, Brian wasn't sure if it had ever been there in the first place. He might have been building a lie in his own head and it was time to decide whether or not that was true.

Justin stirred a little as the light came in full force over his face and Brian pulled the covers up a little to block some of it. He didn't want Justin to wake up yet and he didn't want to be alone with him in consciousness or outside of the

purely sensory dynamic of sex. The words might sting and he would rather postpone the usual dance for every second that it could be avoided.

He heard Justin's stomach growl and he realized the remaining seconds in this...haze...were numbered. Turning in his arms now, the other body stiffened a little as Justin's eyes opened. They were both awake and they were both back. Another night done and time to begin again.

"How long have you been awake?" Justin spoke up and tried to cover his mouth to his imagined morning breath.

"Not long. You hungry?"

"Yeah." Justin would again let Brian steer this wherever he felt comfortable. It would in turn save Justin from being to blame when the whole conversation went off the rails.

"We can order something."

"Let's go downstairs. There's a restaurant isn't there." Despite his view that taking the back seat would keep him blameless, the look on Brian's face spoke volumes of the fact that this conversation had gone off the rails all of Justin's doing.

"Yeah." The other man looked away quickly before fixing his eyes on Justin's face again. "It's alright, although I've never had breakfast there."

Indeed, this would mark the sounding of the bell that ordered both combatants to pull away from each other and return to their marked corners. Brian first and then Justin disentangled himself and sat up a bit on the crumpled sheets. The duvet had been kicked aside and Justin was the first to notice the little spots of blood on the cloth. Touching his cheek a little Justin checked to make sure it wasn't him and Brian held up his palm for him to see.

"It's me. It must have started bleeding again." Brian rolled off the bed and kept his eyes on his hand as he went into the bathroom.

"What's that from?" Watching Brian's disappearing back for a few seconds, Justin turned back to look across the sheets again.

"I cut myself on something. It's nothing." Brian dismissed the question and turned around to turn up the spray. "I'm taking a shower...come in if you want." He called his words through the doorway before pushing the door closed to a crack.

Now that Justin was in the driver's seat, whatever happened in the shower would be his doing.

Lindsay opened the lock and slid the door back on its tracks. She'd beat the rest of the search party here and she was more than concerned for the fact that Brian wouldn't appreciate the intrusion into his space. Eyeing the area of the bedroom, Lindsay identified the fact that there was no one there and she took a few more cautious steps into the loft.

Looking around in the bluish light of a cool morning, she was entirely sure that she wasn't comfortable with being here to be the first to see what there was to see. Her legs wanted to carry her quickly to the bathroom and the images of what she might find there set her stomach to churning. Brian might well be here and if he wasn't in the quiet bedroom, he might well be beyond the dim light of bathroom on the other side of the space. Taking the steps up to the bedroom, Lindsay's legs turned to spun taffy and she felt all the strength and all the resignation to find Brian first seep away from her. Glancing around the room, she thought the sheets looked more slept in than they'd been when she was here earlier and she'd had to put a hand over her mouth to drown out some of the cloying burnt smell that still hung on the air. She pulled her jacket around her a little bit more and she swore she jumped at least three feet as her foot connected with a thin tin ring that looked like the remains of a seal on the neck of a liquor bottle. The crunching of the glass under her feet frightened her even more and her eyes moved reflexively to the chip in the doorframe from the force with which the bottle was thrown. Now more than ever she wanted to go into the bathroom but still her legs refused to move more swiftly than heavy string being blown along in a lack luster breeze.

Frozen by the sound of a key in the lock behind her, she realized that the rest of the expedition had caught up with her. She watched from the doorway of the room as first Debbie, then Michael and then Ben spilled into the loft.

"I don't think we should be in here without at least knocking again first." Ben spoke up as Michael took off in Lindsay's direction. He'd turned to address Ben when Debbie began calling out to anyone in the loft.

"Brian...Justin...you two here? Holy shit, what the hell is burning?" Debbie turned around in the space to look at Michael.

"Shit!" Michael stopped in his tracks and clutched at his chest as Lindsay took a step down from the bedroom and came into view.

"There's broken glass all over the floor and I didn't go into the bathroom." She was vaguely aware of the fact that her throat was closing up a little and she'd never been more frightened in her life.

"What are you doing in here?" Michael missed most if not all of the significance in what she'd said as he came to stand in front of her. He could see that there wasn't any one in the bedroom and he brought a hand up to rub at his nose from the acrid smell. It had been Ben who bounded up the steps and across the room before Debbie could make her way any closer.

Flipping on the light in bathroom, Ben took in the bloodstains all over the sink and counter and he took in the clothes that had been thrown haphazardly across the floor. Not intending for Michael to come in behind him, he turned in the doorway to block the other man's entrance.

"He's not here. There's no one in here." Ben pushed Michael back and tried in vain to keep the other man from seeing the sink.

"Holy fuck." Michael launched himself out of Ben's grip and reached for one of the bloodied towels on the counter.

"Brian cut himself last night when I was here." Lindsay calmed herself enough to come into the bedroom at Ben's announcement that Brian wasn't in there. "He cut his hand so there might still be blood..."

"There's too much blood for a fucking cut on the hand." In full panic mode, Michael turned around in the space to go back into the bedroom. Now devoid of any of the clues that Lindsay had stumbled on earlier, Michael took note of the remains of the joints in the ashtray by the bed and the stiff condom on the floor. He turned around immediately to check for what was missing from Brian's closet and to check to see what was missing from the loft. Brian's overnight bag gone, he passed a hand over the empty hangers in the closet before turning to look at the group again. "Where would he go without his Jeep?"

"Maybe he went to get his hand looked at...if it was bleeding so much?" Ben tried to offer some perspective and it was Debbie who spotted the cheque on the bed.

"What's this doing here? Isn't this Sunshine's from the diner...and from last night." It had dawned on the woman that this was the cheque that Brian had tossed on the table at the diner the morning before and it was the same cheque he'd given to Justin last night. "Justin was here last night." Her contribution to the sleuthing made, she took a step back and almost slid on a large shard of glass. "I can see the warfare didn't end." She eyed Lindsay menacingly having decided that this was proof enough that she was right about Justin not being safe in Brian's company.

"There's probably a perfectly good explanation for all of this. Brian isn't here and since none of us has any right to be in his space, I suggest we all leave before he comes back." Ben tried for the calm voice of reason again and Lindsay nodded from her spot at the doorway.

It had been Michael who shook his head no and Debbie putting her hands to her hips that suggested that the rest of the search party didn't agree that it was time to go.

The telephone started ringing behind them and each turned toward the sound coming from Brian's desk. It rang twice and then a third time and it was Debbie who moved off first to answer it. The machine picked up before she could and Debbie stopped short of her mission.

"If you guys are still over there, and for the record Brian I told them to stay away, Justin just called." Vic's voice sang out of the machine and Debbie reached forward instantly to snatch it up.

"What'd he say?" The woman gasped into the phone.

"He's fine for one. I told you not to go over there and go meddling." The sound of Vic's voice came out of the machine in stereo for all those around to hear even as he continued to talk to Debbie who had the receiver to her ear.

"Where is he?" Debbie ignored the 'I told you so' and went on with her line of questioning.

"Well here's the kicker. You ready for this...he and Brian are taking some time away because they need to be alone. That's exactly the way he said it and I hope for your sake that you'll take the kid at his word and leave them be." Vic sat back on the couch and waited to hear what protest Debbie would offer at something as frank as that.

"He said that?" She had turned around full circuit to look at the little group behind her and she watched the differing reactions cross their faces. "Well, when are they coming back? Where are they and what the hell happened over here last night?"

"That's none of our business and I think it should stay that way for the next little while. Now get out of there and call everyone you harassed last night and this morning and tell them you're sorry." Vic hung up leaving Debbie in silence and letting the stereo projection from the machine cut away to silence once again.

Broken glass and bloodied towels, it had to have been some fight and some conversation following in order to get that couple on a get away so that "they could be alone".

Walking into the restaurant ahead of Justin, Brian ignored the attention from the smattering of patrons in the place. From the way all eyes focused on their entry you would have thought that they'd each been wearing a crown of flashing lights. Still smarting from the fact that Justin had opted not to join him in the shower, Brian took a seat as it was offered and watched as Justin slid into the chair across from him. They'd been seated against a bank of greenery and that fact managed to cut their visibility from the majority of the patrons in the place.

Having ordered coffee and juice, the two sat back from each other, both wondering who would start up the conversation first. For his part, Brian had been reliving the last few minutes of watching Justin get dressed in the reflection of the mirrored closets in the room. The imagery of Justin's flushed nipples standing out against the paleness of his skin stuck in Brian's mind and he wondered when the last time had been that he'd been able to watch Justin in silence without any implication or any worry from the other man. In the past Justin would have blushed or smiled at noticing the outright attention, but this morning Brian had kept his actions inconspicuous, not wanting to see any other emotion than humor in Justin's reaction. He'd watched Justin's hands, his neck, his cock and he'd let himself remember the guiltlessness of the night before.

Guilt was indeed reserved for the daylight and to Brian, the fact that Justin wouldn't make eye contact or didn't want to stay in the room alone with him, spoke volumes.

"Can I bring either of you gentlemen the paper?" Their waiter approached again and Justin took note of the way the man smiled at Brian. He shook his head no and let his thoughts drift away to the fact that this would be a fact of life in Brian's company. A million walking reasons for Brian's head to turn and a million walking reasons why Brian would never want to be what he wanted him to be.

Brian had told the man no as well and he looked across the table a few minutes later as the waiter returned with their coffees. Justin had been pushing away imaginary hairs from his forehead and Brian kept his eyes firmly on Justin's face as their eyes eventually met. It would seem that they'd each been stealing silent glances at the other and for not the first time in the last long while, Brian wondered what Justin was thinking. 'A penny for your thoughts' sounded corny and cheap considering the fact that Brian was already forking out a thousand dollars a night for the opportunity to find out what it was that Justin was thinking.

"Would you like to order or do you want some more time?" The uniformed waiter looked down to take note of the fact that neither man had bothered to open the leather bound menus directly in front of them. While the younger man had been toying with his over the last few minutes, it had been each other that both seemed to be studying. "I can give you a few more minutes." Excusing himself after Brian glanced up at him, the waiter moved away and left them to their silent conversation.

It seemed that Justin wasn't as hungry as his stomach had protested...or what they both wanted couldn't be found on the menu.

"You're not hungry anymore?" Brian offered his words while staring intently at Justin's napkin, which had yet to be unfolded.

"I called Vic to tell him where we were. He said that whatever I had to say to you...I should just say it and not to let you beat around the bush either."

Brian looked up immediately and his gaze narrowed as he waited for what else would spill out of Justin's mouth. Watching Justin drop his eyes again, he continued to wait.

"Sometimes...you make me completely miserable." Justin sighed heavily at the thought. "But...I don't feel anything at all that's remotely good unless it's related to you."

Silent for a second or two, Brian huffed a little laugh. "Now, how's that for light breakfast conversation." His words were met with nothing from Justin but blue strobe lights turned on to the darkest recesses of his brain.

Justin demanded honesty from Brian as the price the man would have to pay for having been let in on his thoughts.

"Like this morning Brian, I haven't felt anything like that for a month now."

Part 14

"What do you want me to say Justin?"

"What you feel."

"What you just said about sums it up, don't you think? You shouldn't feel like you do." The man looked down at the table before continuing. "You shouldn't let anyone make you feel that way." Glancing to his left, Brian caught sight of a group of women still looking at them. It seemed that two men sitting across from each other in a restaurant was more entertaining than whatever it was that this group could make in the way of conversation.

"It's not always like that." Justin kept his eyes on Brian's face as the man smiled but still made no effort to look at him again.

"Tell me something." Brian continued with his train of thought when no sound of objection came from the other side of the table. "You were with the music man for a month...how much of that time did he make you feel like you just said?"

"Never. Not directly."

"There." Brian smiled again. "Like I said, you shouldn't have to feel like that with me." Still not looking at Justin, Brian kept his attention on the little group of women who seemed to be straining to hear what they were saying. He'd been running the tip of his finger around the lip of his coffee cup and he made a conscious effort not to ask the group what the fuck they were looking at.

"Aren't you listening to me?" Justin leaned forward a little. "I didn't feel like that because I don't feel...that same...I dunno know ...intensity when I'm with anyone else...I just didn't feel that way with Ethan...I liked him...a lot and I liked the things we did together... but it wasn't ever the same."

Turning his attention back to Justin, Brian bit at his bottom lip and kept his eyes set on the pair across from him. Hundreds of miles away from the happenings that they were here to talk about...in broad daylight and with tourists...probably from Tampa...staring at them from the other side of a bank of ferns, Brian held his breath. "I wouldn't bring you roses and I won't. You left over fucking roses and picnics. Bullshit that means nothing."

"It means something to me." Justin kept his eyes on Brian's.

Not blinking, the man continued his thought. "Words. You left over words." Brian pushed his coffee cup away roughly spilling some of the contents to create a stain on the linen tablecloth. "Well let me contribute to some more of your education Justin. Words lie. Promises are what end up hurting the most."

"Maybe you're right...maybe that's part of what I feel right now." Justin shook his head at Brian's words of wisdom. "But for me, what hurt the most is looking back and thinking that I must have imagined all the things that I thought were there." Justin furrowed his brows a little as if honestly replaying some of those mixed messages for the first time. Little did he know that Brian would most identify with this sentiment about being half sure that you imagined all the things that once made you sleep easier at night. "But, I guess I can understand if you see it differently. If you expect nothing then people can't really disappoint you when they fuck up." Blue eyes fixed on Brian's again, the older man took refuge in his dislike of the eavesdroppers sitting a few feet away.

"You think I don't expect anything?" Brian looked down at his napkin again.

"You never made any outright demands. I asked for stuff going into this, you didn't." Justin sat back in his chair again and reached down between his legs to grip the edge of his chair with both hands. He'd made a mistake in broaching this area of discussion now and he knew it when Brian closed his eyes slowly and sat back from the table as well. After all, the events that followed Justin's own demands were proof enough that asking for something and expecting something, didn't mean it would happen that way. In this case, the man making all the demands had broken all the rules.

"I expected the fuck ups. I even expected them from me." Brian whispered his words. He was looking at Justin again and Justin tried to force the tears that he suddenly felt welling up to go away. "Like I said. Words lie, Justin."

"I didn't mean to." Justin's voice cracked at the end of his statement and he looked down again. Something...he was hoping for something to focus on...something to help him get his emotions back under control. Leaning back and looking away from the rest of the tables in the restaurant, Justin focused his attention on the windows a few feet away and on the other side of where they were sitting. Outside it was sunny and the sky was clear and Justin conjured up the image of the city that the stewardess had warned him about. This might be a place for regrouping and forgetting, but he wouldn't get to that part any time soon. "Most of the time you didn't give me anything...and when you did, I think now that you're the one who lied." To describe Justin's last few words as hushed and whispered, would be an understatement and Brian ended up offering the best description of all.

"I remember asking you what the fuck was with the little voice."

"And I remember telling you that it was one way to hear what you wanted. This time, it's to say what I think." His accusing blue eyes on Brian's again, a re-strengthened Justin continued. "You lied Brian. One minute you didn't tell me anything of how you felt about anything, and then the next...and I swear to God that I'm not imagining this stuff, the next minute you would touch me and hold me and there were times that I heard you say it when you thought I was asleep...I'm not imagining that stuff. It was like fucking pulling teeth for you to tell me what your favorite food was when you were growing up, or whether you had a bike or sometimes whether you'd had a good day at work...and then other times, other times were different...and after everything that's happened, I'm sure that I wasn't imagining it. And if that's true, you must have lied."

A few feet away their waiter, noticing the intensity of the discussion, carefully weighed whether or not he should go over to take orders at this point. He'd had the good sense enough to notice that in the time since he'd left, neither man had even considered the menus. Deciding instead to check on his charges at another table, the man walked toward a group of women seated some feet away. These ladies weren't talking as much, but they seemed to share his interest in reading what was happening at the table for two on the far side of the greenery.

"Ladies, can I get anyone a refill for their coffee?" The young man smiled and the group turned politely to look at him. Two silver-haired women on his right tapped their cups and smiled back and he moved around to stand next to them. Refilling one cup slowly and carefully and then the next, the light conversation at the table continued.

"Joanie, just look over there. I'm sure that's your son." A woman in a yellow sun-visor reached across the table to tap her friend's hand and the hand recoiled and folded itself quietly in Joan Kinney's lap.

She'd seen Brian come in and had managed to keep herself hidden from his sweeping take of the place and then his annoyed attention on the rest of her group apparently since he sat down. Hidden behind the greenery, she'd already told these women that the man looked like Brian but she couldn't be sure without her glasses. Furthermore, she'd had to physically restrain one woman who wanted to call to him to make sure. It seemed the days of bragging about her rich, successful son had finally caught up with her. They had all seen pictures but most hadn't laid eyes on Brian since he went away for college, despite the fact that he and his mother still lived in the same city. After all the exaggerations the woman had made in the past, this group wanted to see the wonder son for themselves. It hadn't been lost on any of the group that Joan was acting strangely, and the malicious few in the fivesome even hoped to catch her in a lie.

"I'm not sure and I already told you I don't have my glasses. Besides there's no reason for Brian to be in San Francisco." The woman replied curtly before asking the waiter for their bill.

"I'm still working on my toast." A dentured woman with too bright lipstick spoke up and Joan sat back in her chair again.

"I wonder who the young man is. Do you know him Joan? Brian is sitting right behind the greenery so you'd have to stand up to see if that was him, but the other man, you can see him if you just turn a little." The yellow sun-visor offered again.

"I don't have my glasses Ruth and plus I saw a bit of them as they came in, that man didn't look at all familiar. Now we're not going to catch up with the rest of the tour group if we spend the entire day holed up in this restaurant." His mother still trying to chase the group out of the place, Brian continued to steal glances at the many sets of eyes

looking at him from across the restaurant. One woman in a yellow-visor had to have shifted in her seat ten times already trying to get a better look at him. The bank of ferns midway between the two tables obscured her view and the distance apparently made it difficult for the number of them to make out what was being said.

"I didn't lie." The man had returned his attention to Justin's last comment.

"You just tried to make sure that you didn't say anything, but I'm saying that some of the things you said and did...you must have lied because those things couldn't be true."

"How did we get here? Because of things you think I said, or was it because of things that we're both sure that you did?" Point one for Brian, at least that was Justin's scoring of that statement.

"I fucked around on you with one guy. You fucked around on me with an entire city."

"Your rules Justin...and then you started expecting things that you didn't ask for." Point two for Brian.

"But things changed Brian. I know they did. We started tricking together...doing that stuff together...you would tell me about them...I would know what was happening and I would know when it wasn't happening...and it wasn't happening by yourself for awhile...I know that I didn't imagine that. And then you started up again and it was...things changed from the way they were when I asked for those rules and then they changed right back." Justin looked away and out of the window again.

"Nothing changed. Your rules. I lived by them."

"I shouldn't have asked for rules." Justin spoke quietly.

"My point exactly, no point in making rules. Promises are made to be broken." Bringing both elbows to the table, Brian looked across at Justin's profile as the younger man continued to look out of the window.

"That's not what I meant. I meant I didn't want to have rules. I wanted a relationship with you and only you. I thought that if I put you in my place, me having tricks and making you see that, then you would get tired of it and maybe see things from my perspective. I thought it was working when we'd only ever get guys together. I thought that was your way of keeping tabs on me...keeping me for yourself. You wouldn't let anyone else fuck me. You

wouldn't let anyone else kiss me, even touch me too much. I thought..." Justin brought both hands to his face and covered it from Brian's attention and then stopped talking.

Silence between them for some minutes and then Justin moved his hands away. The red eyes told anyone else that he'd been crying, but Brian had known that would happen long before the younger man's words ended abruptly. He watched as Justin unfolded his napkin and wiped his face. Brian watched the red welts from the rough seams of the fabric spring out on Justin's cheeks and then quickly fade away. It hurt him to see this and it hurt him to be able to so perfectly and crisply nail Justin for every point he'd raised in the last few minutes. This was not a conversation that Justin could win because frankly, many of the events were his wrongs and because Brian was already too well versed at winning any form of warfare.

Out come the big guns.' Brian thought as he considered Justin's tears.

"How pussy am I for sitting in a restaurant and bawling my eyes out over this?" Justin tossed the napkin on the table angrily and pushed his chair away. He stood up quickly and didn't bother to look at Brian as he spoke. "I guess you were right and even if you weren't, you're too good at this. You want me, but you're always gonna punish me and none of this is ever gonna be your fault."

"Justin." Brian pulled his elbows off the table and stood up too. "Sit down. Please."

"No. I don't want to finish this here." He'd made a sidelong glance at the attention they were already receiving again. He hadn't been as attentive as Brian in observing the nosy group of women but he had noticed them.

Brian nodded a little and Justin moved off towards the door. Pulling a twenty from his wallet, Brian dropped the bill on the table and glanced around looking for his waiter. Finding the man on the other side of the room, he pointed to the money on the table and followed Justin out of the restaurant.

Joan Kinney hadn't been in touch with Brian in the last month, but she still knew enough about the shape of his body, the gait of his walk and the look of his profile to have accurately identified him from across a restaurant and without her glasses. His companion had also left an indelible impression on her as well and she recognized him when she saw him come into the restaurant and when she saw them both leave.

Brian was in San Francisco and his...lover...his boy was there with him...in the same hotel...in the same hotel as the Catholic Women's Auxiliary, Pittsburgh Chapter on their bi-annual retreat.

The walk across the lobby was made in silence with Brian trailing several feet behind. What could he say now that things had played out exactly as the "blameless" part of him had wanted? This was Justin's fault. Justin couldn't follow his own rules and so fuck him, Brian gave him what he wanted. He'd given him someone that he thought he wanted. Brian reached up to run a hand through his hair as he watched Justin, hands in his pocket, walking ahead of him. Justin was right that he'd wanted to punish him, that he'd always want to punish him...but...

The elevator banks were to the left of them now but Justin kept walking straight ahead. Oblivious to the world, the younger man continued an extra two feet or so before hearing and heeding Brian's call that he'd passed the elevators.

Stopping to let Justin catch up to him and wanting to let the other man get in front of him again, Brian tried his best to ignore the palpable unhappiness radiating from Justin's every pore. Justin had unwittingly brought out the big guns indeed because it was this emotion...this raw prideless emotion that Brian most hated seeing and being the cause of.

Mirrored doors opening and a small crowd spilling out into the lobby, the two men stood aside and waited their cue to board their ride back to the thirty-seventh floor. Justin getting on first, Brian stood next to him and the rest of the new crowd followed quietly. Somewhere between the tenth and twentieth floors they'd lost their company but each man, too deep in his own thought, failed to notice. The mechanisms on the car hummed their assent and each kept silent. It was Justin that Brian thought of and it was Brian that Justin thought of. Each trying to come up with something that they could say to pull this flight out of the nosedive that it had entered; something that would convey the fact that this was not where either of them wanted to be...

Looking over at Justin, Brian watched him close his eyes as if physically affected by the fact that Brian's gaze had fallen across his face. Not waiting for the words to come, Brian reached up and set his palm against the back of Justin's neck. He set it there and held on for as long as it took for the tone to sound and the doors to open on to their floor. Just touching him had to be enough for now...

Justin exiting first, Brian followed him and concentrated his attention on the heat of Justin's skin beneath his fingers...still neither said anything...both having figured that Justin's assessment was right. They were going back to their room to finish this one way or another.

"Wait a second." Justin stopped suddenly and Brian let his hand slip away from the back of the man's neck. "I need to ask you something, before we go back." Turning to face Brian, he continued. "What would you have given me if I'd asked?"

"When?" Brian looked at his still reddish eyes.

"When I started to want more...you just finished telling me that you won't do roses or words...and you say I started expecting things that I didn't ask for. If I'd asked, what would you have given me? I mean honestly Brian, I think it took this," Justin glanced around. "This situation... everything that happened, for us to even have a real conversation...we don't have those...so...I don't buy it when you say I didn't ask so it's my fault. If I'd asked, you'd probably have told me to go fuck myself and we'd be like this anyway."

Looking at Justin's face for a long time, Brian said nothing. How could he tell Justin that it wasn't really about asking for something or negotiating terms...for a while there they were friends, lovers, partners...many of the things Justin had begged to be to him way back when they first met, if only Brian would let him. As far as Brian was concerned, he had let him and then...what he thought had just happened all on its own...started to fade away to the point where he was sure that he must have imagined it. He wasn't as detached as people liked to give him credit for and because he didn't verbalize it, didn't mean he didn't feel it.

Finally turning away, Brian found the cardkey and slid it into the lock. He pushed the door open and stepped inside, not having waited to see if Justin would follow him, and made his way over to the windows on the far side of the suite.

Sensing the other man's presence behind him finally, Brian began to speak. Began to say the things that Justin had no right to hear but he would say them once and for all.

"When Michael and the rest of them first started in on me about how many times I'd fucked you, what did I say?" Brian focused his attention on a building across the way. It had a crescent shaped logo on the top and he wondered whether or not it might be a bank.

"Nothing." Justin sat down on the edge of one of the overstuffed chairs that littered the window area.

"When you moved in with me both times and they started on about me taking you in, what did I say?"

"Nothing."

"When people started calling us boyfriends, did I deny that?"

"You didn't say anything. They were just teasing at first. They knew you didn't like the word."

"People said we were in a relationship. Did I deny that?" Brian continued.

"No. We were."

"Debbie said I couldn't keep my hands off you to save my life. Did I deny that?" The man dropped his eyes to look at a street below.

"No. For a while there it was true."

"People like Lindsay and even...Ted...started saying how much I must...love you. Did I deny that?" When the other man didn't answer that time, Brian continued, finally turning around to look at Justin. "It was never about negotiating terms and marking each step with another discussion and a new contract...it just happened and when you didn't notice, it stopped happening.

Looking directly at Brian, Justin cheeks flushed red and his insides became hollow. He'd managed to regroup in the hallway and again Brian had managed to take him down at the knees. This time, not by being the quickest with a response, but by actually offering a real response. Justin opened his mouth to say something and no sound emerged. What did you say when someone told you that it was your fault that they didn't love you anymore?

"So you want me, but I fucked up so much that you don't lo..."

"It doesn't work that way...and that's all I can say."

Brian spoke up again and Justin fell silent. He watched as Brian came toward him and he forced himself not to blink or to shake. "Why does it have to be so muddy Brian? Why can't you just say it?"

Stopping in front of Justin now, Brian reached down to pull him up from the chair and leaned in to reach both arms around his waist. "Shut up and listen?" The air that followed these words out of Brian's throat pushed across the skin of Justin's face when Brian kissed him...hard.

No denials and beyond what Justin could see and touch and taste...Brian didn't offer him any more than he'd given him to start with. You didn't get to handcraft your lover and you certainly didn't get to hand pick your lover...as

much as you might have thought you did, the truth was that you fell in love with the packaging as advertised and if you were gonna survive, you had to learn to love the parts that you'd discovered over time. As a result, you jumped for joy when you discovered a pearl and took your lumps if you'd been stuck with a person who killed you softly.

Faults and all, it was a package and the beauty and the wit and the passion came hand in hand with the way this person did things, and the experiences that had forged them.

Reaching up to flatten his palms against Brian's chest, Justin pushed back and away. He'd needed to see Brian's eyes and he forced himself to trust what he saw there. Stepping back a little more, Justin reached for the bottom of his shirt and pulled it up over his head. The silence in which Brian had watched him dress earlier, was the same silence that he watched him undress in now. Watching as Justin pushed his jeans and then his underwear down his legs...watching as he pulled off his running shoes and socks and finally pulled the pants free of his legs, Brian didn't say anything and only waited until Justin was done.

Whatever resolution had been reached, it hadn't come in the form of a wordy contract or tearful confessions or concessions. They both wanted this badly enough to know that demands wouldn't work, and a year of misunderstandings didn't disappear in the face of what had been said and what had still been left in the realm of faith...and trust. If Justin wanted to tell Brian with words how he felt, he didn't. If Brian needed to make sure that Justin understood what he'd said, he didn't ask. Reaching for Justin's body instead, Brian pushed him down on the bed and dropped a clothed thigh between Justin's as Justin in turn raised his legs around Brian's waist. Still not kissing yet, the younger man relished the feel of Brian's weight on his body, the feeling of the soft cashmere sweater against his chest, the roughness of the denim across legs, and the cool metal of the buttons of Brian's fly against his penis.

Still not kissing yet, Justin watched Brian's face as the man held firm to him. Brian was the one who closed his eyes first and Justin continued to watch his face as the man's lips inched closer and closer to his. Opening his mouth to his lover's, Justin pushed his hands under Brian's sweater and scratched his fingers across the skin of the man's back. Savoring the softness there as well as the soft sighs from Brian's throat, Justin bucked up a little and pulled him even closer. He was licking over Brian's lips now and he swallowed all of what the man had just shared with him. It was Brian's hand against his cock that drove him over the edge, but it was the feel of Brian's equally hard length against his own that brought him back.

Having pulled the buttons at his fly open, Brian didn't dare himself to pull away from Justin to get what they would need and he felt it when Justin held on to him even tighter.

It may have been a mistake a month ago but the cold against his skin when Brian got up last night had been too painful for Justin to repeat. Knowing the reason didn't make it any less palpable and Justin held on to Brian because they didn't need to fuck...they only needed to make sure that they didn't move from this proximity any time soon. Feeling Brian push against his erection, Justin turned his face to bury his moans against the skin of Brian's throat. Feeling the man reach down to close his fist around both their lengths, Justin's moans escaped the muffling and he

tightened his hold on Brian's body. They would have to cum from kissing because he couldn't bear for them to move even an inch to do much more.

Sensing this desperation and his own blood boiling more than it had any right to be from what he would have called high school humping, Brian pushed against Justin's penis again and pushed against Justin's tongue with his own again. Saliva wetting his lips and sweat wetting his cock, he slid and slipped against Justin's body while every inch of his skin felt as if it was being incinerated. The coolness of the air on his back from where Justin had hiked up his sweater was being overlaid with the heat from Justin's fingers and the fire from the little points of torture flowing from Justin's searching fingernails. A deep-breath as Brian dove head first into the kiss again, his body fell into a steady rhythm of rocking and grinding against Justin's. Feeling the muscles of Justin's stomach and thighs go rigid against him and feeling the pulses of wetness hitting his own shaft and stomach, Brian upped the tempo and pulled back to look at Justin's face as he came. The other man's eyes were still squeezed shut as Brian leaned down to plant one kiss and then two against his eyelids.

Brian had once told Michael what it "meant" to him to hold someone close all wet and sticky and for what had to be their thousandth time like this, neither Brian nor Justin made any effort to move.

Part 15

Leaving the restaurant after handing the waiter her portion of the bill, Joan Kinney moved quickly through the entry way toward the bank of elevators down the corridor. She moved as though she thought the other women, some of whom had only a few years before they'd be using walkers, were hot on her heels. Glancing at the smiling concierge to her left, she didn't think she smiled back but noticed that the man's smile widened a little. It couldn't have been that he knew that she had just seen her son and lied to her companions about it, but it felt that way all the same.

She'd told the other women that she had forgotten something in her room. If only to get a few minutes to herself without their eyes on her in order to make sure that the tops of her ears or her cheeks weren't as red as they felt. She moved quickly across the wide dark-colored runner on the marble floor and hit the call button to the elevator hard enough to think that she'd broken her nail. There wasn't anyone after her and Brian was nowhere to be seen, but she felt his proximity and the proximity of her secret all too close. It had only been last Monday when she'd told one of those same women that she'd just left that Brian was thinking of getting married...this had been said because of the fact that the woman had told her she had seen Brian and a young woman walking together with a baby. That same woman, or spy as Joan called her, had spoken to an unaware Lindsay after Brian had walked away and Lindsay had mentioned in passing that she did in fact agree with the woman's suggestion that the little boy looked just like his father. Looking after Brian as he walked away, the woman had later congratulated Joan on her beautiful grandson. That same woman had promised to keep Joan's secret, what with it being obvious that Brian and this woman were not married.

"You would have told us if there'd been a wedding right Joan?"

The woman, Margaret O'Leary had been her name, had touched Joan's arm as they walked together down an aisle at the supermarket and Joan had switched her shopping basket to that arm in order to put some distance between them.

"It just so happens that they'll be married in the spring."

Not knowing where it came from, Joan had dug herself into another hole. She figured that one had been brought on by the fact that she couldn't stand to think there was something else that Brian hadn't told her about his life.

She remembered the instant horror of thinking that a dead Jack may have had this one on her too and she remembered beating a hasty retreat home to call Claire for confirmation. A solid ten minutes of screaming at Claire to tell her the truth had revealed to Joanie's dismay the fact that Brian not only had a son of more than two years in age, but that Jack had met the baby and had actually lied about going to spend time with him toward the end. Jack had actually spoken to this woman with whom Brian had the child and not once did he breath a word of it to his wife.

"I took care of that bastard, even when he was shitting in his pants toward the end..."

Joanie stabbed at the button for the sixteenth floor and tried to push the scowl off her face as more people came into the elevator. The thought that she would be found out bothered her less than the fact that she had been reminded of the lies and unfaithfulness that her family had laid at her feet. Her husband had been faithless with his dishonesty, her daughter had been faithless with her omissions and complicity, and her son... her son whom she had thought was the one good thing about her horrid existence with Jack Kinney, was faithless to everything that she had ever expected of him.

Joan pulled her purse against her chest and stumbled out on to her floor when the elevator opened. She'd been unsteady enough for a man still in the car to reach out to hold her up and part of her hoped that she had offered him something less than the sneer that she was sure was still plastered on her face.

Finding her cardkey, the woman had pushed at the lock a few times before getting it to open and when she finally did, she collapsed into a chair just inside the door as the sobs pushed through her.

"I wonder what they're doing right now." Debbie spoke absent-mindedly from the back seat of Ben's car as the man guided them back toward Liberty. Debbie had to get to her shift and after dropping her off there, he and Michael would have the uncomfortable silence of pretending that the darker haired man wasn't worried about Brian.

"Well I don't, so don't bother sharing any of your thoughts." Michael sniped a little and settled in against his seat. Only the morning before, he had begged Brian to let up on Justin but he certainly hadn't intended this turn of events. Those two changed their approaches to each other so often that Michael often chided himself for thinking that he had any clue of what was going on between them.

"I think that it's good that they get some time to themselves." Ben turned so that he could see Michael's profile before settling his eyes on the road again. He had been the first to let Michael know that he knew and accepted his feelings for Brian and he and Michael had agreed that for as long as their relationship and Brian's non-relationship with Justin lasted, they would stay in the present and let sleeping dogs lie. "And it'll be good that we all don't have to be so close to the fire for a while."

The threesome having fallen back into the silence that had existed before Debbie spoke up, waved at Lindsay as she sounded her horn behind them and turned off on to the side street that would lead her home. Having cleaned up the glass and blood in the bathroom, they'd locked up and left the loft without so much as a word on what they'd heard.

Dropping Debbie off at the diner, Ben had waited for her to go inside before turning toward Michael. "How do you feel about all this? Honestly...".

Looking up at Ben, Michael had answered as honestly as had been expected of him. "I don't want him to get hurt." The him that Michael spoke of wasn't specified, but Ben was sure that Justin wasn't at the forefront of his lover's thoughts.

Back in the lobby of a hotel in sunny San Francisco, a group of women approached the check-in desk on a mission. Estella Mursby spoke up first and she threw all the harmless charm of a nice old lady into her words. "Sweetheart. I wonder if you could help us with something." Having gotten the young woman's attention she continued. "I know you can't give out room numbers or anything, but we think we saw someone we know earlier and we wanted to know whether he's staying here...the peepers aren't what they were and we just couldn't be sure if it was him." Estella smiled her harmless smile and adjusted her little yellow sun visor a little.

"I'd be happy to tell what I can." The young woman regarded the group of older women and smiled a smile of her own. These women reminded her a little of her nana who had recently passed away and she would have told them anything they wanted to know. After all, how much damage could these sweet old ladies have a hand in stirring up.

"His name is Brian Kinney and we think we saw him in the restaurant." Estella finished and waited.

"We want to know if he'll be here for long or if he's checking out soon." Maggie O'Leary spoke up and Joan would again have appreciated her cunning old spy qualities.

Watching as the woman called up a particular screen on the computer on the counter between them, they waited as she recited the spelling of the last name for confirmation. "K-I-N-N-E-Y. Right?" She'd turned to the group again and they all smiled their toothy dentured smiles in unison.

"Yes, Mr. Kinney is staying with us. He checked in late last night and it looks like he has an open reservation. That means he'll be here for at least the next four days but no check out time has been specified." The young woman smiled again.

"Can you tell us dear if he's staying with his fiancé?" Margaret spoke up again. "I met her once and I'd love to see her again."

"He is sharing the room with someone else, so he probably is." Colleen, the owner of the smile, said and waited as another of the women imposed on her for a little bit more information.

"His mother is staying here too, she's on the same trip with us and they must have gotten their wires crossed because she didn't know that he would be here. Is there any way that we could get in touch with Brian, so that they don't miss each other?"

"Well I suppose it wouldn't do any harm if I gave you the room information just this once." She'd written the room number on a slip of paper and passed it across the counter without once thinking of the many reasons why a couple, a man and his fiancé as she'd been told, might not want Mommy dearest knocking on the door of the love nest. It also hadn't occurred to her to consider why this man's mother wouldn't know he was taking a trip or why they would just have to run into each other in passing. The number 3710 written on the paper she'd slipped across the counter, she smiled a little more thinking that her good deed for the day had been done.

She'd kept her eyes on the group as they walked away and she'd noticed when some minutes later, they were joined by another woman. She had watched as they handed the woman the paper and it was then that she wondered why the woman looked so sick at the thought of what her friends had done for her.

It was only then that Colleen behind the check-in counter had any second thoughts about giving out that confidential information about one of the hotel's guests.

"Where did you get this?" Joan tried to keep her voice calm as the group smiled like hungry hyenas around her.

"We asked at check-in. I just knew it was Brian and I certainly didn't want you two to miss seeing each other. I mean it's just the work of a higher power for you two to be in the same hotel so far away from home. That nice girl over there said that he's staying with his fiancé so maybe his son is here too."

"I know that I'd love to see the baby after everything Maggie said. I'm sure he's just as precious as she said and I'm sure his fiancé is just as pretty." Another of the women spoke up and this was the first time that Joan realized that Maggie O'Leary hadn't kept her "secret" at all and that the group was waiting for a wedding and waiting to meet a pretty blonde fiancé for her perfect son.

...Blonde yes...but not what they expected.

She had let herself tuck the slip of paper with the room number into her purse and let herself be ushered out into the sunlight toward the next tour bus that would take them to Fisherman's Wharf.

Deep breath...What do you smell?

Coconut cream, I think...

It figures, you're always thinking about food...

Not true, sometimes I'm thinking about you.

Justin turned and let the thoughts drift over him again. Where was it that he'd heard these words and when was it that he'd reached this place? He could see the images before him and even though this place looked like the hallway outside the loft, it didn't at the same time. For one, Brian didn't have plants outside the loft...and despite this reality, he certainly didn't have a jungle of plants and vines overgrowing the very doorway to his home or roots growing out of the lock...but then again, if he hadn't expected the plants, why did he have this watering can in hand?

As mildly disturbing as the imagery was, Justin wasn't disturbed and turning over again, these thoughts faded away and the first ones took their place.

He couldn't tell which thoughts came first or second anymore and now the voices were back...

I smell coconut cream...like when I was little and my dad would bring a treat for dessert...my Mom likes coconut cream pie, so he'd get her that kind...

It's not coconut cream pie, so try again...and try not to be so G-rated this time.

I think you're tricking me. It's a pie. I know it... When I was six, I got the chicken pox from a girl in my class. My dad dotted calamine all over my legs and then brought me a pie. I can remember him scooping some of the whipped cream up and dotting it on the tip of my nose...it made me laugh and for a whole second, I didn't itch...I haven't thought about that in a long time...

So then...your parents are to blame for the reason why you can't go ten seconds without thinking about food.

You're wrong...and I'm right about the pie. It's like they say, faces you might forget, names definitely, but not smells...smells mark you and just a little whiff of something and a whole day will come back to you in a flash...I remember that day when I was six, I remember the pie, and I remember cream on my nose...I remember that I didn't itch.

It's not coconut cream pie, so you can give up if you want.

Alright then...I give up. What was it?

I'll give you one last hint...Vic's little meltdown before the wedding...your bottomless pit of a stomach got you a taster's job... you were close with the coconut reference, but it certainly wasn't pie and...

Fuck...I remember...how could I have forgotten about that?

Wasn't a big deal ...

It was a big deal, especially since I've told you that story about my Dad before...I forgot that I'd told you about that... I remember coconut wedding cake frosting on the tip of my nose...you made me laugh too...Don't get so serious, you don't have to worry about me telling anyone about stuff like that, they'd never believe you'd go to such lengths to avoid eating the samples I'd brought for you...

Brian had dotted his nose with the cream frosting again and Justin watched as the man leaned in to lick it off. He'd watched Brian lick away a lot more frosting from a lot more places and he could remember dissolving into giggles as Brian and he continued to kiss and touch and suck.

Twenty-four hours before, they couldn't have been further apart and now...for however long this interlude lasted, there wasn't anything else but these kisses and this sweet cream...

The knocking stirred him from his dream and when he opened his eyes, Justin found that he'd buried his face in the skin of Brian's chest. The man had been looking at the television on the far side of the room and when the knocking started, he'd reached for the remote and muted the volume.

Not much excitement in room 3710, just one man dreaming and another man living the reality of a dream. They'd eaten and then slept, more than slept, but now on the first day of their trip away together, four o'clock had found Justin having a dream brought on by coconut frosted cake for desert and the warm, albeit unbelievable, circumstance of having Brian's fingers wound around his own as he fell asleep next to the man's body.

"Who is it?" Brian shifted a little when he realized that Justin was awake. Pulling away from the warmth of Justin's body, he stood up and crossed the room. Their room service had been delivered and eaten a while ago and they hadn't ordered anything else.

Justin watched the line of Brian's body as the man moved naked toward the bathroom to retrieve a white robe and slip it over his shoulders. He swallowed hard as he remembered licking the last of their dessert off that slip of flesh at the tip of Brian's cock and he remembered swallowing a lot more from that same spot a few minutes later. Settling against the bedding again, Justin had listened to another burst of knocking fill the quiet of the sunny room as these thoughts pulsed through his unbelieving mind.

Standing outside in the hallway, Joan didn't dare announce herself and she instead took in the two sets of different sized plates, two sets of cutlery, and two coffee ringed cups that sat on the large cart outside the door.

Brian and his boy hadn't had much of an appetite at the restaurant from what she could see when they left, but they seemed to have made up for missing breakfast in spades. Hearing footfalls coming toward the door she'd steeled herself and stepped back a little before glancing down the hall to be sure she wasn't followed.

That annoying group of women had made her afternoon a living hell by nattering on about when Joan was going to go up and talk to Brian and when they would be able to meet his little son and new wife...new wife indeed. It seemed that in an effort to keep from embarrassing Joan with spreading the fact that Brian wasn't married, her friends had thought to do her the favor of telling the story as if the upcoming spring wedding had already happened last spring. The fact that the others hadn't heard had been explained away with the fact that Joan liked her privacy sometimes and no one bothered to question the fact that this woman had historically talked endlessly about her son's work and home and success at every opportunity that she was given.

Not bothering to check the peephole, Brian pulled the door open.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" Shocked by his mother's presence, Brian tightened his grip on the edge of the door.

"Nice to see you too Brian." Joan glanced down the hall again and at the accusing little dots of light from the peepholes of the other rooms on the sunny side of the building.

"You didn't answer me." Brian stood solidly blocking the doorway. His hair was tussled, but his robe was securely in place and this time he didn't have to worry about hiding his sweaty skin or his erection from his mother's eyes.

"I'm here on a church retreat and I saw you and your...friend...downstairs at the restaurant earlier. I wanted to know how long you were staying." Joan clutched at her purse uncomfortably. She didn't want a repeat of the last and only time that she met Brian's young man and she certainly realized from Brian's state of undress that she'd practically walked in on the same circumstance that she'd seen on her last visit.

"That's none of your business and how did you get the room number?"

"That's beyond the point Brian." Joan waved the question off. "The point is that I don't want to intrude on your little get away any more than you want me to. I just didn't want us to run into each other unexpectedly or anything. I'm here with a church group and they've seen you and that boy together. The less explaining that I have to do, the happier I'll be about all of this."

Brian huffed a bitter laugh and turned to look over his shoulder into the room. "Worried that we might take to fucking in the lobby or something, huh?"

"You can be just as vulgar as your father."

"One major difference though. Dad didn't like cock. Didn't like pussy either towards the end, right Mom?" Brian sneered wickedly at the woman and waited. Justin grimaced from a few feet away as he heard Brian's words and he sat up a little more in bed. He'd been even more undressed than the last time he met Brian's mother, but he didn't think that there was much danger of her getting passed the doorway or of her wanting to get any closer to Brian.

"Just stay away from me Brian. I've had to deal with a lot in this life but I have always been able to walk around outside of our home life with a lot more dignity than you and your father thought that I had any right to have. I'm asking you to keep that in mind before you flaunt your lifestyle in the face of everything that you didn't help me to build. What little I have carved out for myself, I don't want you and your sinful mess of a life to destroy." She took a step back then and turned to walk away before stopping and finding Brian's face again. "By the way, I know about the baby. I've known about the baby for months and I haven't bothered you about that. We all keep our lives tied up in neat little boxes and I haven't interfered with your life so don't interfere with mine." Joan moved off down the hall with that and she didn't look back as Brian stepped out into the hallway and followed her down to the elevators.

He'd come to stand in front of her as she turned to look at him in silence. "My son was never a secret, Mom. You just didn't have any right to know."

"But your father had every right to? Me who did my best by you has no right to a grandson, but the bastard who beat on you for fun has every right to? I don't want to know about your life Brian and I am asking to keep as much away from me as you possibly can, starting with not letting me see you for the duration of time that I'm stuck in this hotel."

The elevator came just then and Joan stepped forward. She was stopped in her tracks when Brian reached for her arm and held her back. Standing with the hard set of her profile to him, Joan was silent as Brian leaned in close to whisper something in her ear.

Justin, who had gone to the door when Brian went out, looked down the hallway at the two of them. He could see when Brian stopped the woman and he could see when he leaned in close. The anger and the force with which Brian's mother had suddenly spun around and slapped Brian across the face had caused Justin to step back and the noise from the ball of Justin's foot striking the door behind him had gotten Brian's attention. The man lifted his eyes

in Justin's direction and despite the slap across his face, that satisfied smile continued to play across Brian's lips as Joanie fled into the elevator.

Standing in the doorway with a sheet around his body, Justin watched Brian come toward him in silence. He watched the man approach and he felt Brian maneuver him back inside before closing the door behind them. "What'd you say to her?" Justin asked his question as he watched the red streaks forming across Brian's left cheek.

"I told her that I used to love her."

He'd known that Brian's code meant he didn't, or rather couldn't, lie about the important stuff. Where others would have offered a bullshit lie to save their skins in an uncomfortable situation, Brian didn't waste his breath.